

Scholars in Solitude



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Recently, six faculty colleagues and I were discussing socialization of students in distance-learning programs. Each of us shared concerns that had been voiced by students regarding the periods of isolation they frequently feel while studying or completing course assignments. The common theme was expressed as “not feeling connected” and “no real camaraderie” with fellow students. One of us also raised the issue of internal conflict; a student had described herself as enjoying the freedom to listen to lectures on her own schedule and not be obligated to attend class on a specific day at a specific time but simultaneously missing seeing her classmates on a weekly basis.

For the most part, my colleagues and I were all “bricks and mortar” students, tied to required attendance during scheduled classes. We collectively agreed that this was frequently a bother, but we recognized the advantage of being able to sit together before or after class to discuss assign-

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ments, bring clarity to confusion, or simply commiserate on the difficulties of balancing family, school, and work obligations. In my own doctoral studies, week-to-week support and encouragement kept us a close-knit group, seeing us through to completed dissertations.

As our conversation continued, we began to lament our own lack of connectedness, not to our students (we communicate with them at least, if not more than, once a week) but to our faculty colleagues. Our consensus was that the focus on student-to-faculty contact left faculty-to-faculty contact seemingly an afterthought—or not a thought at all. I consider myself lucky that most of “my faculty” were friends or professional colleagues prior to our academic postings. Thus, we had established relationships outside our faculty roles.

But this whole idea of the socialization of faculty in distance education got me wondering: Are there criteria or guidelines for communication among faculty? I don’t mean the required staff meetings; I mean something similar to the requirements for type, and frequency, of interactions with the students, which are set forth by credentialing entities. I wondered what I could find in the literature or educational texts about faculty “connectedness.” And so my search began.

I started with Keating’s text,¹ the table of contents of which listed a chapter on Distance Education. Hmm, I thought, there must be something there. Several sections were enlightening and could very easily provide guidance for faculty-student interactions, but not so much for faculty to faculty. Granted, the basis for the text is curriculum development, so I am not denigrating the work; I just hoped a chapter on program development would include something on developing faculty networks.

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As my search continued, I found the *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*. Notable was research presented by Bower,² who described findings of an American Faculty Poll conducted in 2000 noting that “direct engagement with the students is one of the most important factors” in an educator’s decision to pursue an academic career.³ In this poll, a flexible work schedule was viewed as very important by 60% of those surveyed; those of us who are engaged in distance education have the most control (I would submit) over our schedules. But there was no evidence that faculty who taught online were represented in that survey—and no discussion of faculty-to-faculty connections.

Despite repeated searches, I found a paucity of research regarding socialization (or lack thereof) among faculty teaching in the online environment. In her dissertation, Heilman⁴ addressed perceptions of satisfaction with online teaching. One element she researched was faculty/peer relationships. Her participants noted that “networking and sharing with other online faculty members who work in another location” enhanced their satisfaction, but several noted that “lack of interactions or feeling isolated from their peers” diminished their satisfaction with online teaching. In reading their comments, I formed the impression that the interactions were initiated by the individual faculty, rather than facilitated by the institution.

Recently, I have seen blog posts addressing the issue of transforming clinicians to academics. There is a universal understanding that being an expert clinician does not necessarily mean you are a proficient educator. Moreover, transitioning from a face-to-face system to an online environment can be intimidating. Faculty, especially those new to the role, may need additional support.

Having an internal social network for online faculty is a means to achieving a supportive community and building a mentoring culture within an institution. A faculty member who has a sense of connectedness to other faculty (onsite and online) is as important to the successful online environment as is the development of a sense of community for students. The community must serve to enhance learning and teaching for both groups.

There are several published guidelines for successful online teaching—that is, what faculty can do for students. I have taken those principles, modified them, and applied them as suggestions for improving the socialization of faculty. With recognition of those who devised them^{5,6} and acknowledgement of the poetic license applied, here they are:

- Encourage faculty-to-faculty contact outside mandatory meetings
- Encourage faculty collaboration beyond course/institutional requirements
- Provide for live, interactive events that are fun.

With the ever-increasing number of educational institutions providing online programs (now at about 89%⁷), it is imperative that we as faculty and program administrators include socialization as a component of faculty orientation and training. What better than a connected faculty to enhance student achievement?

When we’re on site, my faculty colleagues and I plan dinner together. During commencement week, laughter and camaraderie from “unofficial” social activities allow us to relax, celebrate another successful class, and form memories that we carry with us throughout the year. What about your institutions? Please share your ideas about “staying connected” to colleagues in a digital environment by writing to NPeditor@frontlinemedcom.com. **CR**

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