The Use of Digital Technologies to Enhance Student-Engagement Pedagogies in Higher Education Distance Learning

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ABSTRACT

The increased availability of digital technologies in higher education distance learning courses gives rise to new pedagogical applications that enrich teaching and learning via student engagement. In addition to the benefits, the shift to distance education and the integration of emerging digital tools creates barriers as well. For example, the opportunities afforded by new technologies, pedagogies, and online learning environments necessitate that faculty develop new knowledge and skills about teaching. Particularly, professional development related to student engagement pedagogies and emerging digital technologies will reconceptualize teaching and learning at a distance. Thus, higher education must continue to invest in the

development of training and resources necessary for faculty to make the best use of emerging technology integration in virtual teaching and learning.

INTRODUCTION

Although once viewed as exploratory, online learning is now mainstream (Kentnor, 2015). Nearly 10.1 million students who enrolled in public and private colleges and universities in 2022 participated in online coursework, and as many as half of that number remained online following the COVID-19 pandemic (NCES, 2022). The trend represented schools that are primarily online, as well as traditional schools shifting from traditional to online coursework (NCES, 2020; Shakar et al., 2021). Although the pandemic provided the impetus for the shift to online learning, an opportunity arose to collect data regarding online teaching and learning in a capacity larger than any other available beforehand (Shakar et al., 2021). The data reflect promise and a trajectory of growth in online learning and define best practices in doing so.

The authors of this chapter serve as faculty fellow, instructional designer, and director respectively of a center for professional development at Towson University called the Faculty Academic Center for Excellence at Towson (FACET). Their roles in professional development and faculty support in teaching have focused on the use of digital technologies and online learning for more than 700 part- and full-time faculty since the COVID-19 pandemic. Subsequently, distance education has remained a priority at FACET. Later in the chapter, several shorter scenarios illustrate applications of pedagogy and digital technologies.

FACET operates on the premise that services that support faculty are best planned, implemented, and assessed for faculty by faculty. Thus, FACET recruits faculty fellows specializing in teaching, research, and leadership to address the three areas of expected performance for higher education educators. The importance of faculty involvement is bolstered by a belief that a strong, specialized staff consisting of instructional designers, technologists, and media specialists provide necessary expertise in higher education today. Most FACET initiatives are facilitated collaboratively by a faculty fellow and instructional designer, especially those focused on teaching. Each scenario below illustrates the collaborative process of supporting teaching on campus emphasizing student engagement and the integration of digital tools.