

Staffing and Supporting a New Online Initiative

by Alan McCord

Online learning has entered the mainstream of the higher education enterprise. Over two million students are enrolled in online courses in the United States, and the online market is growing at a rate of 25% each year (Ruth [2006](#)), much faster than the overall rate for higher education. This growth rate can be expected to accelerate as governments, businesses, and educational institutions create policies that encourage the use of online instruction. The federal government now allows students taking more than half of their courses online to qualify for federal financial aid. Employers see more of their employees enrolled in online study programs; for example, approximately 40% of Boeing employees who received a degree in 2005 did so online (Wellen 2006). The state of Michigan recently began requiring that each new high school graduate take at least one online class, orienting students to online learning on a statewide level (Wellen 2006). An important study from the Sloan Consortium, "Growing By Degrees: Online Education in the United States, 2005," confirms that over half of higher education institutions view online programs as key parts of long-term planning (Allen and Seaman [2005](#)).

Technical infrastructure, government and industry policy, and student interest are thus conspiring to drive growth in online education. And yet significant challenges remain that complicate the ability of universities to deliver instruction by online means. The challenges of staffing online courses as well as training and supporting faculty have been particularly difficult, especially for institutions that are still in the early stages of implementing online learning programs. This article explores how Lawrence Technological University ([LTU](#)) is developing a new online initiative that focuses on these complex and often neglected issues.

Faculty Attitudes and Behavior

Despite the growing use and acceptance of online education, the proportion of full-time faculty who recognize online education as a valuable tool remains less than 30% (Allen and Seaman [2005](#)). If a majority of faculty are to embrace online programs, they must believe from experience that online instruction is valuable and effective. In turn, faculty will likely have positive online experiences if institutions can provide adequate support that anticipates and addresses their needs.

Even in cases where faculty express generalized acceptance of technology in education, their personal views may contrast sharply with their actual decisions as instructors. For example, Vodanovich and Piotrowski (2005) find that 73.6% of faculty held positive attitudes toward the use of the Internet to support instruction and that 69.4% view Internet-based teaching as effective; however, they also find that only 47% actually used online instruction. Such a discrepancy between faculty attitudes and faculty practice may be explained in part by the technology acceptance model originated by Davis (1989) where decisions to use new technologies are based on the distinction between perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness of technologies. The [technology adoption life cycle](#) model (Moore 1999) also illustrates the challenge of "crossing the chasm" to support a majority of users.

Training is a key issue. With 58.1% of faculty receiving no or very little formal training in instructional uses of the Internet, the scope of the faculty support problem is apparent (Vodanovich and Piotrowski 2005). A new commitment to training is all the more necessary since past models of acquainting faculty with available technical resources are no longer adequate. Today's instructional technology environment is much more complex than in years past when mastering a course management system was all that was required.

Faculty must now consider how to harness powerful communication tools such as channels and blogs and how to combine multimedia formats such as streaming audio, video, and digital images with traditional scholarly resources for the physical and virtual classroom. (Maltz, DeBlois, and the EDUCAUSE Current Issues Committee [2005](#), "Current Issue #6: Faculty Development, Support, and Training," ¶ 1)

While formal training can improve faculty attitudes toward technology, it is most effective in practical terms when comprehensively delivered and accompanied by incentives (Gilmore 1998). For this reason an understanding of what motivates faculty to use online instruction as well as what inhibits such use should inform a training protocol. Maguire ([2005](#)) identifies three forms of motivation that influence faculty in their decisions regarding the use of online teaching resources:

- **Intrinsic motivators** involve personal attitudes affecting technology adoption.
- **Extrinsic motivators** incorporate incentives such as promotion, tenure, and opportunities for collaboration with other faculty.
- **Institutional motivators** appeal to potential users by means of the support, compensation, release time, and recognition made available by the university.

While Maguire argues that positive extrinsic and institutional motivators may outweigh negative intrinsic motivators, she also notes that developers of online programs should understand that faculty may experience extrinsic and institutional motivation as a type of peer pressure. If reluctant faculty members feel compelled to incorporate technology, they might experience less satisfaction with their instructional experience and higher rates of burnout (Beam and Kim 2002). Special care should be taken to provide additional support to faculty who participate in online teaching because of a perceived pressure to participate.

Developing LTU Online

Lawrence Technological University ([LTU](#)) is a private university in the metropolitan Detroit area offering over 50 undergraduate, master's, and doctoral programs. LTU was the first university in Michigan to establish a totally wireless campus, and it was recently named one of Intel's 50 "most unwired college campuses" (Intel Corporation [2006](#)). LTU's learning technology infrastructure includes the [Blackboard](#) course management system, digital library resources, video and Web conferencing, and streaming video services.

