

# Engaging the Faculty

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The faculty-student dyad lies at the heart of the teaching and learning process. The revolution in communication technologies has opened the door to a wide variety of teaching and learning materials that can lead to new teaching and learning environments that have not been possible in the past. The challenge for today's college or university is how to change its environment to accommodate and promote the use of these new technologies better.

Perhaps the most critical component in institutional transformation of teaching and learning through new technologies is faculty engagement. In this chapter, we address how to encourage, engage, and nurture faculty as they set about to alter fundamentally one of the most important aspects of their professional lives. We explore several characteristics associated with faculty values and orientations toward the adoption of the new teaching technologies, and we illustrate how an external, Web-based resource can serve the needs of different types of faculty during the transformation process.

## **The Challenge of Faculty Autonomy**

Faculty come to their profession as the result of a variety of motivational structures, and they vary tremendously in the way they perform their assigned tasks (Blackburn, 1995). This variation is sustained by the fact that as they progress up the tenure and promotion ladder, it

becomes increasingly difficult for administration to influence almost any aspect of their job performance.

As Steven M. Cahn (1986) observed, “Few institutions other than colleges and universities permit their members the latitude so much a part of the professor’s life” (p. 3). The tradition-bound nature of the academy has accommodated this latitude, and the slow pace of change in almost every aspect of campus life has made it a tolerable part of the academic landscape. However, the complacency and comfort of that landscape is now shifting.

Technological change has removed the spatial security of academic institutions by opening up and redefining the core concept of the delivery of learning. This fact, coupled with the change in the nature and expectations of students, has produced a strong impetus for change and transformation. In a real sense, faculty will feel the pressure from both above and below: from administrators reacting to market forces and from students who demand new forms of learning presentation. In the face of growing pressure to adapt to these new circumstances, faculty autonomy presents a considerable challenge.

## **How Faculty View the New Technologies**

The theory of Everett Rogers (1995) on the diffusion of innovation has quite deservedly been recognized as the baseline work in this area. We offer a simplified version of Rogers’s adopter classification categories that we believe can be useful in understanding faculty on the basis of their underlying motivational states with regard to using emerging technologies to change the way they teach.

Certainly, the complexity of faculty roles makes such a classification far too simplistic for many purposes, as many faculty possess characteristics of more than one of the four groups we describe. However, after intensive interviews with over 240 faculty at the University of Hartford, we have found that they demonstrate predominant characteristics of one of the four groups and that these characteris-

tics appear to be related to the probability that the faculty member will or will not adopt new ways of teaching and learning.

### **The First Wave: The Entrepreneurs**

Sometimes referred to as “lone rangers” (Bates, 2000), these professors represent the vanguard of innovation and risk taking in teaching and learning. David G. Brown (2000) edited a highly informative book that collected ninety-three vignettes describing the work done by entrepreneurial professors. As a follow-up, Paul R. Hagner (2000) interviewed roughly half of these entrepreneurs to explore their motivations for their novel work. These interviews revealed both a high level of commitment to quality teaching and learning and an informed competency with the new teaching and learning technologies.

Although entrepreneurs do not seek rewards or recognition for their work, they nevertheless are rather disappointed when there is an absence of positive feedback. One other important characteristic of their work is that it tends to be idiosyncratic and not portable to other faculty. Basically, entrepreneurial faculty are content to use their expertise to solve their own instructional problems.

### **The Second Wave: The Risk Aversives**

This second group of faculty is perhaps the most interesting. Although they share the commitment of the first-wave faculty to quality learning, they are more risk averse (Geoghegan, 1998). They can have one or more of the following characteristics:

- Lacking technical expertise, they are unsure of the investment costs associated with transformation.
- They are afraid that their current success in teaching will not translate into the new teaching environments.
- They will need significant levels of instructional support to make the transformation.
- They are hesitant to become engaged in the process of self-examination (in terms of developing learning

objectives) that is demanded by the new forms of learning delivery.

It is important to keep in mind that these faculty members are committed to quality teaching and learning and that they are attracted to the new technologies because of the potential for improving what they do. A critical first step is to provide information to faculty in this group that can demonstrate the effectiveness of the new forms of teaching, including examples of success stories from faculty they consider peers. The second step is to create a support environment that facilitates their transition. Adoption of technology for teaching and learning by second-wave faculty is inversely proportional to the effort they must exert. They want to focus on teaching and learning, not on the technology.

### **The Third Wave: The Reward Seekers**

As colleges and universities change their reward structures in the tenure and promotion process, a third wave of faculty will emerge: those who see adopting technology-based teaching techniques as a way to advance their professional careers. These faculty members' motivational structure is tied closely to the university's reward structure. When they view adoption of new teaching and learning techniques as having a positive impact on tenure, promotion, and salary decisions, they will be more willing to transform.

Colleges and universities should be willing to adjust the reward and recognition structure so that it is aligned with new institutional priorities. As long as this structure attempts to strike a balance between the old and the new, there will be less incentive to adapt to the new environment.

