



Faculty satisfaction in the online environment: An institutional study

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ABSTRACT

A study of online faculty satisfaction was conducted at a public research university in the United States. Overall level of online faculty satisfaction at the institution, major concerns and motivating factors associated with online faculty satisfaction, and the differences between more and less satisfied online instructors were identified. One hundred two online instructors responded to the online faculty satisfaction survey. Results indicate a moderately positive level of faculty satisfaction with online teaching. Major frustrations were associated with technological difficulties, the lack of face-to-face contact, and student involvement. Satisfying elements pertained to flexibility, access, and student diversity. More satisfied online instructors reported a higher degree of student-to-instructor interaction than their less satisfied counterparts. The classification analysis resulted in 88.5% of online instructors being correctly classified.

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1. Introduction

Online education is the fastest growing form of delivery in higher education in the United States (U.S.). During fall 2006 approximately 20% of all students in higher education in the U.S. were enrolled in at least one course delivered online. In fall 2006, student enrollment in online courses increased nearly 10% as compared to fall 2005 (Allen & Seaman, 2007).

Higher education institutions list several reasons for offering online courses such as improved student access, increased rates of degree completion, and appeal of online education to nontraditional students. In contrast, institutions indicate barriers to the adoption of online courses that include the need for more discipline on the part of the online students, the lack of faculty acceptance of online delivery methods for instruction, low retention rates in online courses, and higher costs associated with the development and delivery of online courses (Allen & Seaman, 2007).

Faculty satisfaction is an important factor influencing the overall success of online educational programs. Student motivation with and performance in online courses can be directly affected by levels of faculty satisfaction (Hartman, Dziuban, & Moskal, 2000). Many instructors enjoy teaching in the online environment because of reasons they perceive as beneficial to them and their students. However, there is still a large group of faculty who find online teaching less attractive than traditional face-to-face instruction because of factors that impact them negatively (Hislop & Atwood, 2000).

2. Literature review

Online learning has proven to be a successful delivery method for many institutions in higher education. Fredericksen, Pickett, Shea, Pelz, and Swan (2000) and Navarro (2000) report high levels of faculty satisfaction with online courses. Hislop (2000) and MacGregor (2001) compared student performance in online and campus-based environments and found similar student levels of achievement. Schutte (1996) found students in a virtual course scored on average 20% higher than students in the campus-based course. Olson and Wisner (2002) reviewed 47 online course evaluation reports published between 1996 and 2002 and concluded that “Web-based instruction appears to be an improvement over conventional classroom instruction” (p. 11).

2.1. Faculty satisfaction

Faculty satisfaction is a crucial success factor of successful development and implementation of online programs (“Faculty Satisfaction,” 2006). Many instructors report high levels of satisfaction with online teaching. Thompson (2002b) found only 10% of participants reported dissatisfaction with their overall online teaching experience. However, faculty satisfaction varies significantly from instructor to instructor. Hislop and Atwood (2000) report when instructors at Drexel University considered the issue of personal satisfaction, “78% of respondents indicate that they consider face-to-face teaching to be a ‘much more satisfying experience’” (p. 222). At the University of California Extension two-thirds of study participants were strongly satisfied with teaching online, whereas one-third expressed mixed emotions. Some raised concerns pertaining to lack of student motivation, adjustment difficulties to asynchronous course delivery, and compensation issues (Almeda & Rose, 2000).

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2.2. Issues contributing to faculty satisfaction

Several research studies have been conducted on motivation of faculty teaching online at U.S. higher education institutions. The largest group of previous studies focused on describing levels of satisfaction and factors contributing to faculty satisfaction or dissatisfaction with technology-enhanced teaching in various institutions across the United States. For example, [Almeda and Rose \(2000\)](#) described barriers to adoption of online programs at the University of California Extension. [Arvan and Musumeci \(2000\)](#) looked at instructors' attitudes with hybrid courses at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. [Betts \(1998\)](#) identified factors that influenced faculty participation in distance education at the George Washington University. [Fredericksen et al. \(2000\)](#) conducted an extensive study at the State University of New York's online program to examine factors affecting faculty satisfaction. [Kashy, Thoennesen, Albertelli, and Tsai \(2000\)](#) conducted a case study of a large enrollment technology-enhanced course and described factors associated with faculty satisfaction or dissatisfaction. [Turgeon, Di Biase, and Miller \(2000\)](#) studied barriers and motivators that affected online instructors at Pennsylvania State University.

Another group of studies pointed out specific issues and examined their influence on faculty satisfaction. For instance, [Hartman et al. \(2000\)](#) studied relationships among infrastructure, student outcomes, and faculty satisfaction at the University of Central Florida, whereas [Hislop and Atwood \(2000\)](#) examined faculty workload associated with teaching in an online program at Drexel University.

Finally, [Thompson \(2002a,b\)](#) integrated results of previous studies in faculty satisfaction in distance education. The author formulated standards of excellence to support and guide faculty participation in online education and examined how online faculty satisfaction could be improved. Issues of faculty satisfaction in the online environment can be categorized into three groups: (a) student-related, (b) teaching-related, and (c) institution-related ("[Faculty Satisfaction](#)," 2006; [Wiesenberg & Stacey, 2005](#)).

