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Ekaterina Ginzburg
Sacred Heart University

Peter Chepya
Post University

David Demers
Sacred Heart University

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The Digital Learning Faculty Certificate Program

EKATERINA GINZBURG
Sacred Heart University, USA
ginzburg@sacredheart.edu

PETER CHEPYA
Post University, USA
pczprof@yahoo.com

DAVID DEMERS
Sacred Heart University, USA
demersd@sacredheart.edu

To assist in the training and professional development of faculty new to teaching online, Sacred Heart University established the Digital Learning Faculty Certificate Program. This 8-week online cohort program provides faculty with best practices for teaching online, including instructional design, effective online communication and appropriate use of technological tools. Now in its third year, the Digital Learning Faculty Certificate Program has been successful in providing a mechanism to prepare faculty to better meet the challenges of teaching online.

Introduction

A key concern for many institutions offering online courses remains the quality of instruction delivered electronically. For most, this concern may help drive the planning and design processes undertaken to establish new online courses and/or programs. In this case, the responsibility of ensuring quality in online course offerings has fallen on the individual instructor and/or department offering the course(s). In such an instance, schools might be left with lingering questions regarding the quality and efficacy of online

courses serving their student populations as the number of online course offerings continues to grow.

Another factor influencing the growth or success of online courses and/or programs is faculty perception regarding online learning as a viable model for higher education. As reported by the Sloan Consortium (Sloan Consortium, 2003), the majority of academic leaders feel that students taking online offerings at their institutions are at least “as satisfied” as those students taking similar courses in a traditional face-to-face environment. Despite subsequent Sloan reports indicating consensus among college and university administrators that the quality of online course offerings was equal to or greater than similar courses offered in a traditional format (Sloan Consortium, 2007; Allen & Seaman, 2007), the perception that quality was lacking in online courses was reported by a large percentage of faculty. As a result, addressing faculty perceptions regarding online learning remains a key challenge for institutions wishing to embark into the realm of offering online courses to students.

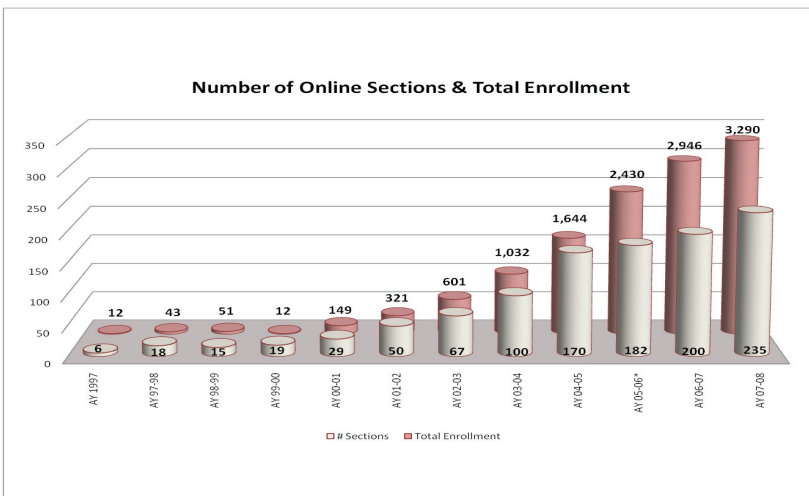


Figure 1. Number of Online Sections and Total Enrollment from 1997-2008 at Sacred Heart University. Number of online sections (gray) has grown from a total of 6 offered in 1997 to 235 offered in AY2007-2008. Total enrollment in all online sections (red) at SHU has grown to exceed 3,000 in AY2007-2008.

In 1997, Sacred Heart University (SHU) offered its first courses delivered entirely online. Individual faculty largely managed the development

and delivery of online courses for SHU students with little or no opportunity for faculty training in the art of teaching online. In the 11 years following the introduction of online learning at SHU, the school has seen steady and progressive growth in terms of the number of course sections offered online and student enrollment in these sections (Figure 1). With a current total enrollment of 5,800 students, SHU offers over 200 course sections online each year. Total enrollment in online course sections exceeded 3,000 for the first time in AY2007-2008. As the opportunity for online learning became more popular with students and the number of course sections continued to grow, there was a clear need to recruit additional faculty on campus who would be interested and motivated to accept the challenge of teaching their first course online. Despite this need, the school lacked an appropriate training mechanism to address the needs of faculty new to teaching online. As part of a new 'Digital Learning Initiative' introduced in 2006, the administration of Online Learning at SHU became the responsibility of the Office of Instructional Technology, which is dedicated to providing support for faculty in the effective use of technology to enhance teaching and learning.

