

Chapter 117

Supporting Faculty and Students During Pandemic Conditions: An Online Department Chair's Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Events that are unforeseen in nature and have widespread impact demonstrate the potential to necessitate abrupt changes in both personal and professional parameters of life. Although university departments that are already primarily online are accustomed to operating in a predominately remote atmosphere, multiple adjustments were required to effectively support faculty and students during the early days of the global pandemic, COVID-19. This chapter will explore relevant challenges from the perspective of a chair of an online department. Included will be an analysis of considerations for an administrator's effective self-management during periods of abrupt change.

FACULTY SUPPORT

Faculty management is a key priority of online departments, as it directly impacts the student experience. Effective faculty management involves training, regular feedback, the administration of rewards and recognition, professional development, and regular community building through the delivery of engagement opportunities (Coswatte Mohr, & Shelton, 2017; Frankel, Friedman, Mansell, & Ibrahim, 2020). Sudden changes to personal and professional circumstances, which followed the outbreak of COVID-19 across the world, led to additional support needs among faculty, irrespective of the modality in which they previously taught.

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Training

One important best practice for online teaching which is well documented in the literature is presence (Bailey & Card, 2009; Baran et al., 2013; Kumar et al., 2019). Presence can be demonstrated through the use of welcome messages, personalized multimedia (Mandernach, 2009), responsiveness to student emails, and scheduling office hours at regular intervals. A second-best practice involves demonstrating support and engagement through the use of a variety of activities (Erbaggio et al., 2012; Martin, Ritzhaupt et al., 2019). Faculty must clearly communicate to students what will be expected of them during an online course. A related best practice, feedback (Alderman et al., 2012) is of the utmost importance when teaching online, as feedback provides students with direction. These best practices should be communicated to faculty as part of the process of preparing them to engage in the process of emergency remote teaching.

Although the assumption may be that faculty who were accustomed to teaching online would not be significantly impacted by the changes that followed the outbreak of COVID-19 across the world, the need for innovative strategies to effectively support this group of faculty arose quickly and can be categorized into two main areas: preparation to provide student support and time management. First, in terms of student support, online faculty are generally well versed in implementing typical strategies for supporting students enrolled in online courses. These strategies generally include the provision of timely and detailed feedback, prompt responses to students on discussion boards, regularly scheduled office hours, and additional outreach in cases where students are inactive within the online classroom. Following the closure of physical campuses, many institutions saw an increase in the number of students enrolled in online courses. This is due, in part, to the fact that higher education institutions began to schedule additional online courses, to complement the emergency remote teaching, which was occurring in previously face-to-face courses. In addition to the introduction of additional sections of online courses, course caps were increased in some cases, leading to additional students for online faculty to engage. Training in the management of large groups of students helps to facilitate a smooth transition for both faculty and students.

One strategy that helps to support the effective management of relatively large groups of students pertains to the use of technology tools to facilitate the process of feedback provision. One example of an applicable technology tool is Mote, which allows faculty to provide audio-based comments. A second tool is Screencastify, which allows faculty to provide feedback via video. An additional strategy is to utilize AnnotatePro, which is a free tool within the Microsoft Office suite. This tool allows faculty to quickly insert pre-formulated content after adding personalized feedback to each comment. One situation in which this would be particularly useful is when formulating comments that pertain to the use of the style guidelines from the American Psychological Association (APA). If the original comment pertained to inaccurate formatting of references, a faculty member might draft the comment to include a link to a reference that outlines an accurate application of the APA's style guidelines to reference formatting. The added, individual feedback might then reflect a key example from the paper submitted by the student.

The second area in which training may be helpful relates to time management. When faced with additional students and increased student outreach opportunities, faculty may experience an increase in their workload. These increased duties can be addressed through training in time management. One example of such training involves prioritization matrices. Prioritization matrices may be utilized to organize daily tasks in terms of their priority. Engaging in this activity helps faculty to ensure that key

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