

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT FOR ONLINE FACULTY: EXPANDING THE MODEL

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ABSTRACT

FACULTY SATISFACTION WITH ONLINE LEARNING IS IMPACTED BY THE LEVEL OF INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT RECEIVED BY FACULTY DURING THE COURSE RECONCEPTUALIZATION, DEVELOPMENT, DELIVERY AND REVISION PROCESSES. AT MONROE COMMUNITY COLLEGE (MCC) SCAFFOLDING AFFORDED BY MCC'S ON-SITE SUPPORT TEAM AND THE SERVICES PROVIDED BY THE SUNY LEARNING NETWORK (SLN) FORM THE FRAMEWORK OF ONLINE FACULTY SUPPORT AT MCC. THIS FRAMEWORK IS KNOWN AS "THE MONROE MODEL." IN THIS PAPER, A DESCRIPTION OF THE MODEL IS PRESENTED, THE IMPACT OF PROGRAM MATURITY AND SCALE-UP ON FACULTY SATISFACTION IS ADDRESSED AND ISSUES RELATED TO THE EXPANSION OF THE MODEL TO IMPROVE FACULTY SATISFACTION ARE PRESENTED.

I. INTRODUCTION

For over a decade, the distance learning field has recognized that on-site institutional support is critical to the level of faculty participation in distance learning [1]; [2]; [3]. Schifter's study of factors that motivate and inhibit faculty participation in Asynchronous Learning Networks (ALNs) suggests that the lack of "institutional support for faculty, technical infrastructure and course development needs" are the top three factors that inhibit faculty participation in ALNs [4]. Rockwell et al state, "For faculty to be successful in distance education teaching, higher education institutions must take into account the wants, needs, interests and aspirations of the faculty so they can help faculty develop distance learning educational models and techniques" [5]. This does not suggest that institutional support is the only key to faculty satisfaction. As Hartman et al report, online faculty satisfaction is impacted by student outcomes and the impact of these outcomes on the faculty, as well as by a "complex pattern of interactions" within colleges, departments and program areas [6]. However, institutional support for online faculty is a key component to faculty satisfaction and is the concept that is addressed in this essay.

Specific research on online faculty training needs provided by institutions offer many lessons. LeBlanc shares three key distance education faculty support lessons learned in the early 1990's at the University of Maine: 1) Find a training balance between the practical and theoretical; 2) Experienced faculty and staff are our most valuable resource; and 3) Remain open to viewing instructional design as a dynamic, not a linear, process [7].

Following a three-year study on faculty and learning technologies, Bullock and Schomberg offer these suggestions for faculty technology training: Have general morning sessions followed by afternoon work teams; Foster both inter- and intra-institutional collaboration; Hold institutes away from most attendees' work environment; Focus on the pedagogy of implementation as well as the technology [8]. Emphasis on online pedagogy as a key component of faculty training cannot be overstated. Passmore states, "So much of the current design emphasis in design, development, and delivery of web-based instruction focuses on technical issues...So much of what stands for web-based instruction is little more than 'shovelware,' that is, a migration of a syllabus and yellowed notes, along with a few visuals and URLs, onto a Web site" [9].

More recently, on-going institutional support for online faculty development has provided the framework for team approaches to pedagogically sound course reconceptualization, design and delivery that move beyond a focus on faculty training [10]; [11]; [12]. Lorenzetti reports, "support cannot come only from one department or one group. In order for an online faculty member to be successful, the institution as a whole, including the upper levels of administration, must be committed" to the concept [13].

The need for faculty support escalates when an institution rapidly scales-up their online course delivery efforts. Recognition of the need for this support, and an institution's response to that need plays a major role in the success of any online learning initiative and in the satisfaction of its online faculty [14]. Monroe Community College responded to the need for on-site support for online faculty by creating *The Monroe Model*—a comprehensive, team-based, online course support model. Although there are researchers who advocate for totally online faculty development and support environments [15] MCC chose to use a balanced approach that includes web-based resources provided by SLN, and on-site face-to-face training and support. An overview of the *The Monroe Model* follows.