One of the first challenges addressed through the "Digital Learning Initiative" was the establishment of a robust professional development program for faculty wishing to explore online learning. This paper will describe the planning process that went into the establishment of the *Digital Learning Faculty Certificate Program* at SHU as well as highlight the successes and future challenges that remain for the Digital Learning initiative.

Surveying the Landscape: Initial Planning for the Digital Learning Faculty Certificate Program

As an initial step in developing an effective training curriculum for faculty interested in teaching online, a simple needs analysis was conducted using an online survey administered to the entire SHU faculty body, including adjunct instructors. Two versions of the survey were made available to faculty: 1) for 'experienced' online instructors and 2) for 'inexperienced' faculty who had not yet developed or taught an online course. These surveys addressed a wide range of topics related to online learning including faculty perception toward the quality of online instruction, the amount of time and effort required to develop and teach an online course and areas of perceived need for training and faculty development. A total number of 41 faculty participated in the survey with 23 individuals responding as 'experienced' and 18 responding as 'inexperienced' online educators. Results were tabulated

and analyzed to establish a baseline of faculty attitudes and perceptions toward online learning and to identify potential training opportunities designed to foster excellence in online instruction.

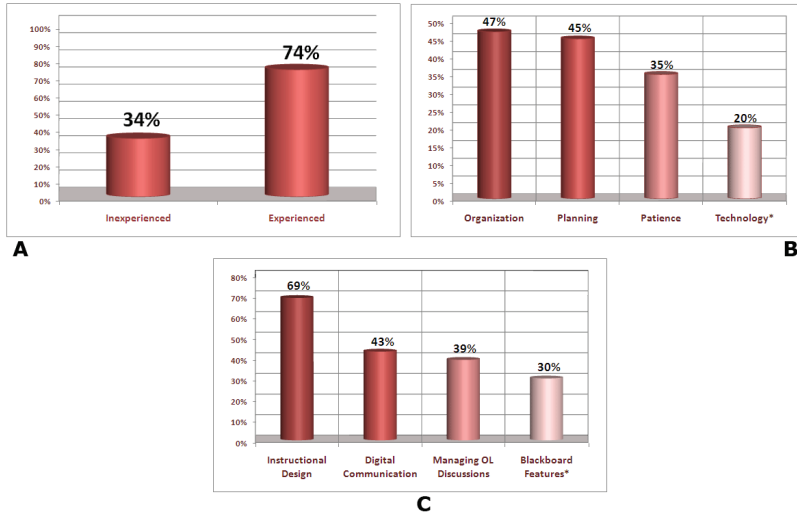


Figure 2. Results of Initial Needs Assessment Survey. (A) Faculty Perception of Online Learning. Percentage of SHU Faculty respondents indicating agreement with the statement “I feel that teaching a course online can be just as effective as teaching it in a traditional face to face setting”. Results are presented for both ‘experienced’ online educators and faculty ‘inexperienced’ with online learning. (B) Characteristics of Effective Online Educators. Percentage of ‘experienced’ online educators selecting each characteristic as being important in terms of being an effective online instructor. (C) Desired Areas of Training. Participants were asked to select from a list of topics those that they would most like to see offered as part of a new faculty development curriculum. Percentage of faculty selecting each topic are presented.

On the needs analysis survey, faculty were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statement “I feel that teaching a course online can be just as effective as teaching it in a traditional face to face setting” (Figure 2A). Results demonstrated that faculty perception toward the quality and efficacy of online instruction at SHU differed according to whether faculty had prior experience with developing and/or teaching an online course.

While 74% of ‘experienced’ online instructors indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, only 34% of instructors with no prior experience teaching online felt the same.

Experienced online educators were also asked to indicate which ‘characteristics’ from a provided list (Organizational Skills; Writing Skills; Planning Skills; Technology Skills; Adaptability; Flexibility; Patience) were most important in terms of achieving success as an online instructor (Figure 2B). Experienced online instructors indicated that organization, planning and patience were the most important characteristics of a successful online instructor. Of particular note was the fact that technology proficiency ranked among the lowest indicators of success according to ‘experienced’ online instructors.

