

# Innovations in online faculty development: an organizational model for long-term support of online faculty

## *Innovación en la capacitación docente online: un modelo organizacional para brindar apoyo a largo plazo a la docencia online*

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### Abstract:

In 2008, Penn State University's online delivery organization, Penn State World Campus, established a dedicated faculty development unit to improve online instruction. The Online Faculty Development (OFD) unit was designed to prepare faculty for online teaching through a large and varied curriculum of asynchronous online training courses built on the theory and research of best practices for online instruction. This paper describes the Penn State World Campus OFD unit, its mission and

program, and the assumptions underlying its day-to-day operations.

**Keywords:** online faculty development, online teaching, professional development, online teaching competencies, asynchronous training, online teaching certificate.

### Resumen:

En 2008, la organización de enseñanza *online* de la Pennsylvania State University, el Penn State World Campus, creó una uni-

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dad dedicada a la capacitación docente para mejorar la formación *online*. La unidad de capacitación docente *online* (en adelante OFD, del inglés *Online Faculty Development*) fue diseñada con el objetivo de preparar al profesorado para la enseñanza *online* a través de un programa amplio y variado de cursos asíncronos de formación *online* basados en la teoría e investigación de las mejores prácticas relacionadas con la instrucción

*online*. En este documento se describe la unidad OFD del Penn State World Campus, su misión y programa, y las premisas sobre las que se basan sus operaciones diarias.

**Descriptores:** capacitación docente *online*, enseñanza *online*, desarrollo profesional, competencias de enseñanza *online*, formación asíncrona, certificado de enseñanza *online*.

## 1. Introduction

Online education has become a mainstream delivery system for academic degree programs and courses in higher education. Online teaching, however, can be a very different experience to face-to-face teaching because the learning environment — asynchronous, distant, and digital — is still new for many instructors transitioning from the face-to-face classroom. Online teaching requires specialized training designed to develop best practices, understandings, skills, and competencies needed for effective instruction and student success. This is the case for several reasons:

- 1) Few skills and competencies from face-to-face teaching transfer to online.
- 2) Many mid-career instructors new to online teaching lack a first-hand understanding of how online students learn.

- 3) Online course design and teaching require a familiarity of learning theory unfamiliar to many instructors, for example, how to align student learning outcomes, assessments, and assignments, design effective online discussion questions or facilitate effective online group projects.

For many instructors, face-to-face and online, online faculty development training is their first formal introduction to teaching. According to the Educause Learning Initiative, a thought leader in higher education in the United States, the number one issue in teaching and learning in 2017 and 2019 was faculty development (Educause, 2017, 2019). With online learning here to stay, universities should now be turning their attention to preparing faculty to teach online with high levels of competence and quality. This paper describes the theory and practice behind one university's recognition that online courses need to be taught by

specifically trained instructors in order to improve and maintain quality, assure enrollment growth and student success, and solidify institutional brands through quality instruction.

Online faculty development (OFD) is a recently-emerging subset of higher education faculty development with a growing body of research to support its importance in online education and its best practices (for example, Allen & Seaman, 2008; Bigatel, Ragan, Kennan, May, & Redmond, 2012; Gregory & Martindale, 2016; McQuiggan, 2012; Palloff & Pratt, 2011). OFD accepts core assumptions about effective teaching and successful learning online:

- 1) While «good teaching is good teaching,» there are specific skills, understandings, and competencies required for online, asynchronous instruction that are not reliably intuitive and self-teaching for a face-to-face instructor new to online teaching.
- 2) Few face-to-face teaching techniques translate to the online space while many online practices positively inform and enhance face-to-face teaching.
- 3) Research is becoming settled on best practices for effective online instruction and student engagement.
- 4) Institutional commitment to OFD, including a dedicated and expert staff, consistent funding, and a university-wide long-term plan, is essential for preparing instructors for the present and

future of higher education online learning.