A. The Monroe Model

In the Fall of 1997, Monroe Community College partnered with the State University of New York's *SUNY Learning Network* to develop and deliver four online, totally asynchronous courses to thirty-two students. By Summer 1998, online enrollments and courses increased by ten-fold—it was at this juncture that the need for comprehensive online course development support reached a critical point at MCC. The institution recognized the need to address faculty course design, delivery and training issues, operational details, important scale-up issues and policy implications for the campus.

The Monroe Model was developed as a way to meet these strategic needs. At the same time, the College also embraced the philosophy that an online course was like any other campus-based course. Online courses would be academically sound, contain the same learning outcomes as a campus-based course, and would involve all areas of MCC i.e., they would not be treated as an enclave, but would be considered as a component in the array of instructional modalities available at MCC.

The Monroe Model is configured in a way that parallels what we believe to be the best practices of an online learning experience—it is team-based, collaborative, comprehensive, action-oriented and non-hierarchical by nature. The team coordinates the academic, training coordination, instructional design, library, technical support, and student services aspects of the creation and delivery of online courses. The team also is the liaison to the SUNY Learning Network central office in Albany. This ensures that the faculty members primary concern is the development and delivery of their online course, not the many other tangential but significant details. As enrollments in online courses continue to grow at MCC—in the Fall 2002 semester, online enrollments total over 2,000—the level of support and coordination requirements also increase. Issues related to the impact of program scale-up are addressed in section II.

The model has two main components, the SLN (centralized) portion and the MCC (distributed, campus-based) portion. Although the focus of this essay is on the campus-based part of the model, a bit of information on SLN is in order. The State University of New York (SUNY) received a grant in 1994 from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation to develop an online course delivery system. Unlike other models of totally asynchronous learning, SUNY did not create a virtual university. Instead, SUNY virtualized an existing university system. The SUNY Learning Network was conceptualized and developed as an alternative way to deliver courses that could originate from any one of SUNY's sixty-four campuses. It is important to note that SLN is not another degree granting institution and is not part of any individual campus. SLN is designed to provide a centralized online course development and support infrastructure to participating institutions, so that each campus does not have to create or reinvent the services on their own.

The centralized support services offered to campuses that participate in the SLN initiative are represented in the top portion of the model. The four key areas of support provided to local campuses by SLN include:

1. Faculty Development Support—Faculty Training and Materials, On-going Faculty Support, Course Development Process and Online discussion groups and searchable SLN faculty guidebook
2. Technical Infrastructure Support—Servers/Telecommunications, Technical Support/24x7
3. Operational Support—Marketing & Promotional Activities, Research/Data Collection/Analysis, Help Desk/7 days a week

4. Administrative Support—Central Inquiry Response Capacity, Common Student Registration Process, SUNY Website, Assisting Registrars, Assisting local campus Academic Coordinators and Policy Development

Space does not permit a full explanation of these services, please refer to the SLN home page: <http://sln.suny.edu> for more detail. These core services provided by SUNY are invaluable to SLN institutions because they take a great burden off of campus partners as they initiate and sustain their online programs. SLN provides the framework and infrastructure for asynchronous delivery, and the institution’s role is to focus on the developmental, instructional and administrative local campus activities. SLN defines the local campus partner’s role in the SUNY Learning Network as one that:

- Grants the degree
- Designs/develops courses
- Offers courses/degrees
- Provides academic review
- Provides advisement
- Registers students
- Administers financial aid

For those institutions outside of the SUNY system, SLN’s centralized services included in the model may be used as a benchmark in assessing the support from proprietary online course system partners, home grown systems or both. A graphical representation of *The Monroe Model* follows:

