Empowering Faculty through Coaching:
An Online Quality Assurance Strategy

Kristen Kirkpatrick[1], Carlos Morales[2]

Tarrant County College Connect Campus, Fort Worth, Texas, USA[1, 2]

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to highlight a tiered and iterative approach to faculty support within E-Learning. Common professional development practices in higher education- particularly among community colleges with high percentages of adjunct instructors- fail to incorporate professional empowerment. This may cause division between faculty and leadership.

The E-Faculty coaching program described in this text is framed by tenets of collaboration rather than evaluation. Coaches possess extensive education and work experience in three primary areas: online teaching, instructional design, and coaching. They do not currently teach for the institution, although they may adjunct for other institutions. The discipline they are credentialed to teach is not related to the discipline they provide coaching in. Notably, the members of the E-Faculty coaching team do not supervise faculty; this allows the program to remain collaborative.

This model, now in its sixth year, produces constant quantitative and qualitative data to drive decisions and improvement at the online campus. Community Colleges across the United States are expected to demonstrate increasing measures of student success related to enrollment, grades, retention, engagement, persistence, work readiness, etc. It is generally accepted that faculty impact and affect those metrics. Empowering faculty in a non-threatening environment promotes faculty success which in turn promotes student success.

Two notable and research-based shifts- professional development to professional empowerment and evaluation to collaboration- are reflected in the E-Faculty Coaching model. Each student, class, term, semester, and faculty member matters. Restructuring resources and support is key to success for all stakeholders in the online community college environment. An innovative learning modality deserves an innovative assessment program.

Keywords: *E-Learning, Quality Assurance, Faculty Support, Coaching, Collaboration, Continuous Improvement*

Introduction

Amidst many achievements and accomplishments attributed to distance education since its inception in the 1990's exists one continual obstacle: faculty resistance. In 2016, less than 30% of faculty acknowledged the value and legitimacy of online education [7]. The emergency transition to online teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic further alienated many instructors. Many experts agree the initial transition semester should not be used as an evaluation of online teaching [13]. Yet changing perceptions and advancing the cause proves challenging for many in higher education leadership. Leaders must support faculty in specific and measurable ways. Prior to teaching an online course, it is recommended to offer faculty opportunities to design an online course and experiment with a highly resourceful learning management system. During the semester, faculty need technical support, an accommodating work schedule, and autonomy [7]. Finally, communicating reasonable policies and expectations for success is key to faculty satisfaction.

This tiered and iterative approach to faculty support shifts the culture of professional development to incorporate professional empowerment. Empowerment involves clarity (expectations/ metrics), support (provide resources/ remove obstacles, and autonomy. Empowering faculty within a nurturing ecosystem of instructional designers, coaches, department chairs, deans, colleagues, accessibility experts, technical support, and other stakeholders is a departure from evaluative or punitive policies. Professional development models lacking an empowerment-focus are likely to fall short.

Tarrant County College Connect Campus

Tarrant County College was established by a county-wide election on July 31,1965 as Tarrant County Junior College, the name change coming in 1999. Located in Fort Worth, Texas, with a current enrollment of more than 90,000 credit and non-credit students, Tarrant County College is a two-year public institution with six campuses. Distance Education offerings started in the fall of 1973 with two

courses delivered via instructional television, reaching an enrollment of almost 800 students. This demonstrated an early interest in distance education. TCC Connect Campus, which opened in 2014, is the virtual campus of the college and the only stand-alone online campus built from the ground up in Texas. Today the campus offers 40 programs; the enrollment of the virtual campus is 30,000 enrollments every semester [12].