### **The Reluctants**

The fourth group of faculty members includes those who are computer illiterate or firmly believe that traditional models of learning are superior. For this reason, we do not consider this group to con-

stitute a wave. Although numerous examples across the nation have shown that it is neither time- nor cost-effective to attempt to incorporate philosophically resistant faculty into institutional transformation, there is a very important human factor to consider when dealing with these individuals.

With the incorporation of the computer into university research in the 1970s, many faculty, especially those in the social sciences, found that the type of research they had done in the past to establish their professional careers was no longer acceptable to the professional journals. The shifting of emphasis from teaching to research during this period exacerbated their difficulties. Universities at that time offered little in support of these mostly older faculty, and as a result, many sought early retirement or ended their careers on bitter notes. There is a high probability that we shall see a similar process emerge around the issue of the adoption of new learning technologies.

As their colleagues either bring in or adopt the new technologies and as students come to expect and respond positively to them, the reluctant may well be confronted with a contrast effect that may have an adverse impact on the evaluation of their teaching. While they have not changed the way they teach, the world around them will have changed. They will find themselves to be increasingly anachronistic.

Although the decision not to adopt new forms of presentation is the choice of the faculty member, it is nonetheless important to alert faculty to the personal consequences of this decision. In our work in this area at our institutions, we have found it very effective to have this message communicated by a faculty member to other faculty members and faculty bodies, such as faculty senates. The more information concerning the effectiveness of the new technologies in the teaching and learning process that can be provided to these faculty, the better. Rejection of better ways to perform their jobs makes their nonparticipation an overt act rather than one of benign avoidance. Overall, these approaches make transformation more of a faculty-student concern than an administrative concern.

## First Step: Know Your Faculty

Before your institution can begin the transformation process, you must first be able to determine what mix of faculty groups you have. The choice of engagement strategy depends on this important element of institutional readiness information. For instance, many universities have made the mistake of setting up their support structures on the basis of the characteristics of the entrepreneurs. This “if you build it, they will come” mentality has created consternation for administrators, because their costly investment in hardware and infrastructure overlooked the fact that many faculty, especially the risk averse, needed flesh-and-blood support to make their transformation. In these instances, many well-equipped support centers see few new faces.

Institutions need to determine their faculty mix. Transformations in colleges and universities dominated by either the first or last group of faculty members are easy to predict; they occur quickly in the first case and emerge only after a long period of attrition and replacement in the last. Institutions dominated by faculty in either of the middle groups will have to make a commitment to providing significant faculty support even if the infrastructure is in place. Obviously, if the risk averse dominate, then emphasis on infrastructure and strong support will create a much better chance for successful transformation. The domination of the third group of faculty makes this effort more problematic because it involves a restructuring and redefinition of the institutional reward structure prior to adoption. This slows the transformation process considerably because most administrators are reluctant to engage in the politics of their institution’s reward structure without a clear assurance of tangible gain as a result of that engagement.

In preparing an inventory of faculty proclivities, some institutions are designating individuals to make contact with all faculty members to assess their current use of technology and their possible future use. This is a time-intensive process that works well only in

smaller institutions. Some institutions are using e-mail surveys to all faculty. This method is also not usually very effective because response rates for faculty surveys are notoriously low and this method misses faculty who do not use e-mail on a regular basis, causing a bias in the results. We have found the most success in our efforts from using the department chair as the reporting source. Most chairs have a good sense of their faculty's computer expertise.

The most important element of this information-gathering process, regardless of means chosen, is to make it public. A common concern on the part of faculty is that central administration rarely makes the effort to solicit faculty input. An intensive and very open effort to gather faculty-based information pays off well when the time comes for making specific policy. If policymaking is tied at least in part to the information collected from faculty, a greater sense of legitimacy and a greater probability of cooperation are obtained.

Roughly the same process can be used to gather input from students. Since students will be the direct recipients of the changes brought about by transformation, their participation in and approval of the use of new technologies are important. Many institutions are sponsoring open forums with students, in established or ad hoc groupings, to discuss issues relating to transformation. Those who have run these sessions report high levels of student interest and enthusiasm. Communicating these student reactions to the faculty can also provide useful arguments for engagement.

## **An External Source of Faculty Engagement**

Can faculty with varying motivational states for adopting technologies be served by the use of innovative resources that are available to all institutions? We believe that one such resource, the Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching (MERLOT) project, can be used effectively by a wide variety of faculty who come to the technology table for different reasons.

Although the number of faculty who want to use the power of computers and networks is increasing, finding a sufficient quantity of high-quality interactive teaching and learning materials remains difficult. The MERLOT project ([www.merlot.org](http://www.merlot.org)) is addressing this barrier to the effective use of these technologies by providing tools that allow faculty to share teaching and learning resources over the World Wide Web. Thousands of faculty from across the country are collaborating to create a collection of on-line teaching and learning materials that can be shared by the entire higher education community. This approach is being sponsored by the National Learning Infrastructure Initiative (NLII) of EDUCAUSE and twenty-three institutional partnerships throughout North America.