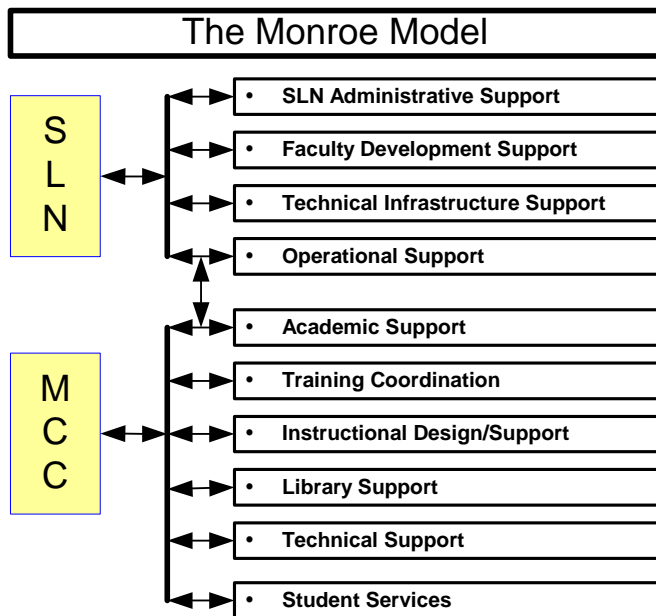


Table 1.0 The Monroe Model

The continuous connection of all arrows in the graphical representation of the model attempts to show the complicated nature of the SLN activities that may, or may not be, linear in nature. *The Monroe Model* graphic attempts to illustrate the integrated nature of MCC's program by showing the continuous loop of services provided by SLN and by the campus. The MCC team's role is shown in six components: Academic Support, Training Coordination, Instructional Design/Support, Library Support, Technical Support and Student Services. Each component represents MCC staff members who participate on the SLN team while continuing in their existing (and quite disparate) roles at the College.

Examples of the types of on-site support services provided by *The Monroe Model* team members include:

Academic Support—Approves MCC online course offerings via the program advisory team, gathers the names of online faculty cohorts from department chairs, develops academic policies, coordinates SLN promotional efforts, acts as the MCC liaison to SLN

Training Coordination—Coordinates Western New York regional training for the SUNY Learning Network, develops MCC's on-campus wrap-around faculty training to enrich the SLN training sessions (i.e., Meet & Greet session, pre-orientation, one-on-one sessions), evaluates SLN and MCC training sessions, recommends additional campus-based support for online faculty growth and development, conducts research on online learning.

Instructional Design/Support—Assists online faculty with the course reconceptualization process based upon principles of learning and instruction, conducts one-on-one design sessions, coordinates on-site graphics/video/audio support, conducts technical checks of course links, backs-up course templates, conducts skill review with faculty (operating system, e-mail, Internet, laptop orientation, Windows environment, ISP recommendations), conducts reviews of online courses with MCC faculty members.

Library Support—Acts as a resource for faculty in researching and identifying appropriate library materials (online and hard copy) that are integrated into the design of the course. The librarian works with faculty at the initial stages of course development assists throughout the instructional process. Specific areas addressed include copyright, fair use, content-related sites and information literacy.

Technical Support—Acts as technical liaison for related hardware, coordinates faculty laptop distribution, coordinates laptop repair/replacement, acts as technical liaison for related software, assists with laptop setup/upgrades, coordinates faculty access to course templates with SLN, provides on-site emergency technical support for faculty.

Student Services—Acts as the liaison to student services at the College including counseling, advising, testing, financial aid, bookstore, and online student services. This area has an updated web presence that provides comprehensive web-based support for all students—on-site and remotely.

The examples provided under each area above represent the typical functions performed by that area. *The Monroe Model* team's actual functions are typically not linear in nature, however, the current model is useful in that it helps to define for others the breadth and scope of the team's activities. The graphic also helps to identify the key on-site campus support requirements of an online learning initiative.

The on-site support team evolved as MCC's online program matured and expanded. A summary of key issues directly related to foreseen and unforeseen impacts on faculty satisfaction appears in section II.

