efaculty Coaching: A Model for Increasing Communication, Interaction, Quality and Compliance in Online Courses

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Abstract— **Tarrant County College is committed to aligning the instructional design and delivery of online community college courses to the Quality Matters (QM) standards. The efaculty coaching model launched in Fall 2018; to date, remote coaches have observed and collected data in over 700 online courses. That data is based on QM standards 1, 5, and 6. The goal is to ensure that fully online classes provide exceptional Course Communication, Learner Engagement, and Instructor-Student Interaction. This paper highlights lessons learned and improvements made to the process. A timeline of goals for implementation, sample data, and potential ways to inform individualized professional development opportunities are presented. The author's intent is to provide a roadmap for other institutions considering an efaculty coaching model.**

Index Terms—**coaching, collaboration, compliance, course communication, data-driven professional development, instructor-student interaction, learner engagement, online quality assurance**

I. INTRODUCTION

The popularity and steadily-increasing demand for fully online courses at the community college and university levels is well-documented. Since the early days of e-learning in the 1990's, innovations in both technology and pedagogy have paved the way for wider access among diverse student populations. By the fall of 2016, approximately 31% of all college students enrolled in at least one online course, while 13% enrolled in fully online programs [1].

There was never a question that online delivery would continue to rise as a key player in post-secondary online education. However, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in recent months renders any previous projections irrelevant and unreliable. Enrollments in online courses will reach unprecedented levels. As institutions scramble to balance appropriate staffing, training, and technology, one universal concern stands at the forefront: How can the quality of remote instruction be assessed, improved, and communicated? Studies indicate that students who are already academically struggling can seriously suffer in online courses [2]. This is particularly significant in challenging core classes such as College Algebra, the single-most failed course in post-secondary education [3].

To date, the emergency response to COVID-19 has required flexibility and accommodations. The U.S. Department of Education published a series of unique and temporary departures from its traditional accreditation agency requirements [4]. Yet moving forward, an established plan for ensuring quality and compliance is needed. This plan may be addressed by efaculty coaching, a model in which remote employees trained in instructional design, online teaching, and Quality Matters rubric standards [5] observe online courses and collaborate with instructors as needed. Implications for instructional designers, online instructors, and academic leadership are discussed.

II. FOUNDATIONS

In the summer of 2018, the campus Department of Academic Affairs identified three compliance concerns. Automated reports generated by the Blackboard Learning Management System (LMS) showed the Instructor Course Requirements (ICR) document often not timely updated in accordance with Texas House Bill 2504. Second, the automated LMS reporting indicated that some online instructors were not actively present in classes on a daily, or even weekly, basis. Third, the U.S, Department of Education published a decision related to Western Governors University (WGU) which had an indirect but significant impact on other online institutions. The final report discussed what constitutes substantial interaction in order to differentiate between correspondence and distance education programs [6]. Of the two, distance education programs meet eligibility for federal financial aid funding. These three concerns were the impetus for the original observation criteria, and

organically evolved into identifying the three QM standards that would guide the campus efaculty coaching model. It is worth noting that at the given institution, the instructional design team also leads a rigorous Online Instructor Certification (OLC) training, required of all instructors prior to teaching online. That training incorporates the other QM general rubric standards not directly addressed by efaculty coaching. The OIC and efaculty coaching models are intended to be complimentary of one another.

The importance of fostering quality communication and interaction in the online setting is well-documented and supported. Moore's Theory of Transactional Distance maintains that there are distinct differences between online and traditional delivery methods. The separation between teachers and learners must be accounted for; potential misunderstandings occur as a result of psychological and communication spaces. The instructor is responsible for facilitating dialog and structure, leading to learner autonomy [7]. The more recent Communities of Inquiry (CoI) Theory contends there are three distinct aspects of learning: teaching presence, cognitive presence and social presence. Teaching presence represents the instructor's behaviors that help facilitate learning in the online learning class. Social presence includes the learner's emotional qualities and their ability to express themselves. Cognitive presence is the core of learning, visible by how learners interact and engage with the course content [8]. In distance learning programs, this is represented by three desired types of interactions: student to instructor, student to student, and student to content. Each type of interaction is interrelated.