Further, as a professional development practice, OFD is driven by and responsive to innovation. In American universities, faculty development for face-to-face teaching is rarely required of newly-minted assistant professors and newly-hired adjunct instructors. Higher education classroom instruction has a long history of assuming that subject area experts are teaching experts as well, a false assumption that can lead to ineffective instruction. In contrast, the movement among universities to require some type of formal preparation for online teaching is a major innovation in U.S. higher education. Pre-teaching training for online instruction is motivated by several factors:

- 1) The recognition that the asynchronous digital learning space is sufficiently different from the face-to-face classroom as to require specialized training.
- 2) The allocation of resources made available to the «team approach» of moving face-to-face courses and programs online.
- 3) The promise of new revenue through online enrollments.
- 4) The possibility of higher college rankings via extensive training to teach online.

With the normalization of training and credentialing for online instructors, we see a trend affirming the relationship between educational professional

development, quality instruction, and student success.

## 2. Best practices for online instruction

Chickering and Gamson (1987) identified seven principles for successful undergraduate teaching. They are expressed as instructor behaviors, identifiable as competencies and understandings:

1. Encourage contact between students and faculty.
2. Develop reciprocity and cooperation among students.
3. Encourage active learning.
4. Give prompt feedback.
5. Emphasize time on task.
6. Communicate high expectations.
7. Respect diverse talents and ways of learning.

These are not aspirational; each of the seven behaviors can be enacted with planning, guided training, practice, and a purpose intending to positively impact student learning and success. Underlying these behaviors are several key factors:

- 1) The importance of building relationships through teaching and learning.
- 2) An instructor positionality of «student-centeredness».

- 3) The value of student input into course design and management.

- 4) The need for tight alignment among the core components of a course: student learning objectives, assignments, assessments, and course design.

- 5) The importance of student engagement with the instructor, peers, and the course content and curriculum.

In online higher education instruction, these behaviors are still relevant but must be conceptualized and operationalized for a different demographic and learning space: the adult online learner and the traditional college age student learning asynchronously, in multiple time zones, and through a digital interface. The Chickering and Gamson (1987) instructor behaviors translated to online must leverage the affordances of online learning and innovate around the constraints inherent in the asynchronous digital space. For example, «encourage contact between students and faculty» and «respect diverse talents and ways of learning,» can be more productive online because, unlike the face-to-face lecture or discussion, *every student voice is heard* in discussion forums. Issues of race, ethnicity, class and physical accessibility are somewhat neutralized online, allowing for increased equality of contribution and sharing of diverse points of view and life experiences.

Research building on Chickering and Gamson found that these face-to-face

TABLE 1. Online Teaching Competencies.

Pedagogical	Technical	Administrative
Attend to the unique challenges of distance learning where learners are separated by time and geographic proximity and interactions are primarily asynchronous in nature.	Complete basic computer operations.	Log-in to the course and actively participate.
Be familiar with the unique learning needs and situations of both traditional age and adult learners, providing an educational experience that is appropriate for both.	Successfully log into the LMS and access the course.	Communicate to students when assignments and exams will be graded and returned.
Have mastery of course content, structure, and organization.	Successfully navigate the course space.	Provide a comprehensive syllabus that adheres to institutional syllabus policy.
Respond to student inquiries.	Set-up and manage student grades.	Mediate course-related student conflicts.
Provide detailed feedback on assignments and exams.	Effectively use course communication systems.	Adhere to the institutional policies regarding student educational rights, privacy and accessibility.
Communicate with students about course progress and changes.	Manage the course roster.	Revise course content and instructional materials based on student feedback.
Promote and encourage a learning environment that is safe, inviting and mutually respectful.	Manage student submissions.	Know where and when to get technical assistance and support for you and your students.
Monitor and manage student progress.	Manage the course files and folders within the LMS (when appropriate).	Communicate expectations of student course behavior.

Communicate course goals and outcomes.		Be aware of, inform students about, and monitor compliance to institutional academic integrity policies.
Provide evidence to students of their presence on the course on a regular basis.		Report grades to students and record grades to the University's grading system as required.
Demonstrate sensitivity to disabilities and diversities including aspects of cultural, cognitive, emotional, and physical differences.		