II. THE IMPACT OF PROGRAM MATURITY AND SCALE-UP ON FACULTY SATISFACTION

The Monroe Model was begun on an informal basis as a result of rapidly rising online enrollments and program expansion. It now has evolved into a formalized resource where online learning issues are addressed and collaboratively resolved. The model offers the expertise and “specialization” needed to address some thorny problems, and also offers the benefit of cross-divisional perspectives and open communication that mitigates other potential programmatic roadblocks. Often, people think of asynchronous course delivery as a “stand-alone” project that impacts only the faculty and students directly involved with the program—perhaps this notion has its roots in the days when distance learning often was an institutional enclave. *The Monroe Model* team definitely can attest to the fact that to some extent, MCC’s online program now involves coordination with almost every area of the College, and its work directly impacts faculty satisfaction.

As the SLN program has grown at MCC, the support team has become an easily accessible information source for online MCC faculty. Team members see the “big picture” in terms of the college’s online learning program, and through collective brain storming can work with faculty, staff and administrators to bring issues to resolution. To date, the team has assisted in the development of over 100 online courses, has worked with twelve faculty developer cohorts representing over sixty faculty members and has participated in a minimum of ten online faculty training sessions each year since 1997.

The team members have gained an in-depth knowledge of online learning operations, services and support at MCC. The team members know the faculty well and can pinpoint the person/area needed to address issues raised by online faculty members. The team often connects faculty members to other online faculty—both within or outside of their department. The team also refers new faculty to other experienced faculty members who may be working on a similar online learning activity, even if it is in an unrelated discipline.

Online faculty members recognize that the support team is aware of the time commitment involved with the design and development of an online course. Team members work with the administration to ensure that all new developers appear on the developer stipend listing for that semester, and team members confirm that new faculty developers are registered for training. The majority of the changes to the local campus training and wrap-around session formats are the direct result of MCC faculty input. The faculty members appreciate the fact that team members accept the feedback provided to them, and that appropriate revisions are made within a reasonable timeframe. Online faculty members often comment that they are more willing to provide constructive input into the process now that there is a track record of implementing recommended changes and evaluating them on a timely basis.

One of the processes that has made the most impact on faculty satisfaction levels is the use of peer-to-peer training in SLN training sessions and in the wrap-around and niche sessions provided by MCC. Faculty report a comfort level with hearing the experiences of colleagues in a face-to-face setting. Online pedagogy and strategies to improve and sustain online interactions generate the most discussion in these sessions. The interaction between the faculty members, and their willingness to accept comments and support from team members, makes for an invigorating and engaging session. Once the course reconceptualization and pedagogical issues are covered, then the specifics about the technical portions of the course template are addressed.

As MCC's online program has expanded, it has become even more critical that the on-site support team creates bureaucratic short-cuts for online faculty. For example, should a laptop be damaged, the online faculty member may be closed out of their class. Rather than being added to the normal college equipment repair queue, SLN faculty members contact the technical support person on the team and receive immediate attention. If the laptop cannot be repaired within a few hours, a loaner laptop is assigned. There are over 2,500 desktops and laptops deployed at the college, so this service to online faculty is appreciated and adds to faculty satisfaction levels with the support provided by the institution.

The maturing on-site support concept has benefited greatly by word-of mouth support from experienced online faculty. New faculty are told that their needs will be met if they work directly with the support team members. If SLN faculty members need special graphics or files for their online curriculum, team members do everything possible to expedite the development of the materials by the instructional technologies team. If faculty are having difficulties with a particular registration issue, the team intervenes and assists in the resolution of the problem. Regardless of the online faculty member's need, an on-site support person is available to assist the faculty in person, online or via telephone. The faculty members realize that there are only eight team members to support the needs of a maturing and expanding program, and they appreciate the efforts put forth by the team on their behalf.

The team as a whole provides a stable "home base" for information on a wide variety of online learning questions. Over the years, the team has built credibility with the faculty, staff and administration and is relied upon to recommend solutions or to favorably resolve online learning issues. Although some team personnel have changed, there is a collective history of the online learning faculty cohorts, their online courses and the development of online programs that is shared among the team members.