The purpose of the efaculty Coaching model, and the subsequent data study, is to systematically examine quality and compliance within fully online courses at the community college level in a collaborative, non-punitive manner. Specific elements for observation and analysis center on communication and interaction. The use of design tools and course technology to impact those elements is also measured.

III.   METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes primary, quantitative data collected between August, 2018 and June, 2020. Observations of online sections were conducted using questionnaires with closed-ended questions, based on Quality Matters Rubric Standards 1, 5, and 6 (6th edition) [5]. Table I demonstrates the alignment of these standards to the data collection forms. The findings and conclusions of the research are limited to available literature plus data collected at one fully online community college campus in Texas.

TABLE I.   Specific Review Standards from the QM Higher Education Rubric, Sixth Edition [5] Aligned to efaculty Coaching Data Questionnaire

General Standard	Specific Review Standards	efaculty Coaching Questionnaire
1 Course Overview and Introduction	1.1 Instructions make clear how to get started and where to find various course components. 1.2 Learners are introduced to the purpose and structure of the course. 1.3 Communication expectations for online discussions, email, and other forms of interaction are clearly stated. 1.4 Course and institutional policies with which the learner is expected to comply are clearly stated within the course, or a link to current policies is provided. 1.5 Minimum technology requirements for the course are clearly stated, and information on how to obtain the technologies is provided. 1.6 Computer skills and digital information literacy skills expected of the learner are clearly stated. 1.7 Expectations for prerequisite knowledge in the discipline and/or any required competencies are clearly stated. 1.8 The self-introduction by the instructor is professional and is available online. 1.9 Learners are asked to introduce themselves to the class	Form 1: Communication Plan
5 Learning Activities and Learner Interaction	5.1 The learning activities promote the achievement of the stated learning objectives or competencies. 5.2 Learning activities provide opportunities for interaction that support active learning. 5.3 The instructor's plan for interacting with learners during the course is clearly stated. 5.4 The requirements for learner interaction are clearly stated.	Form 2: Learner Interaction & Engagement
6 Course Technology	6.1 The tools used in the course support the learning objectives or competencies. 6.2 Course tools promote learner engagement and active learning. 6.3 A variety of technology is used in the course. 6.4 The course provides learners with information on protecting their data and privacy	Form 1: Communication Plan & Form 2: Learner Interaction & Engagement

IV.   IMPLEMENTATION

Initially, a three-year timeline for implementation was presented to the executive leadership and other stakeholders. During Year One (2018-2019), the goals included: hire, onboard, and train up to eight highly-qualified coaches, develop data collection tools aligned to Quality Matters standards, and share trends with department chairs. Year Two (2019-2020) focused on digitizing all data collection, sharing via single, secure, collaborative platform, and applying feedback to improve the process. Initial data and success warranted the hiring of two additional coaches. As Year Three (2020-2021) begins, creating data-driven and individual professional development opportunities, ensuring ongoing calibration among coaches, and allowing instructors to self-assess

their own courses prior to dialoging with coaches is anticipated.

Two key challenges emerged early in the implementation process. First, the minimum qualifications for hiring remote coaches proved to exclude many applicants. While the budget provided for up to eight part-time coaching positions, only four applicants met the posted criteria. A decision was made to continue with the original intent and qualifications. The four coaches hired all demonstrated three or more years' experience with both instructional design *and* online teaching at the higher education level. Once hired, each coach immediately enrolled and completed the Quality Matters Applying the Rubric training.