Fuente: The Pennsylvania State University, 2019.

best practices could be translated to online teaching best practices, generating multiple discrete skills and understandings relevant to asynchronous learning. Bigatel et al. (2012) confirmed three categories of online instructor competencies encompassing online teaching: pedagogical competencies, technological competencies, and administrative competencies (see Table 1). Each of these best practices was identified as having a positive association with student engagement and a reliable measure of student learning and success.

Diehl (2016) further includes instructional design as a teaching-related competency and updates the research on online teaching competency and the standards movement for online instruction for Quality Matters, a rubric-based standard for online course design.

While these best practices maintain an association with effective face-to-face instruction, the factors of distance, asynchronicity, rapidly changing technology, and demographics of online learners suggest the need for specialized training for the online instructor. For that purpose, Penn State established a dedicated faculty development unit in the World Campus organizational structure responsible for supporting all Penn State faculty who teach online. This initial support resulted in the development of a curriculum of online training courses made available to faculty free of charge. Along the way, the descriptor «online» was added to «faculty development» to distinguish the specific learning experiences necessary to develop the skills, understandings, and competencies necessary for effective online instruction.

### 3. A dedicated unit for online faculty development at penn state

The Online Faculty Development (OFD) unit of Penn State World Campus was established in 2008 to offer online, asynchronous courses designed to help Penn State faculty develop understandings and competencies in online teaching. OFD is a unit within the World Campus Academic Affairs organization along with Learning Design, Program Planning and Management, Academic Advising, Student Affairs, and Outreach Information and Technology. Established in the early days of World Campus and approved by the governance of Penn State Outreach as a formal support for quality online instruction, the OFD unit is funded through a tuition revenue share between World Campus (the platform provider) and the academic program and its college (the content and instruction provider).

One of the unique design features of Penn State's online initiative is the division of responsibilities between World Campus and the university's colleges. World Campus provides the online platform and technical support for the colleges to offer their academic degree programs. World Campus has no authority over the academic content, hiring, performance assessment of faculty, or course assignments of a program's faculty. World Campus can advise an academic program seeking to establish online degrees and can help market those programs, but retains only a support role in academic quality. The relationship between Penn State World Campus and the colleges can be thought of as a decentralized design,

with the colleges retaining their academic authority. All World Campus courses are authored and taught by Penn State faculty. This design means that all degrees earned online through World Campus say «Penn State», and not «Penn State World Campus.»

Given this organizational context, World Campus Online Faculty Development has been given the support and freedom to be an innovative, researched-based leader for online teaching improvement across the university as well as contributing to the specialized field of higher education professional development. All of the unit's research-based online training courses, customized services, and one-on-one work with faculty is offered free of charge to programs and individual professors.

The Online Faculty Development (OFD) unit at Penn State World Campus offers all Penn State University faculty and graduate students a curriculum of over nearly 20 faculty training courses (designated as «OL courses»). Half of the curriculum consists of self-directed courses that take three to five hours to complete. The rest consists of four or five-week cohort-based, instructor-led courses designed to mimic an online academic course with graded assignments and due dates around topics related to best practices for online teaching. The courses take between three to five hours a week to complete and are taught by current Penn State faculty who have earned the World Campus OFD Foundations of Online Teaching Certificate.



The theory of action behind the OL course design is based on the idea that the best way for an instructor to learn to teach online is to gain knowledge and competencies through learning online. In an OL course, the faculty member, especially one new to online education, becomes a «student», gaining familiarity with the LMS, experiencing the social learning advantages of asynchronous discussions, understanding the online student perspective, and acquiring knowledge and expertise in teaching skills. In addition to content learning, OL course evaluations consistently report that faculty who start off a course resistant, fearful, or insecure about online teaching conclude the course with self-reports of increased confidence and competence, key factors in online teaching self-efficacy (Horvitz, Beach, Anderson, & Xia, 2015).