2.2.1. Student-related issues

[Hartman et al. \(2000\)](#) found a positive correlation between faculty satisfaction and student performance. In general, when instructors perceive that they can contribute to positive student outcomes, they feel more satisfied ([Kashy et al., 2000](#)). The ability to provide previously un- or underserved populations with educational opportunities is also related to high faculty satisfaction ([Almeda & Rose, 2000](#); "[Confronting the Future](#)," 2000; [Thompson, 2002b](#)). Instructors highly value the fact that some online students in their courses, who otherwise would not be able to have access to educational opportunities, can continue their formal education. Furthermore, online faculty are satisfied with opportunities for high-quality student-to-teacher interaction ([Hartman et al., 2000](#); [Thompson, 2002b](#)). In the online environment interactions with students can be richer and deeper compared to traditional instruction because online students often spend more time on reflection ([Baglione & Nastanski, 2007](#)).

However, working with online students is often a challenge for instructors. One of the disadvantages of the online environment is the absence of face-to-face contact with students and the lack of group interaction ([Almeda & Rose, 2000](#)). Students can feel isolated from other students and their instructor in the online environment which might decrease their levels of participation in the course. In traditional classrooms such problems can be addressed conventionally, whereas online instructors need to put more effort in preventing feelings of isolation.

In addition, online instructors could be overwhelmed by students who expect their instructors to be available on a 24 hours a day, 7 days a week basis ([Young, 2002](#)). Unrealistic expectations can irritate and discourage online instructors, although students in traditional

classrooms can also require a lot of attention. Furthermore, some instructors feel it is difficult to get to know students on a personal level in the online environment ([Perreault, Waldman, & Alexander, 2002](#)). Even remembering names can be quite challenging in an online course where visual cues are scarce. Developing personal relationships with students in the online classroom is more complicated because it requires more time which online learners or instructors may not have.

2.2.2. Teaching-related issues

Faculty enjoy teaching online because of the flexibility and accessibility of the online environment ([Almeda & Rose, 2000](#); [Arvan & Musumeci, 2000](#); [Hartman et al., 2000](#)). The online delivery of courses provides faculty with opportunities for growth, both personally and professionally ([Betts, 1998](#)). Faculty may be able to acquire new skills and knowledge about online teaching with new technologies or new instructional strategies. However, opportunities such as the involvement in instructional design and development can be perceived by faculty as either positive or negative depending on their attitudes. Other benefits of online teaching to faculty include additional opportunities for research and interdisciplinary collaborations with their colleagues ([Kashy et al., 2000](#); [Thompson, 2002a](#)).

2.2.3. Institution-related issues

Levels of faculty satisfaction depend on whether or not institutions value and support online teaching ([Bower, 2001](#); [Fredericksen et al., 2000](#)). Online teaching usually requires more time and effort for class preparation and delivery compared to face-to-face instruction ([Bender, 2003](#); [Hislop & Ellis, 2004](#); [Santilli & Beck, 2005](#); [Sellani & Harrington, 2002](#)). Instructors are typically dissatisfied with increases in workload associated with online teaching when adequate compensation and reward systems are not adjusted accordingly ([Almeda & Rose, 2000](#); "[Confronting the Future](#)," 2000; [Hartman et al., 2000](#); [Thompson, 2002b](#)).

Professional development support in online instruction and design has a positive impact on faculty satisfaction ("[Faculty Satisfaction](#)," 2006; [Fredericksen et al., 2000](#)). When institutions provide adequate levels of instructional design and development support to instructors, they feel more satisfied with online teaching ([Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2009](#)). Technical difficulties and inadequate technical support affect faculty satisfaction negatively ([Arvan & Musumeci, 2000](#); [Betts, 1998](#); [Hartman et al., 2000](#)). Technical support services are important to assist instructors and students in troubleshooting issues with course management systems, computer hardware, and software.

Quality control issues include faculty concerns about quality of online courses and perceptions that students' evaluations of online teachers tend to be lower ([Betts, 1998](#); [Bower, 2001](#); [Hartman et al., 2000](#)), which could impact promotion and tenure decisions. It is important that online instructors are reassured by their institution that proper policies for online teaching and learning are implemented. Finally, online instructors might have concerns regarding intellectual property issues ([Simonson et al., 2009](#)). Faculty should either retain intellectual property rights for course content they develop or should be compensated appropriately.

The purpose of this study was to ascertain the levels of online faculty satisfaction at a western U.S. research university and to understand the difference between satisfied and unsatisfied online instructors. Some literature has addressed elements of faculty satisfaction in the online learning environment. However, faculty satisfaction is an important element in the evaluation of online courses and programs and can be used to measure the quality of these online offerings ("[Quick Guide](#)," 2002). It is important to investigate this aspect on a continuous basis. This study focuses on elements that directly influence satisfaction of faculty with teaching online. It builds on the existing literature on online faculty satisfaction by focusing on the examination of differences between more and less satisfied online instructors. There is a need to contribute to the understanding

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