Encouraged by the success of fully online courses, the president and provost established [LTU Online](#) in March 2006 to develop and deliver high-quality online courses in support of the following degree and certificate programs:

- Master of Business Administration
- Master of Engineering Management
- Bachelor of Science in Information Technology
- Graduate Certificate in Nonprofit Management
- Graduate Certificate in Project Management
- Graduate Certificate in Architectural Management

These programs were selected for their potential to attract new students, their ability to be effectively taught online, and their likelihood of acceptance by employers (Wellen 2006). Other program areas will be addressed as the initiative matures. As part of its overall commitment to establish online learning as a mainstream means of educating students, LTU follows the lead of institutions, such as the [University of Massachusetts](#), which uses the same admissions and degree requirements for its online programs as for its traditional programs (Romano [2006](#)).

A rigorous set of best practices is an essential starting point for integrating an online degree program into the

everyday work of faculty connecting with students. The following four sources are especially helpful for identifying the most effective practices for online programs:

- "[Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs](#)" (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions),
- "[Achieving Success in Internet-Supported Learning in Higher Education](#)" (Alliance for Higher Education Competitiveness),
- [Effective Practices](#) (the Sloan Consortium; see also Moore [2005](#)), and
- [Best Practices for Online Programs](#) (the Connecticut Distance Learning Consortium).

These sources document the best strategies for developing policy in several areas, including institutional leadership and commitment, comprehensive program development, pedagogy, evaluation and assessment, cost effectiveness, student services, and faculty support. LTU Online was designed based on these best practice areas, beginning with the "organizational will" embodied in institutional leadership (Morrison and Graves [2004](#), ¶ 30). Once we selected the appropriate degree and certificate programs, we then established a comprehensive course development methodology, set instructor course delivery standards, developed student and program assessment methods, and insured that all student services were available online.

Selecting and Compensating Online Faculty

Prompted by the research on best practices noted above, we first addressed the problem of the cost of full-time faculty. Many institutions rely on full-time faculty to teach online courses despite generally low faculty advocacy for online teaching opportunities. Online programs can better finance operating costs when there is a focus on higher credit hour volumes and intentional use of adjunct faculty in the place of full-time faculty, whose instructional costs can be up to 600% higher (Ruth [2006](#)).

These considerations informed two critical decisions reached at the start of LTU Online. First, we decided to treat online classes as an overload rather than as part of the standard teaching load for full-time faculty, thereby limiting the number of such courses taught by this portion of the faculty. Second, we decided to compensate all online faculty—full-time and adjunct—at the same rate. This structure results in several benefits insofar as it

- reduces the pressure to participate in online instruction,
- should attract early adopter advocates of online teaching,
- frees colleges and departments from making scheduling and teaching assignment decisions based on college-level costs, and
- makes instructional costs easier to measure since faculty are compensated at the same rate.

Also important was our decision to distinguish between course development and instruction and to use the same rate of compensation for both activities. Faculty may develop an online course, teach an online course, or do both. Maintaining this distinction manages costs and promotes collaboration with the following effects:

- Early adopters may both develop and teach their own courses while other instructors may test the waters by focusing on only one of these activities.
- The course development process may expose faculty to methods that could improve traditional and hybrid instruction.
- Learning objects created for LTU Online may be repurposed for potential use in traditional and hybrid classes.
- Opportunities for collaboration and team building may occur between full-time faculty who are developing online courses and adjuncts who are employed to teach those courses.

Another critical way that LTU Online has involved full-time faculty has been to grant them the right of first refusal to teach a particular online course before hiring adjuncts to teach it. This accomplishes several objectives, all of which can help win the support of established faculty for new online instruction. It helps to reduce the pressure to participate by allowing faculty to contribute to scheduling and hiring while also maintaining their awareness about upcoming online courses and opportunities to teach. This approach also reduces the instructional burden on full-time faculty.

Faculty Training and Support

Getting established faculty involved in developing and teaching online courses requires substantial investments in training and support processes. Moreover, such training and support processes need to be designed carefully to ensure that they comprehensively meet faculty needs. In this regard administrators must not only understand how campus service units work, but they must also recognize the ways in which such units often fail to connect with the faculty they are intended to serve.

On the one hand, there are a number of factors related to faculty life that typically complicate the lives of campus service providers. For example, the requirements of teaching, research, and service often result in faculty decisions to minimize their participation in technology training. Faculty work schedules are sometimes unpredictable and may conflict with the fixed schedule of service providers; faculty may also become frustrated when they must wait in line with other users for help. Some faculty members may be physically isolated or unaware of campus or departmental services. Some may experience basic problems with managing documents and e-mail, backing up their work, or securing their desktops whereas those who are more proficient may use technologies that conflict with campus standards.

