WHERE ARE THE FACULTY? FULFILLING THE TRADITIONAL FACULTY ROLE AT A DISTANCE

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Innovative approaches are needed to retain seasoned nursing faculty. Technology provides opportunities for faculty to fulfill the traditional roles of teaching, research, and service from a site removed from the traditional campus. The purpose of this article is to encourage faculty and administrators in traditional, land-based colleges and universities to thoughtfully consider the advantages and challenges of the remote worksite for faculty based on the experience of one faculty.

Some faculty are better suited to a remote work environment than others. Long-term established faculty may be better able to successfully transition to the tripartite faculty roles with greater ease than novice nurse educators as a result of their familiarity with the institutional resources and comfort in the teaching role.

Preparation for the remote experience must be diligent and thoughtful, considering equipment needs, connectivity, and support personnel and strategies for ensuring continued engagement within the nursing education program. Institutional policies must also be considered related to fulfillment of the faculty role via distance technology. A pilot experience for one faculty, as described here, may be useful for evaluating the cost–benefit to the individual and the institution. (Index words: Distance faculty; Nursing education; Remote faculty; Distance faculty role strategies; Innovation) J Prof Nurs 32:256–261, 2016. © 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

THE TRADITIONAL FACULTY roles of teaching, research, and service on the college campus remain the cornerstone of higher education, even in this age of technology-enabled on-line learning. Yes, some colleges and universities offer all courses on-line and lack the physical presence and hallowed halls, but many traditional campuses remain. These campuses are also actively engaged in on-line distance education, but what about the faculty in these traditional colleges and universities?

If students can learn at a distance, can faculty fulfill the traditional roles of teaching, research, and service distant from the physical campus? Absolutely! Should all faculty be afforded this opportunity? Probably not. The purpose of this manuscript is to encourage faculty and administrators in traditional, land-based colleges and universities to thoughtfully consider the advantages and challenges of the remote worksite for faculty based on the experiences of a remote faculty member.

Background

Little has been published in the nursing education literature regarding faculty working at a distance. Only two articles, both published since 2012, were located. One focused on global beliefs of faculty and administrators; the other described the institutional approach to a pilot study and development of a model.

A description of barriers and facilitators of the faculty-at-a-distance role (Pearsall, Hodson-Carlton, & Flowers, 2012) was based on results of two on-line surveys of administrators and experienced certified nurse educator faculty who were asked to rate the potential for faculty at a distance to fulfill National League for Nursing Nurse Educator Core Competencies. Tradition, faculty role changes, facilitation of student learning and development, and socialization were perceived barriers to the innovation. Surprisingly, engagement in scholarship was perceived to be least difficult for those who may want to work at a distance along with assessment and evaluation

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of students. Nearly half of the responding administrators (n = 92; 46.5%) represented programs that were solely distance education programs, yet only 19% of the responding programs reported at least one distant faculty member, thus the research was likely based on beliefs rather than experience. Distant faculty were not intentionally surveyed in the research, and the experiences of distant faculty have rarely been reported in the literature.

More recently, a distant faculty model was proposed after a 2-year pilot remote opportunity for one faculty (Goodfellow, Zungolo, Lockhart, Turk, & Dean, 2014). The faculty member was required to take a 2-year leave of her tenured position and agree to performance evaluation and evaluation of the distant experience. Ambivalence was reported by both administrators and faculty initially, and the proposal required the approval of the university president and legal counsel. The faculty member excelled in the role during the 2-year pilot period, remaining engaged and extremely productive in all aspects of the role. Lessons learned at the institutional level related to careful planning and establishment of expectations. Administrative considerations for future distant faculty experiences were posited and included questions such as whether distant faculty should be able to maintain a tenure-track position, the cost–benefit to the institution, and whether a distant faculty person should assume a larger teaching workload.

Contemplating the Idea of Working Remotely: The Faculty Perspective

Telecommuting has become acceptable in many businesses and areas of government, and most people have used Skype to visit with friends and family. Federal grant reviews are conducted remotely through secure servers, and critical meetings such as certification examination development and search committees use telecommunication to minimize human and financial costs while maintaining quality. But the idea of faculty working full time from a remote location is relatively novel in traditional institutions of higher education.

Faculty may desire to work distant from the physical institution for professional or personal reasons. The quandary of aging nursing faculty is regularly discussed; working remotely may reinvigorate a tired nurse educator. Access to research participants or resources may attract faculty to a different location. A geographic change of scenery may be appealing for varied reasons such as aging parents, a spouse's transfer, or grandchildren. Whatever the reason, some faculty are better equipped for successful distance employment than others.

Who Should? Who Should Not?

Clearly, faculty who teach prelicensure nursing students in a face-to-face classroom and directly supervise clinical learning cannot work from a remote location. However, those faculty whose teaching assignment consists of on-line courses may be a candidate for a remote work environment. Individuals new to the faculty role or new to the institution may benefit from a period of acclimation to the campus resources and requirements, and administrators may want to validate the contributions of the new faculty face-to-face, at least initially. However, need sometimes trumps what is "best." If the program needs someone with specialty preparation to fill a faculty vacancy and the person who meets the need only agrees to work remotely, a decision to allow a novice nurse educator to fulfill the role from a distance may be made.

Traditional educational institutions typically have the tripartite mission of teaching, research, and service. A remote work environment does not afford faculty access to the same resources as office-based peers, yet the same expectations for productivity exist. Approval to work remotely is only the beginning; outcomes and productivity will likely figure into administrative decisions to allow the remote effort to continue. Preparation for the remote role requires forethought and a collaborative group of faculty and staff.

Preparation

Faculty who are seeking approval to fulfill the role from a remote location must consider the resources typically available in an office environment and transition that to a distant site, usually at the expense of the individual faculty. The personal expense to the remote faculty should be considered prior to making the request. State and federal tax implications are also important—office space, costs of equipment, and connectivity may all be tax deductible. But prior to calculating those possible tax advantages, the applicant would be wise to develop and present a plan that addresses the strategies discussed below to demonstrate to the administration the careful consideration given to the request.

An office telephone enables the faculty to communicate with students and other education associates by providing a contact telephone number on an e-mail tag line and course syllabi; for the remote person, a telephone may not (probably will not) be provided by the institution. This requires the faculty to use a personal telephone. Students, particularly on-line students, may not have needs during the 9–5 Monday through Friday office hours. They may call the faculty at their convenience. With an office telephone, the students can leave a voice message; with a personal telephone, most faculty would likely answer the telephone, not knowing the party who is calling unless the caller ID was familiar. One remedy to this potential quandary is to purchase a dedicated telephone line; however, this adds another expense to the remote experience. A second option is to instruct students to send an e-mail to the faculty setting up a mutually convenient appointment for the discussion. Inconvenient calls and text messages can thus be prevented. Clarifying with students that they can leave a message with a staff support person is also an option; an office telephone number for the remote person may actually be that of the staff support person. The faculty responsibility is to ensure timely response to student needs, no matter the location or communication strategy.