All participants (‘experienced’ and ‘inexperienced’) were asked to select topics which they would most like to see offered in a new training curriculum for online instructors from a provided list (Blackboard; Using Internet Resources Effectively; Using Multimedia Effectively; Identifying and Incorporating Learning Objects; Utilizing Web 2.0/Social Computing Technologies; Instructional Design for Online Courses; Effective Communication in Online Courses; Managing Online Discussions; Time Management Tips and Strategies; ‘Stories from the Trenches’). The most commonly selected topics included instructional design, digital communication, and managing online discussions (Figure 2C). Once again, technology-related topics ranked lowest in terms of participant selection, suggesting that faculty at SHU already felt comfortable using the official course management system (Blackboard) for providing electronic course content to their students.

Design and Development of the Digital Learning Faculty Certificate Program

Based in part on the results and feedback obtained through the initial needs analysis survey, the Office of Instructional Technology staff worked to develop the *Digital Learning Faculty Certificate Program* (DLFCP). The two primary goals of the program were to: a) provide faculty interested in developing and/or teaching online courses with best practices and strategies for success in the online arena and b) train faculty not just in the technologies available, but in how to create a high quality teacher student relationship in an online environment. After several weeks of planning the learning objectives for the DLFCP were crafted. These objectives specified that graduates of the program would:

- Achieve proficiency in applying the principles of Instructional System Design (ISD) during the course planning and development process.
- Become familiar with the value of “Presence Learning” and achieve proficiency in delivering course content using the principles of “e-Personality”
- Consider issues of Academic Integrity in the online world and achieve proficiency in implementing measures to discourage cheating online
- Employ effective time management strategies during both the development and delivery of an online course
- Explain, demonstrate, and implement principles of “Netiquette”
- Explain how to build an effective Online Learning Community and understand its importance
- Interpret the meaning of Fair Use and the TEACH Act and their implications for delivering electronic content through the Blackboard Course Management System
- Demonstrate proficiency in the use of the Blackboard Course Management System and its integrated tools for supporting communication and assessment in the online classroom
- Introduce SHU quality standards for online courses and employ suggested evaluation strategies to assess these standards

The DLFCP was developed as an 8-week online cohort program where groups of 8-14 faculty work together as ‘scholars’ led by a member of the Office of Instructional Technology staff. Each ‘module’ in the program is available for an entire week and focuses on one of the learning objectives along with a series of brief assignments with designated due dates and required online participation and discussion. One of the key reasons for delivering the training curriculum in this format was to provide an opportunity for faculty to experience online learning from the perspective of the student (Valentine, 2002). In addition, the DLFCP curriculum was designed to emphasize the value of planning, learning design, effective online communication and time management to directly address those areas identified by faculty as ‘areas of need’ in the initial needs analysis survey.

Research suggests that establishing and maintaining a sense of ‘connection’ with students is a vital component of a successful online instruction (Murphy, 2000; Hutchins, 2003). Three key components of the DLFCP directly address the need for online instructors to ‘connect’ with their students in the online classroom: “e-Personality”, “Netiquette” and “Online

Community”. The principle of ‘e-Personality’ suggests that instruction online is most effective when instructors inject ‘presence’ and ‘personality’ in their online lectures (Chepya, 2005). This can be achieved by incorporating personal reflection, history and humor into online instructional modules (Hutchins, 2003; Jones, Lindner, Murphy & Dooley, 2002). ‘Netiquette’ refers to the etiquette of online communication and can be achieved by providing students with a set of simple rules to follow when posting or contributing online communication with either the instructor or classmates (Weiss & Hanson-Baldauf, 2008). ‘Online Community’ is presented within the context of establishing and maintaining an effective, functioning online learning community where students and the instructor work together to support each others’ learning needs. The learning modules presented in the DLFCP that focus on these concepts provide real world examples, activities and streaming video vignettes designed to emphasize the importance of these strategies.

The Impact of the DLFCP at Sacred Heart University

The DLFCP has been successful in providing faculty interested in teaching online with an opportunity to develop the skills and strategies necessary to become an effective online instructor. Through the Summer 2008 term, 54 SHU faculty have graduated from the program, 43 of which have gone on to develop and/or teach their first online course shortly after completion of the program. Completion of the DLFCP at SHU also qualifies scholars to apply for a course development stipend for each online course they develop. To help ensure the quality of new online offerings, each instructor applying for a course development stipend is required to undergo a course-readiness review with a member of the Office of Instructional Technology after the course has been developed. The review process is used to ensure that the new online course has been designed using the concepts and principles presented in the DLFCP.