#### 4. World campus ofd: organizational structure and scope

In the early 2000's, World Campus and university leadership understood that in establishing and growing an online initiative, it was necessary to make sure that faculty received formal and scaffolded preparation to teach in the new digital learning spaces in online education. The OFD unit was positioned inside the World Campus organizational structure rather than in a college or the Provost's office because it was designated as the primary support of faculty who taught courses offered through the World Campus. As part of the tuition revenue share between World Campus and

the colleges, OFD was considered one of the services provided along with the student help desk support, learning design, undergraduate academic advising, IT support, and marketing. In recent years, services have expanded to include online student affairs.

All faculty who teach online at Penn State, either through World Campus degree programs or college-level web-based courses, receive training in online instruction. While some type of training is required of all faculty, the sources of training vary. Training can be provided at the academic program level, from within a college faculty development office, or through the World Campus Online Faculty Development unit. Increasingly in recent years, colleges and academic programs have mandated that their faculty who teach online be trained through OFD's OL courses.

World Campus offers over 160 degree and certificate programs to 20,000 fully online students. In any given semester, approximately 1,200 Penn State instructors teach courses through World Campus. OFD's mission is to offer all instructors who teach through World Campus initial preparation and ongoing instructional development. Despite this large scope, OFD is designed to be lean. The unit consists of four people with specific responsibilities: a director with a faculty appointment who oversees curriculum and OL course instructors, an assistant director with a doctorate and learning design experience, a program associate who advises faculty on professional de-



velopment planning, and an administrative support person who manages course enrollments and reporting back to colleges. The team manages the development of three to four new courses a year, the revision of current courses on a three-year timeline, the hiring and performance assessment of OL instructors, and the registration and reporting of over 1,000 faculty enrollments in an academic year. In recent years, the OFD unit has expanded its mission to support 150 graduate students a year who seek to establish and improve their online teaching skills. Since the unit's establishment in 2008, there have been over 5,000 faculty enrollments and 1,200 graduate student enrollments.

## 5. Mission

Fundamental to the World Campus OFD organizational unit is curricular, instructional, and budget decision-making informed by mission. The unit has evolved from focusing on course-taking, certificate-earning, and growing course enrollments to a longer-term vision: *to support online faculty throughout their teaching careers*. This big picture perspective is central to how the unit manages enrollments, expands course offerings, trains the Penn State faculty who teach the OL courses, and balances all of this with attention to quality and sustainability. The mission suggests that each individual faculty member who completes an OL course is potentially a long-term partner in his or her online teaching career. The mission also suggests that beyond competence, it is now

possible to work with individuals and groups of faculty for genuine online teaching mastery.

## 6. Curriculum development of OL courses

The core curriculum focuses on basic competencies. OL course topics include essentials of online teaching, introduction to the World Campus, accessibility issues for online learners, Learning Management System (LMS) basics — in our case Canvas — and operating the LMS hands-on, assessment of online learners, teaching various student populations such as the adult learner, military learner, and the international learner, using groups and team in online learning, and course-authoring for accessibility. Ideas for new OL courses are created through various processes such as periodic faculty needs assessments, monitoring industry trends, and serendipities of cross-unit and academic collaborations. For example, a gamification course was developed and taught by partners in another area of the university. A teaching the military learner course originated with the military specialists in World Campus, and the Teaching the International Learner Course arose out of conversation with colleagues in the College of Education's Comparative and International Education Program. A course on academic advising (for faculty who advise) arose from the need for professional development for advisers. An OL course on using the online library, helping online students crisis, and conducting research with online students all came about because the

unit was responsive to the needs of our core constituents.

Individual OL courses and the whole curriculum are created with several purposes in mind:

- 1) To provide exposure to and practice with best practices in online instruction.
- 2) To familiarize faculty with the online course environment by mimicking an academic course in the OL course design and by treating faculty as students in the OL course with assignments to complete through each week.
- 3) To help faculty gain knowledge in important topic areas essential to online teaching.
- 4) To fulfill training needs in the faculty development community across the university.

Course development is supervised by the OFD unit, even when other subject area experts author the course. The process from design, authoring, piloting, and official launching usually takes two to three semesters or less if collaborators and partners can provide additional capacity. Standard intellectual property rights and agreements apply to OL courses as if they were for-credit academic courses, but the OFD unit has final decision-making authority over the creation, revision, or discontinuation of an OL course.

