



LUOMA ACTION PROJECT #2 VIRTUAL FACULTY SERVICE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY - June 17, 2007

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Executive Sponsors: Vice Chair of the Minnesota On-Line Council, Barry Nab Dahl,
and President Kathleen Nelson, Lake Superior College

Problem: Expanding on-line learning within the system is challenging the more traditional roles of faculty and their requirements to meet specific institutional and contractual work requirements.

Team Charge: Identify the issues faced by virtual faculty in relation to the current faculty employment contracts.

The team conducted research that would address the following:

- Identify the issues faced by virtual faculty in the current faculty employment contracts.
- Research how faculties in other national virtual settings address the issues identified.
- Recommend alternatives for consideration by faculty and administrators for how virtual faculty might meet their contractual requirements while still maintaining their virtual status.

Action Research Methods included :

1. The team met with sponsors to discuss the project and then met throughout the year face-to-face and virtually to frame the project.
2. A plan was developed to collect information from institutions within Minnesota Online, Midwest Regional Consortiums, and other well-known online colleges.
3. A team decision was made to develop and use a Virtual Faculty 10 Question survey.
4. Data was compiled by the team in a written report of the findings.
5. The Team Project Site (<http://www.virtualfaculty.project.mnscu.edu>) will house the data.

Summary and Analysis of the Findings:

This action research project collected both quantitative and qualitative data. Over 90 people were contacted in the study either through an online survey or by telephone. Some of the issues were:

- Workload issues, monitoring of faculty, and the lack of opportunities for community building and interaction were problematic.
- Bargaining contracts with language that “does not fit” issues of virtual faculty will be constant until there is meaningful discussion of issues connected to sick leave, vacation, duty days, and office hours.
- Issues of quality online, quality assurance and trustworthiness of faculty came up as well.

Limitations of the Research

This was a pilot study undertaken to get a sense of the issues surrounding virtual faculty and the institutions who hire them. It will be important to look ahead and work together to remedy issues of virtual faculty in a proactive rather than a reactive manner. This pilot project might be leveraged into a larger system wide discussion of these issues.

Virtual Faculty Service Conclusion

Our research and survey results indicate that within higher education the incredible success of online learning and enrolling students for online coursework has been the primary focus so far. What is lagging behind is developing the contractual requirements for the “Virtual” faculty, the online instructor. It is also clear colleges have not yet made the policy or procedure changes that will be required to address the “virtual” instructor and the contractual language to clearly define the rights and responsibilities to the college and to the students the “virtual” instructor and their unique classroom requires. Can institutions hold “virtual” instructors to the same requirements as the “brick and mortar” instructors? This action research projects collection of data suggests that we are not able to do so now. As we expand our online course offerings and employee “virtual” instructors from all corners on the world we have an opportunity to develop some clear guidelines and contract language to address the role and duties of online faculty to the communities and students they serve.