The scale-up and maturity of MCC's online program has brought unplanned and ancillary benefits of the support team to the forefront. One of the unanticipated results of the support team concept is the team's historical perspective and depth and breadth of knowledge of individual online faculty member's teaching styles. Coppola, Hiltz and Rotter describe the impact of technology on the teaching process, and "role changes" of faculty that occur as professors "change their mode of teaching" [16]. The bonds established between the faculty members and the support team, and the collective history retained by the on-site support team scaffolds MCC faculty members as they move through these various role changes and stages of online course development, delivery and revision. Team members follow the progression and development of creative, first-time, online faculty as they change their teaching processes and bring lessons learned in the online environment to their campus-based classrooms.

Another outgrowth of this special connection between online faculty and on-site support team members is leading to new collaborations such as the development of hybrid/blended courses. Due to the fact that the MCC online faculty members have an in-depth understanding and many years of experience with online pedagogy, members of MCC's online faculty are the first group to pilot test new hybrid instructional delivery options. Faculty members report that they are willing to experiment with other modes of instructional delivery because they now are confident that sufficient institutional support will be available to them.

The use of the distributed on-site support team approach at MCC clearly has helped to overcome some of the hurdles involved with the operationalization of a maturing and expanding online program. SLN faculty members recognize that the "course is a course" philosophy is now accepted and that the support team has played a major role in promoting the concept and making it work. Members of the support team

collect and analyze data on the online program (cost-benefit analyses, student retention, course and program offerings) and readily share these data with the online faculty. Several faculty members regularly present at conferences with support team members and work collaboratively to improve the online teaching-learning process. These events and interactions have evolved over time and mutual respect continues to grow between the support team and the online faculty.

SLN faculty members are our best and brightest, and are being recognized as such by annual nominations from *The Monroe Model* team members for various teaching awards such as the NISOD award, the Chancellor's Award for Teaching Excellence, the ITC award and the Hanson Award for Teaching Excellence. For the past several years, the online faculty members who have been nominated for these awards by the support team have been the successful recipients. This type of formal recognition (by the support team) of the exceptional teaching and service provided by MCC's online faculty members further contributes to the respect and trust between the online faculty members and the members of the support team.

The evolution of the MCC on-site support team demonstrates that on-going coordination with other College departments, and direct interaction and support of online faculty plays an important role in the success of online support team efforts. These efforts add to the overall quality of the institution's online initiatives and contribute to the satisfaction of online faculty.

Currently, the on-site support team is reviewing past processes and efforts and is in the process of expanding *The Monroe Model*. An online faculty survey regarding the initiatives of the various operations of the on-site support team is being prepared. The results of this survey will help to inform the expansion of the model. The specifics on the areas under consideration for revision are summarized in section III.

III. EXPANDING THE MODEL

The highly interactive nature of the MCC on-site support team has facilitated cross-divisional information exchange and has allowed team members to view the online learning environment from a variety of perspectives and frameworks. These views encompass those of teaching faculty, student services staff, technology support personnel, library personnel, web-designers, registration and records staff, students, and administrators in all divisions. The team's historical and comprehensive perspective on MCC's online learning program and faculty needs provide a good basis from which to review the current model. Prior to developing a faculty survey on the on-site support team's efforts, the team reviewed past practices and has identified several potential areas for model expansion.

One of the top areas of concern for first-time online faculty (and some experienced faculty) involves responding in a timely manner to student questions, and to appropriately managing the large numbers of discussion postings in an online course. On-site support personnel—and other experienced online faculty members—can model and suggest ways for faculty to manage these communications without becoming overwhelmed or obsessed with their course 24-hours each day [17]. As the model has evolved, this is one of the areas in which the team has become more proactive. The use of niche sessions—especially for first-time online course developers—on course management strategies is one training area currently under review for revision. Support team members also can reinforce strategies introduced at SLN and MCC training sessions regarding other key course design and template management issues. Adding a series of these niche trainings is one area that is likely to be included in the expansion of the model.