In addition to developing and maintaining a curriculum of courses, OFD bundles courses into online teaching certificates. The Foundations of Online Teaching Certificate is the four-course centerpiece of the certificate curriculum and focuses on developing understandings and competencies essential for online higher education instruction. The Instructional Practice Certificate includes OL courses aimed at improving pedagogy and online instruction. The Professional Practice Certificate clusters OL courses and experiences designed to improve teaching through ongoing professional development. The Learning and the Learner Certificate includes OL courses designed to teach faculty about the unique learning needs of online student populations. The Course Authoring Certificate bundles OL courses designed to help faculty understand the design fundamentals of the digital learning space.

## 7. Model of faculty instructors

An essential component of the OFD curriculum is instructor-led OL courses. These are courses of 20-25 participants (Penn State faculty who teach online) in a four- or five-week cohort model, taught by a currently practicing Penn State online instructor. This model of *faculty teaching faculty* is based on three assumptions:

- 1) Faculty, especially those who reluctantly enrolled in an OL course (but are required to by their program or college), prefer to be taught by a colleague rather than a non-faculty educational

developer. This is especially true for faculty who don't wish to be «students in an online class» but are required to gain training by their academic department or college.

- 2) Faculty who become OL instructors have already earned our basic Foundations of Online Teaching Certificate. However, teaching other faculty is an important step in their own professional development and teaching satisfaction as well as their effectiveness in their own online academic courses.
- 3) Faculty who teach OL courses come from all disciplines, providing OL course «students» (faculty participants) a broad range of experience and perspective.

OL instructors receive individual support from the Director and Assistant Director, including a discussion around the course evaluation (rating both the course and the instruction) and reflection on the experience of teaching the course. OL instructors also become part of a Faculty Learning Community, a virtual space in the LMS for communication, information sharing, and discussion around OL teaching and online teaching in general. In the Faculty Learning Community space — much like a course space with faculty *enrolled* in the LMS, OL instructors can chat asynchronously about challenges and successes in online teaching, share resources and examples of their teaching, and provide their colleagues with ongoing support and expertise. Both the

director and the assistant director participate in this online Faculty Learning Community as leaders of the OFD unit as well as OL instructors themselves.

OL instructors are modestly compensated for their teaching through pay supplementals according to their employment status at the university. With approximately 45 sections of OL courses needing instructors each year, and increasing every year, the unit-level operating budget for OFD requires a growing line item for OL instructor compensation. It is a testament to the university's commitment to preparing faculty to teach online that these funds are allocated to the unit each year.

## 8. Customized services to programs, colleges, and campuses

Most of OFD's capacity is allocated toward maintaining the OL course curriculum and supporting the OL course instructors. A secondary function that fulfills the mission is the design of customized, face-to-face services to programs and colleges. These efforts include new faculty orientations, presentations at face-to-face and online faculty development meetings, individualizing certificates based on a college's goals for their online faculty, and working with academic program leads to train and support new types of online instructors. One remarkable example is a college with a large online portfolio of programs and courses. Administrators and lead faculty in this college created an on-campus, three-day workshop around faculty development for online faculty. The

college funded travel for over 50 online instructors nation-wide and some online students to gather on campus in order to talk about teaching and participate in presentations around best practices for online teaching and course design. OFD leadership worked on the event planning committee, presented an overview of OL courses and certificates to the whole group, and participated in breakout sessions on best practices.

## 9. Scholarship and research

The focus of OFD's research efforts is to determine the effectiveness of OL courses. At this point in time, academic autonomy and faculty culture prevent OFD from *sitting in* on an instructor's academic course. This would be the best way to observe the extent to which the instructor applied concepts and practices learned in the OL course — a credible measure of effectiveness. For now, instructor self-reports and additional course-taking are measures of program effectiveness.