To assess the efficacy of the DLFCP in achieving the primary objectives of the program, each cohort is asked to complete a post-course survey administered directly through the Blackboard Course Management System. Participants are asked to evaluate the value of the activities and exercises assigned for each of the learning modules in the program. Over 85% of DLFCP graduates indicated agreement with the statement “*The required activities were valuable exercises for achieving the stated learning objectives*” (Figure 3A). One of the main benefits of completing the program entirely

online for participants was the experience of learning as an online student; something few faculty have direct experience with (Valentine, 2002). Over 86% of DLFCP graduates indicated agreement with the statement “*I now understand online learning better from a student’s point of view*” on the post-course survey (Figure 3B). Another emphasis of the DLFCP was developing effective online communication skills for the scholars. To achieve this goal, scholars were routinely asked to communicate and collaborate with their peers through the course discussion board, group work and/or through email. This effort proved valuable to participants as over 67% of DLFCP graduates indicated agreement with the statement “*The DB Forum discussions with my peers contributed to my learning*” (Figure 3C).

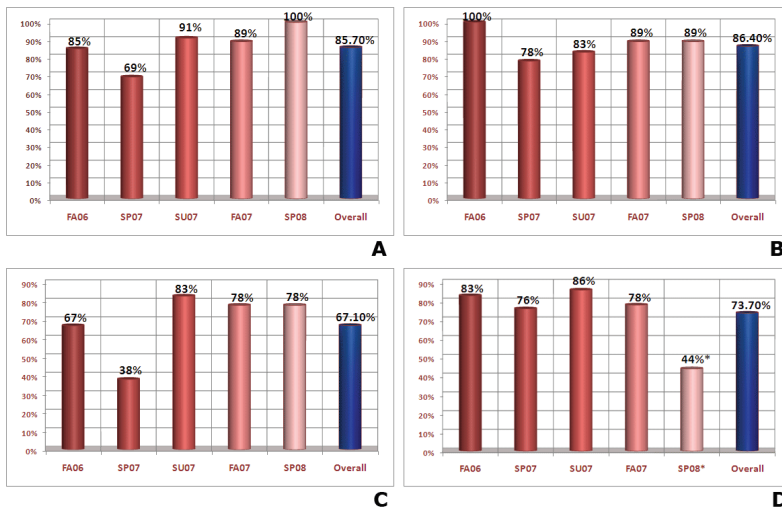


Figure 3. DLFCP Post-Course Survey Results. Participants in the DLFCP were asked to complete a post-course survey. Results are displayed for 5 subsequent cohorts offered between Fall 2006 and Spring 2008. (A) Value of Activities and Exercises. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statement “The required activities were valuable exercises for achieving the stated learning objectives”. (B) Understanding Students’ Perspective. DLFCP graduates were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statement “I now understand online learning better from a student’s point of view”. (C) Collaboration. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statement “The DB Forum discussions with my peers contributed to my learning”. (D) Changing Perceptions.

DLFCP graduates were asked to re-assess their level of agreement with the statement “I feel that I am able to develop an online course of equal quality when compared to my traditional face-to-face courses”.

To provide a direct measure of the impact the DLFCP has had in addressing the initial challenges of the Digital Learning Initiative at SHU, several questions from the initial needs assessment survey were also included in the post-course survey. When asked to re-assess their level of agreement with the statement “*I feel that I am able to develop an online course of equal quality when compared to my traditional face-to-face courses,*” over 73% of DLFCP scholars indicated agreement or strong agreement (Figure 3D). This result demonstrates that graduates of the DLFCP feel confident in their ability to develop an engaging online course and teach effectively in the online environment. The lower rating for the Spring 2008 cohort (44% agreement) reflects a larger than normal number of participants indicating neither agreement or disagreement with this statement (44%). For this group, only 11% indicated disagreement with the statement.

Additional anecdotal evidence regarding the success of the DLFCP in instilling greater faculty confidence in developing and delivering high-quality online instruction can be seen in the verbal and written testimonials received from the scholars on the needs analysis survey. Comments revealed appreciation for being able to experience online education from the perspective of the student:

“Thank you. You gave me a new perspective on what my students experience and I am now looking at my next course with new eyes.”