Another area for enhanced team activities in support of online faculty includes a formal identification and recognition of how online pedagogy impacts the on-campus classroom. Numerous online faculty members report that their online design process has reinvigorated their interest in promoting active learning in their teaching. Many already are transferring their online activities to the classroom, but since time is always short at the various training sessions—and faculty have limited time to participate in the online SLN discussions—this important area is downplayed. The team is considering several options to bring this concept to the forefront for discussion with online and campus-based faculty members.

While the team considers expanding the training component of the model, it becomes apparent that our faculty target audience is becoming more stratified. For example, we now find ourselves talking about the expansion of our faculty professional development services, but to more narrowly defined faculty cohorts. After the first semester of online delivery in 1997, MCC began offering services to only two groups—experienced full-time online faculty, and first-time full-time online faculty. These two cohorts formed the framework for the institution's support for online faculty members for several semesters.

As the program has matured and scaled-up, it is clear that the model needs to be expanded to provide training and other services to various groups of faculty who have their own specific needs. MCC now is serving several online faculty cohort combinations that include: 1) Full time, new faculty, 2) full-time, experienced faculty; 3) first-time, full-time faculty who are teaching an already-developed online course; 4) first-time, adjunct faculty who are teaching an already-developed online course; 5) experienced, full-time faculty who are developing and delivering their 3rd, 4th, etc. course; 6) adjunct faculty who are developing and delivering their first course, 7) co-developers of a new course who may be full-time/adjunct, new/experienced faculty; 8) department chairs who never have taught an online course but need an understanding of online pedagogies/best practices in order to evaluate their online faculty.

The on-site support team agrees that each of these faculty groups has specific needs that demand attention. In order to address the concerns and nuances of all of these groups, it is likely that the focus of the model's components will be expanded to meet the needs of the various faculty characteristics on all levels, not just the training area.

Even within these newly identified groupings, there still may be a wide variation in the extent to which the faculty members have had exposure to specific online course issues. Of particular concern to the support team are the following areas: the culture shift from the instructor as a lecturer to one of facilitator; a general understanding of the course reconceptualization process; the shift from an independent course designer to a team-based course design and delivery process; an understanding of the "course is a course" philosophy (same outcomes, different means of designing activities and assessments for online initiatives); peer mentoring as part of the training process; technical skills and support issues; and the importance of ensuring a consistency of the institution's mission with the online program's business plan and goals.

Faculty satisfaction with online learning support is one of the key areas to the success of our online programming and to the success of our online students. In order to maintain good levels of faculty satisfaction with the on-site support team concept, the team feels that all components in the model must be expanded to meet the specific, yet broad-based needs of current and future online faculty. In the same way that online services for students are being expanded to accommodate a broader base of learners via niche services, the support services for our online faculty also need to be broadened to offer the best support possible.

IV. SUMMARY

The Monroe Model originated as a response to a convergence of issues: faculty course design, development and delivery needs, rapid online program growth, unresolved protocol and communication issues, and the general operational on-site support requirements of a comprehensive online program. The team has evolved into a collaborative, comprehensive, action-oriented and non-hierarchical team that strives to parallel the best practices of an online learning environment. MCC's experience suggests that institutions interested in providing quality online programs that support and encourage faculty participation and student success, first give serious consideration to the on-site support needs of online faculty.

The support provided by the SUNY Learning Network—in particular, the server infrastructure, the HelpDesk support and the pedagogically-sound template—has allowed the campus-based team to focus on faculty, student and local process issues. Over time, this has allowed *The Monroe Model* to gain the mutual respect and support of faculty and administrators alike. This advocacy has encouraged the on-site support team to continually seek improvement and to meet the needs of online faculty in an expedited and professional manner.

MCC will continue to utilize aggregate SLN faculty satisfaction data to inform our practice. Additionally, the administration of the Fall 2002 MCC online faculty satisfaction survey will help to assess specific on-site support team initiatives. The results of this survey will play a key role in the expansion of *The Monroe Model*. Enhancing on-site institutional support for online faculty—and balancing this support with SLN's online support initiatives—is a priority at Monroe Community College. It is an evolving process and we hope to continue to gain insights into the ways in which we can sustain and improve online faculty satisfaction with our on-site support processes.

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