On the other hand, some common tendencies of campus service provision can also complicate the lives of faculty. For example, technical support, faculty training, and documentation services are often fragmented and more difficult to locate than service providers believe. Support services provided at the university, college, and department levels sometimes overlap or conflict with one another. The library is often isolated from other service providers, leading to inadequate use of digital library resources. Service providers often do not recognize that some faculty members are "cosmopolitans" who rely more on formal interactions whereas other faculty members are "locals" who rely more on informal interactions (Mulkey, Dougan, and Steelman 2005). A "one size fits all" support strategy is not effective in providing faculty support. Help desk services often use a one-size-fits-all strategy designed with IT professionals in mind rather than faculty; meanwhile, faculty members who need off-campus support may find that campus services are designed to be provided in person (O'Connor, Valerio, and Dexter 2005).

In order to avoid these common problems, training and support programs need to be designed to provide sustained, ongoing forms of assistance as well as personalized, "just-in-time" forms of assistance to faculty throughout the process of online course design and implementation. With the aim of designing such a multidimensional training and support program, we adapted models described by Sixl-Deniell, Williams, and Wong (2006); Riedlinger and Rosenberg (2006); and Covington, Petherbridge, and Warren (2005). Our program includes the following features:

- We define expectations regarding online learning within our teaching contracts and our faculty course development processes.
- We budget for software and Web services during both development and delivery phases, and we provide continual staff and peer support during both of these phases as well.
- We require all faculty—full-time and adjunct—to complete an online teaching course produced by the [Educational Teleconsortium of Michigan](#). This six-week online course introduces faculty to the pedagogical and technical aspects of online teaching.
- We use a whole product approach to technology integration. Rather than offering a variety of individual products that faculty must assemble on their own, we provide a comprehensive suite of products and processes that can be more easily learned and utilized in conjunction with one another.

- We assign an individual producer (instructional developer) to each faculty member in the course development process. Producers and faculty members collaborate using a [content design template](#) to organize course objectives, course content, student activities, and student assessment; producers also provide guidance and ongoing support to their faculty cohorts regarding the use of any new technologies.
- We tailor our support staff interactions to suit the needs of faculty, depending on whether they prefer to meet face to face on campus, via Web conference or telephone conference call, or even at home.
- We mentor faculty throughout their online classes with frequent consultation and feedback (Helton and Helton 2005), and we have established Blackboard structures to allow for further communication, knowledge sharing, and problem solving between course developers and teaching faculty.
- We support the preparation of audio, video, narrated PowerPoint presentations, and other media.
- We are developing shared learning objects and [shared service resources](#) consistent with those described by Wood (2004) to prepare us for our planned migration to the [Blackboard Content System](#).
- We are creating a library of [video-on-demand training segments](#) similar to one developed by the [University of Miami](#).

We hope that our support program encourages faculty to share their knowledge as "faculty peers" (Reilly 2005, ¶ 1) who can help lead colleagues through the technology adoption life cycle and thereby help LTU bridge the chasm between faculty and technology.

Conclusion

How successful has LTU Online been so far? Our early results are encouraging:

- We developed 11 courses for Fall 2006 and will develop 24 more courses over the next two semesters.
- We have identified a mix of full-time and adjunct faculty to develop and teach our online courses, and we have scheduled instructors for development and teaching for several semesters.
- Instructors have observed that LTU Online courses are more comprehensively designed than prior hybrid or online courses.
- Faculty are increasing their use of video and other media.
- Faculty are developing sophisticated online assessment methods.
- Students have registered for our online courses at a faster rate than for traditional or hybrid classes. As of September 1, 2006, over 150 students have registered for online classes.

As the conclusion of the Fall 2006 semester, we will assess student learning by measuring outcomes using the same assessment instruments we have used for traditional and hybrid classes. Meanwhile, we will monitor [student course evaluations](#) for observations about teaching effectiveness and course design; in turn, we will monitor [instructor surveys](#) for feedback regarding the effectiveness of our support services. We will also evaluate the retention of adjunct faculty from semester to semester to ensure that our incentives and services are sufficient for maintaining staff levels in our new online learning programs.

Chief academic officers rightly believe that "it takes more effort to teach online" (Allen and Seaman 2005, 9); institutions therefore must be realistic when designing faculty training and support systems for online learning programs. Institutions that offer online programs have probably already recognized the associated support and cost issues, and this recognition has likely come with some pain attached. We are trying to learn from the lessons of those institutions that have gone before us and learn from ourselves as we grow. In turn, we hope that other institutions currently in the midst of launching new online learning programs will be able to learn from our own efforts to establish a strong foundation for faculty support.

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