MERLOT recognizes the fact that each year more faculty want to incorporate technology into their teaching and learning environments, yet only a small percentage of faculty actually develop Web-based, interactive learning material. Because the publishing industry is not meeting the growing need for these materials, MERLOT is providing an environment where higher education can collaborate to address this critical need.

Members of the MERLOT community add value to the collection of teaching and learning materials in a number of ways. For example, they use the MERLOT tools to add assignments to individual learning materials, an activity that provides examples of appropriate pedagogy for other members of the community. Perhaps the most significant value added by the community of users is a peer review process to ensure quality control. Similar to the scholarly peer review process, the MERLOT peer review process provides a mechanism for faculty who create Web-based, interactive learning materials to have their work evaluated by their peers from other institutions. A less formal mechanism for quality control is the ability of any member of the MERLOT community to add user comments about any of the learning materials found in the collection.

MERLOT can be a powerful engagement tool because its features can appeal to faculty at all stages of engagement.

## **Entrepreneurs**

Of course, by definition the entrepreneurs are already engaged, but that engagement tends to be personal rather than collaborative. MERLOT offers two incentives for entrepreneurial faculty members to broaden the reach of their work. First, it offers the opportunity for them to display what they have done to a wider audience. This is a form of engagement since it gives the entrepreneurs the opportunity to see that their work can be leveraged beyond the needs of their classroom. Second, MERLOT gives the entrepreneurs a chance to interact with other entrepreneurs in their field of expertise. Smaller institutions may have very few entrepreneurs, and they are working in considerable isolation with little entrepreneur-to-entrepreneur interaction. MERLOT allows the entrepreneurial faculty member to become a part of a wider virtual community.

## **Risk Aversives**

The most defining aspect of members of this faculty group is that the easier the institution makes their transition, the better their chance of transformation will be. While this can usually translate into improvements in the faculty support area (see Chapter Five), many institutions lack the resources to offer course content development services to all interested faculty. MERLOT offers faculty not only the learning packages themselves, but also peer-based guidance on how to apply them in classes. The main goal of the project is to eliminate the traditional barriers associated with the incorporation of new technologies, chief of which is the faculty member's reluctance to assume a student role once again.

## **Reward Seekers**

The impact of the new technologies goes far beyond the teacher-learner dyad. Transformations in teaching and learning are now being accompanied by transformations in the very meaning of research and scholarship. At each level of the hierarchy at a university (departmental, college, and central), there will need to be a

redefinition process that will incorporate the new forms of virtual scholarship. This is especially important because the faculty most likely to possess the expertise, or at least possess the highest level of comfort with the new technologies, are those who are the most vulnerable in the tenure and promotion system: assistant professors. Without concrete statements in faculty handbooks that clearly outline the type of scholarship in this area that would contribute positively to the tenure and promotion process, no institution will engage a significant slice of the faculty. The peer review process, which is unique to MERLOT, allows faculty to submit learning objects for review and review existing learning objects. The degree to which these activities should be judged to be equivalent to the traditional journal article submission and review process will be a matter of discussion for each institution, starting at the department level and moving up through each evaluation level. Our point is that these discussions must be initiated as part of the transformation process.

### **Reluctants**

Although we defined this group as standing outside the transformation process, we believe that MERLOT offers a chance for engagement with at least some members of this group. Just as we have not yet encountered anyone who has made a serious attempt at word processing and then returned to the typewriter, we believe that exposure to the innovations and new ways of presenting material to those with a commitment to teaching might have a lasting effect. One method of doing this is to have departments hold a session where faculty are invited to explore the MERLOT site. We have found at these sessions that even the most skeptical faculty members tended to stay longer than the scheduled time.

### **Conclusion**

The considerable number of challenges for higher education over the next five years will be easier to meet and overcome if administrators view the faculty as allies and collaborators. Faculty are not

oblivious to the changes that are occurring in society at large, as well as in the halls of the academy. For the most part, they recognize that change is inevitable.

A possible threat to the ease of this transition lies with the process itself. The more that change agents and initiatives are tied to central administration and are seen as an imposition from above, as opposed to being the result of a constructive and collaborative effort, the slower the speed of change will be.

We encourage the following strategies:

- Conduct an assessment of faculty readiness that includes both their existing level of use and what they would like to do given the right conditions. Make sure you learn what they consider the “right conditions” to be.
- Make sure that faculty are included in any campuswide change process and that they understand that this inclusion is substantive, not symbolic. Make the fact of this inclusion as public as possible.
- Start an examination of how the institution’s reward process should be changed to include faculty activities relating to the adoption of new technologies and professional activities done in connection with the technology adoption.
- Explore innovative, faculty-based resources, like MERLOT, that can facilitate change by connecting to several dimensions of what the faculty are doing and what they consider to be important.
- Examine the campus faculty support mechanisms, structures, philosophy, processes, and funding priorities, and adjust them to accommodate the mix of faculty groups on campus.

This is an exciting time to be involved in higher education; open communication with and meaningful engagement of faculty during the transformation process can create and spread enthusiasm for change.

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