## 10. Cross-university collaboration

Development of curriculum and support for instruction of OL courses (and related administrative functions such as enrollment tracking and reporting back to academic programs and colleges) are part of the customized professional development services that constitute OFD's main function to serve the mission of supporting online faculty throughout their careers. Another way the OFD unit serves is through Penn State's robust committee structure. OFD leaders serve on multi-

ple formal standing committees, working groups related to the strategic plan, and on informal project groups that bring together the faculty development and learning design communities who would normally be siloed in a complex and multi-campus institution such as Penn State. The value of this service recognizes the vast online learning resources throughout the university are best used when coordinated through formal and informal networks.

## 11. Conclusion

The World Campus Online Faculty Development unit is unique among large and complex Research universities with a robust online initiative. The unit continues to evolve from a faculty development function focused only on OL course completion to a learning center with a robust curriculum of professional development courses, customized programs, and collaborations on new courses such as Universal Design for Learning, Integrative Thinking, and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. While funded through the World Campus revenue share, the unit serves any and all interested Penn State faculty, regardless of whether they teach through the World Campus or not. Additionally, the unit is now the main source of preparing graduate students to teach online for Penn State and their future universities.

The evolution of the OFD unit, its function within the university, and its contribution to the field of online faculty development in general suggest

that the decision years ago to create the unit and allow it to prosper through ongoing funding and political support helped position Penn State as a leader in online education. It can be tempting for universities new to online learning to focus on launching courses and degree programs while overlooking instruction. It is not unusual to miss the fact that teaching online is distinct from face-to-face teaching and requires specialized training. It is understandable that educators trained formally or informally and steeped in face-to-face instruction are mistaken when they believe their teaching skills translate to the online environment when, in practice, few do. What we now know is online instruction has significant transfer to face-to-face instruction, but less so the reverse. It can be easy to overlook the fact that quality online learning needs more than a well-designed course; it needs skilled and competent instruction to make a course come alive and to spark and sustain student engagement.

The university that chooses to emphasize and invest in preparation for online instruction addresses several critical issues simultaneously. One, preparation for online teaching makes possible a greater quality of student experience and success. Students who feel more engaged with their online professors may be more likely to persist through the course and their degree. Given the marketing cost of bringing a student from the prospect stage to the enrollment stage, online faculty development is a small investment to improve the

chances of student retention through the direct impact of instructor quality. Two, online faculty development helps build sustainability of a program as faculty expand their teaching repertoire, achieve success and satisfaction in their online teaching, and remain on staff in order to build the quality and reputation of an online academic degree program. Three, an intentional online faculty development effort focuses on teaching and learning theory, not just pushing buttons and playing with the bells and whistles in the online learning space. As faculty learn about teaching online, for many perhaps their first formal instruction in how to teach, they are learning about best practices and principles of teaching and learning in general. Four, this knowledge on how online learning works and how online learners learn brings value added back to the face-to-face classroom. A common observation from those trained to teach online is that they become more effective and satisfied teachers in face-to-face classrooms. This is due in part to learning educational principles essential to online instruction such as designing clear instructions, aligning student learning objectives with relevant assignments and accurate assessments, and backward course design starting with outcomes and ending with readings, assignments, and grading methodologies. Preparation for online teaching can also result in greater degrees of faculty competency for and confidence in teaching, especially in the unfamiliar space of asynchronous distance learning.



The intentionality of online faculty development training, for example in formal courses such as Penn State's OFD OL courses, sends clear messages to colleges wishing to create online programs to capture new revenue and serve a wider student population:

- 1) Teaching is important and worth investing resources.
- 2) Reflective instructional practice and meaningful assessment of teaching performance are critical to online quality and student success.
- 3) Online teaching mastery is achievable but takes years of guided learning and practice.
- 4) Online teaching informs face-to-face teaching, improving overall instruction in all delivery modes. Such a permanent training initiative requires time to mature and achieve credibility within a university, and the patience for this may seem unrealistic given the velocity of change — especially in online education — that higher education is experiencing now.

However, as with all teaching, corners cannot be cut to achieve quality. Quality costs. Quality also makes an online initiative competitive. As online degree programs and courses have become mainstream, so should online faculty development as a core function of the university seeking a credible status meaningful purpose as an online learning provider.

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