Quality Assurance Via Course Design
Due to exclusive focus on delivering online and accelerated courses, TCC Connect Campus must remain responsive to stakeholders and provide swift scaling of offerings. One strategy to improve retention and graduation rates is the intentional focus on the variable of "course development." This collaborative process- supported by a team of instructional designers that work with faculty, as subject matter experts, to assemble content for instruction [11]- produces a shell that meets TCC's Quality Standards for Online Courses, is ready for utilization, and reduces or eliminates the structural variations that exist in the same course that is taught by two different faculty members [9]. Current analysis of online higher education enrollments confirms this modality to be a sound and reliable way of earning a degree. Ongoing analysis of campus data confirms peer-developed course development and E-Faculty coaching as integral quality assurance approaches.

Quality Assurance Via E-Faculty Coaching

This article highlights a five-year journey to empower online faculty working for a fully centralized online community college campus in Fort Worth, Texas. The E-Faculty Coaching program commenced as a framework in 2018, evolved into a model, and is now recognized as a successful, award-winning program. To date, 450 unique instructors participated in one or multiple iterations of collaborative coaching. This represents over 1,200 unique sections in varying disciplines and term lengths. Five employees lead this campus-based program. These staff members possess extensive education and work experience in three primary areas: online teaching, instructional design, and coaching. They do not currently teach for the institution, although they may adjunct for other institutions. The discipline they are credentialed to teach is not related to the discipline they provide coaching in. Notably, the members of the E-Faculty coaching team do not supervise faculty; this allows the program to remain collaborative.

An integrated yet flexible structure is employed to ensure opportunities for continual improvement. An instructor new to online teaching at the given campus must first complete a rigorous, 32-hour certification program designed and facilitated by the campus Instructional Design Team. For many faculty, this serves as their introduction to creating a course in the learning management system, Quality Matters Rubric Standards for Higher Education, federal guidelines for Regular and Substantive Interaction in distance education courses, laws related to accessibility, etc. The online instructor certification (OIC) program provides the opportunities for faculty to design an online course and experiment with a highly resourceful learning management system, per the recommendations discussed in the previous section of this paper [10]. Many institutions have an internal certification program; yet this institution quickly recognized that these early efforts could be overwhelming and/ or intimidating to a new instructor. E-Faculty Coaching allows tailored support throughout the first semester of teaching. As cited earlier, faculty need ongoing technical support, an accommodating work schedule, autonomy, clear and reasonable policies and expectations [7]. E-Faculty coaches collaborate with instructors to achieve these elements and empower growth on an individual scale. Most institutions of higher education recognize the need for empirically researched, data-proven quality standards. Yet research indicates campus implementation is the key element in how effectively the quality standards are applied [3], [13].Gregory & Martindale [3] note the role of the instructor in higher education changes/ becomes more complex because of changing communication models. Teaching the way one was taught, and/or the way one might teach in a traditional setting, is not satisfactory in the online setting. However, successful professional development must actively involve and motivate the faculty member. The E-Faculty Coaching program aligns with this recommendation. Instructors must actively communicate and collaborate with coaches; yet faculty drive the conversations based on their own needs. Consider the process flow illustrated in Figure 1 [5]:

Fig. 1: E-Faculty Coaching Process Flow
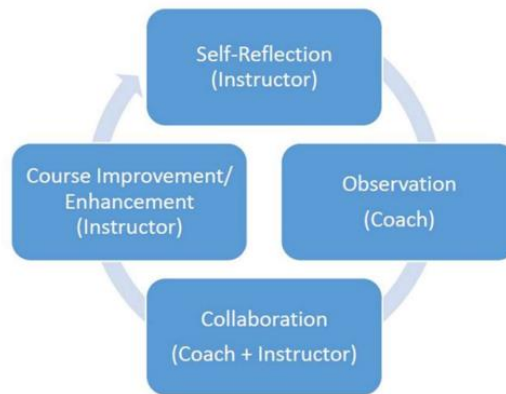
This is an iterative, continuous process...additional self-reflection and observation occur as needed...