Based on their DLFCP experience, most participants agreed that implementing many of the recommended best practices introduced in the course were not only useful, but necessary. This included re-conceptualizing assignments for delivery online:

“I thought designing assignments was a very useful part: How do you create an assignment that is done exclusively online? How do you grade that assignment?”

Many participants indicated they found the program so valuable, they were planning to revise their traditional face-to-face courses to implement the concepts and strategies learned in the DLFCP:

“[The DLFCP] has influenced my teaching, my face-to-face teaching. So that now it is easier for me and it’s something I am more inclined to do - get everything structured ahead of time and really think it through in greater detail than I had previously.”

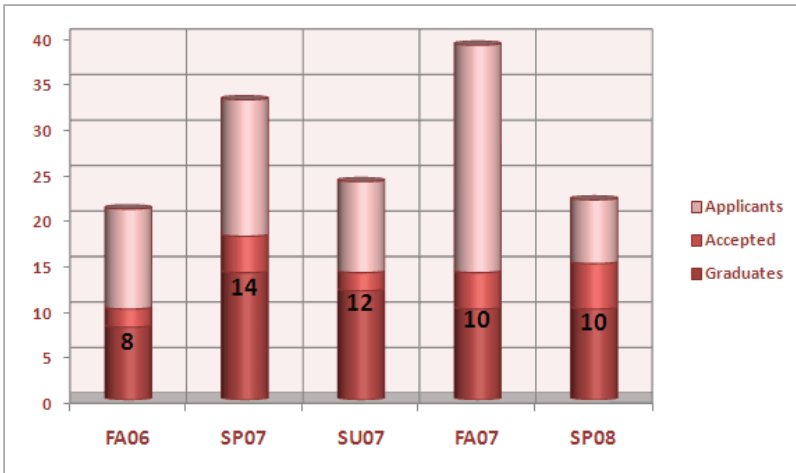


Figure 4. Demand for Participation in DLFCP at SHU. Number of applicants received, scholars accepted and graduates of the DLFCP from Fall 2006 through Spring 2008.

Perhaps the greatest indicator of the success experienced with the Digital Learning Faculty Certificate Program at Sacred Heart University can be found in the demand for participation in the program from the faculty body. The number of applications received to participate in the program has consistently exceeded the number of faculty that can be accommodated in a given cohort (Figure 4). The program's popularity has been a by-product of word-of-mouth from previous scholars and the increase in the number of nominations for participation received from department chairs.

Future Directions

To continue to build upon the success of the DLFCP, the Office of Instructional Technology is planning to work directly with various departments on campus to sponsor a group of DLFCP graduate scholars as 'mentors' who will be responsible for developing and delivering customized department-focused offerings of the DLFCP to smaller groups of participants from their own department. This effort will allow SHU to accommodate a greater number of potential participants in the program and provide a measure of quality assurance by helping achieve the goal of having every online section taught by a DLFCP scholar.

An additional activity to be incorporated into the DLFCP will be to ask participants to engage in a series of self-reflective activities designed to help them identify their own personal teaching philosophies. These reflective activities will be discussed with their assigned mentors in order to identify potential teaching strategies and the appropriate tools that may help these instructors create an online learning environment that adheres to their own teaching philosophies. In addition, scholars will be asked to document and reflect on their experiences teaching their first online course. Assigned mentors will be responsible for monitoring and collecting these reflective essays to review with the scholar afterward to identify potential areas of improvement or innovation that may then be pursued through the Office of Instructional Technology. These simple modifications will further enhance the success of the DLFCP by continuing to transform the program to adhere to the principles of adult learning theory (McQuiggan, 2007).

CONCLUSION

One of the main challenges in establishing an effective professional development program for faculty new to online teaching was addressing the perception among SHU faculty that quality may be compromised when adapting a course from a traditional face-to-face format to an online format. Graduates of the Digital Learning Faculty Certificate Program indicated not only their satisfaction with the training provided, but their confidence to develop an online course of equal quality when compared to their traditional course(s). To date, SHU has 'certified' a total of 54 instructors through the DLFCP with this number growing each year.

The Digital Learning Initiative at Sacred Heart University was designed to establish the infrastructure necessary to support the multitude of online offerings currently provided by the university to both the full- and part-time students as well as future online undergraduate degree programs. A key component in establishing this infrastructure was to provide a mechanism to prepare faculty to better meet the challenges of teaching online. As described in this report, the Digital Learning Faculty Certificate Program has been successful in fulfilling this objective.

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