

Drexel University

Research Brief no. 4

**Effects of Adaptive Leadership on Faculty Engagement in Online Learning in Higher
Education: A Mixed Methods Study**

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November 2021

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Abstract

The higher education environment was already changing when the COVID-19 pandemic swept through the world disrupting almost every industry. Higher education was facing stressors on the system including rising costs, decreasing enrollments, and the looming enrollment cliff of 2025. Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) were turning to online learning in the hopes it would increase enrollment. The student population was becoming more diverse and non-traditional; demanding flexible programs that can fit into the lives of busy working adults. As IHEs turned to online or remote learning to keep their doors open during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, research was needed into how to engage faculty in online learning. The purpose of this mixed methods explanatory sequential study was to investigate the influence of adaptive leadership on faculty engagement in online education in higher education.

Aim

The aim of this explanatory sequential mixed-methods study was to investigate the influence of adaptive leadership on faculty engagement in online education in higher education. This study sought to explore faculty's perceptions of online learning as a modality within higher education; and then to explore what would affect faculty's willingness to participate in online learning. Data collected and analyzed from this study may provide guidance to IHE's administrative and faculty leadership on how best to support faculty if the institution decides to develop or increase online programs.

Problem

Research shows that higher education was changing even before the COVID-19 pandemic (McKenzie, 2019). This research is significant because IHE's that were already adapting to the new realities brought on by rising cost and declining enrollment, had to instantly respond to the national business closures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Kaufman & Stimpson, 2021). Pre-COVID-19, IHEs were in crisis with many institutions being forced to close their doors due to financial exigency (Lederman, 2018).

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are faculty's perceptions of online learning?
2. What factors influence faculty's willingness to participate in online learning?
3. How does adaptive leadership affect faculty perception and participation in online learning?

Research Findings

Framework

This research was done using a pragmatic constructivist frame (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Pragmatism looks for the best way to address a challenge, and constructivism uses reality of a situation to shape one's approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018). There is no one magical answer to the challenges facing higher education. This study explored the feasibility of one solution. IHE's ability to be adaptive is critical to success in a post-industrial age (Heifetz et al., 2009).

Method

This study was done using a mixed-methods explanatory sequential study design which allowed for quantitative data to be collected first and then to inform the qualitative data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A mixed-methods design was chosen so the researcher could triangulate the data between the quantitative and qualitative findings and so the results could be reported both using statistical significance found in quantitative data, and the rich descriptions found in qualitative data. Quantitative data were collected by a survey distributed to faculty from four schools/colleges at a large research university in the northeast: College of Nursing and Health Professions, Education, Law School, Public Health. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with faculty from the four schools/colleges. The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS One-way ANOVA and Independent sample t-Tests. The Qualitative data were analyzed using NVivo with open and axial coding. The data were then triangulated to increase the validity of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Conclusions/Discussion

This study had five results emerge: (a) the climate of a school/college affects perception of and participation in online learning, (b) faculty want to be acknowledged and rewarded for participation in online learning, (c) Institutions of Higher Education looking to move online need to secure faculty buy-in and provide faculty support, (d) faculty's perception of online learning has shifted over time. Exposure to online and remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic shifted perceptions in a positive way, (e) instructional design support was highly valued.

Implications and Recommendations

Five recommendations emerged from this research. They are based on data that was triangulated through the qualitative and quantitative data analysis as well as the literature review. While this was a relatively small study at four schools/colleges at a large university in the northeast the recommendations are generalizable to other settings.

1. Institutional leadership should let faculty decide to opt-in to online teaching
2. Institutions of higher education need to develop policies to protect faculty time for developing online courses
3. Institutional leadership should recognize faculty contributions
4. Institutional leadership should provide support for online course development
5. Institutional leadership should invest in instructional designers for all course modalities

The study found that leadership is critical to both perception and participation. Because of the unique organizational structure of most IHEs, the option to employ an authoritative leadership model where faculty are simply told what to do is fortunately not an option. Participants in this study made it clear that for faculty to have a positive perception of online learning and be willing to participate in online learning, they need to be able to opt-in to online teaching, be recognized and acknowledged, and have protected time. To be successful they need support, but not just traditional professional development. They need instructional design support as well as just-in-time training, coaching, and job aids. Should an institution of higher education wish to create an online program, following these recommendations will create a smoother and effective process for faculty adoption of teaching in the online modality.

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Author Biography

Dr. Melissa Kaufman is the Director of Academic Innovation for the Dornsife School of Public Health, Drexel University (DSPH). There, she oversees the school's online programs, as well as, curriculum development and assessment including developing new programs and ensuring all programs meet accreditation standards. Dr. Kaufman received her EdD in Education Leadership and Management in September 2021. She has presented at numerous conferences including the 2020 Quality Matters National Conference and the 2020 ASPPH Conference. She has also published articles in the *Journal of Health Administration Education* and the *Journal of Educators Online*.