Class sections are observed within the LMS to align with QM Standards 1, 5, 6, 7, and 8. The remaining standards, 2, 3, and 4, tend to be more discipline-related, and thus the instructor will typically discuss those elements with a subject matter expert, teaching colleague, department chair, or dean. Instructors and coaches utilize digital forms created within Microsoft Teams, and responses are automated for sharing. Table 1 [6] highlights the alignment of the forms to QM and the timeframe in which they are completed/ discussed.

Table 1: E-Faculty Coaching Forms

Originator	MS Form	Quality Matters Standard(s)	Timeframe
Instructor	(1) Course Readiness Checklist	all	1 week before class section starts
Coach	(2) Course Overview & Introduction	1, 7	prior to 33% class completion
Coach	(3) Regular & Substantive Interaction (RSI)	5,6	prior to 66% class completion
Coach	(4) Accessibility & Usability	8	prior to 99% class completion
Coach	Meeting Collaboration Notes	-	on-going/ following each meeting with instructor

Measuring Satisfaction and Success

The given institution recently participated in the Community College Student Satisfaction and Engagement Survey (CCSSE). A secondary survey was disseminated to faculty on each of the campuses, assessing levels of job satisfaction. One specific indicator reflected Professional Development. Overall, 87.6% of district faculty described the professional development offered or required as "valuable". The online campus represented in this article reported the highest percentage of the six campuses on this criterion; 93.5% of the dedicated online instructors considered their professional development "valuable" [12].

Community Colleges across the United States are expected to demonstrate increasing measures of student success related to enrollment, grades, retention, engagement, persistence, work readiness, etc. It is generally accepted that faculty impact and affect those metrics. Empowering faculty in a non-threatening environment promotes faculty success which in turn promotes student success. Modeling regular and substantive interactions with faculty promotes regular and substantive interactions with

students. These relationships are interdependent. Table 2 reflects datapoints and highlights through the E-Faculty Coaching program since its inception [6].

Table 2: E-Faculty Coaching Successes

Academic Year	Sections Coached	Noteworthy Performance Increases (AY)
2018-2019	176	Timely posting of ICR: 76.6% to 95.5%
2019-2020	559	Inclusion of clear instructions and communication elements to start the course: from 73% to 82%
2020-2021	310	Presence of discussion boards visible in LMS: from 32% to 76%
2021-2022	143	Instructors participating in coaching in Spring 2022 demonstrated a 7.4 average increase in student success and a 2.65 average increase in student retention rates per online section.

Intentionally Planning Versus Reacting

Planning is paramount in the online modality; training must be continuous [8]. Formal and cyclical performance evaluation, particularly in larger institutions, is obstructed by several factors; for example, many adjunct faculty play a transient role and may not teach continual classes or sessions. Changes in federal guidelines, competencies, LMS features, etc. may not be adequately communicated in this fluid staffing situation.

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) currently advises 932 public community colleges registered in the United States [1]. Many of the largest community colleges in the nation are in California; these colleges are represented by The Academic Senate for California Community Colleges (ASCCC). Both the AACC and ASCCC recommend self-evaluation be part of the assessment process [1], [2]. The ASCCC expands the scope of recommendations to include a clearly identified purpose, jointly established procedures, peer evaluation, and student evaluation [2].

This charge presents challenges for institutional leadership. The campus highlighted in this article currently employs six department chairs; approximately 600 instructors- largely adjuncts- teach in varying sessions and term lengths within the academic year. E-Faculty coaches operate using jointly established procedures while relying on both self and peer reviews. Instructors no longer wait or rely on a formal evaluation to receive feedback and tailored support. As a result, online courses are improved in real time as opposed to every 1-3 years as part of an evaluation cycle. This proactive approach ensures timely success for both faculty and students.

Two notable and research-based shifts- professional development to professional empowerment and evaluation to collaboration- are reflected in the E-Faculty Coaching model. Each student, class, term, semester, and faculty member matters. Restructuring resources and support is key to success for all stakeholders in the online community college environment. An innovative learning modality deserves an innovative assessment program.

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