The second challenge centered on faculty buy-in. This was a new process, envisioned by the campus president, assigned for facilitation by a new campus administrator. Most of the issues that arose during Year One could be attributed to a lack of trust and shared vision. In an environment based on hierarchy and supervision, a non-evaluative improvement process is easily misunderstood. The only solutions are time, communication, and transparency. Annual surveys of department chairs were utilized to guide improvements to the efaculty model. Once this input was acknowledged, buy-in and support quickly elevated. The improvements outlined in the next section reflect their feedback.

V.   IMPROVEMENTS

The process evolved in three main areas: assignment of coaches to instructors, digitizing of all data collection and sharing, and Excel formatting adjustments. Originally, coaches were assigned Course Reviewer Access in Blackboard based on prior instructor performance data or course-related student success rates. While the intent was to identify concerns and timely support the instructors most in need, this targeted approach had the unintended consequence of causing anxiety. In an effort to destigmatize the process, and promote coaching as a professional development opportunity for all instructors, random assignments emerged. A coach may be assigned to veteran instructors, new instructors, etc. without consideration of any previous evaluation or performance information. The decision was made to include all department chairs in the observation process, as well. By May of 2020, all online instructors and courses were observed at least once.

The vision in 2018 supported open-ended data collection tools that would encourage dialogue between coaches and instructors. However, it was difficult to calibrate and compare the data collected. A more quantitative approach ensued, allowing for data to be compared at the individual, department, and campus levels. Moving from rubrics to surveys was the first step; google surveys were created, completed by coaches following observations, and submitted to the administrator for analysis and final reporting. In the Spring of 2020, COVID-19 necessitated a college-wide transition to MS Teams. The google surveys were converted to MS Forms, allowing for a streamlined collection and sharing process. Currently, the efaculty coaching administrator (and author of this paper) manages an MS Team site for each department. Sorted analytics are uploaded to each site as available, typically every 3 weeks during an academic term. Campus reports are also generated and presented to the leadership cabinet. The observation criteria is consistent across all departments and disciplines, as the data collected is based on QM indicators rather than subject matter or content. This is an important distinction; coaching is focused on quality of overall course design relevant to communication and interaction; the annual performance evaluation, completed by department chairs, is the only measure of content. This allows coaching to be non-punitive and separate from the official evaluative system.

The feedback from department chairs typically addressed the presentation of data in spreadsheet form. For example, the comments column is now text-wrapped prior to sharing on MS Teams, improving readability. Another request to import employee identification numbers as a column resulted in the ability for department chairs to merge multiple sources of data.

VI.   RESULTS

The current version of Form 1 contains a total of ten questions related to Course Communication. One question that has remained consistent between the Fall 2018 and Spring 2020 terms reads as follows: Is the ICR timely posted in WebAdvisor? Coaches attempt to access the ICR using the public link during the first week of class. Figure 1 shows the results from each term, demonstrating a steady increase in compliance. In two years, over four terms, compliance grew from 68% to 91%.

Figure 1. Campus Data, ICR Compliance
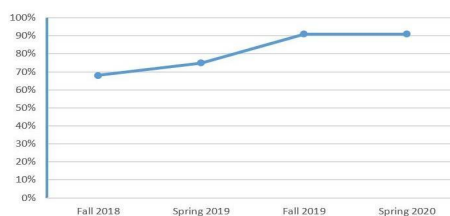
Instructor interaction with students is another criteria for observation consistently observed and measured over the two years. Several questions address this element. The data shown in Figure 2 illustrates the methods for introducing a course as observed in Year One. Clear Statements, Welcome Message (written form), and Start Here Button were the top three approaches. None of these approaches are interactive; instead, they reflect transactional communication typical of a correspondence class structure. This data was used to create a new professional development opportunity, in which

instructors worked with an instructional designer to develop an interactive Welcome Message. Figure 3 reports increased interactivity with regard to the Welcome Message aspect, as observed in Year Two. Finally, Table II notes a 12 % increase in substantial interaction between instructors and students. Discussion boards and Blackboard Collaborate are two course tools commonly utilized to achieve this desired type of interaction.
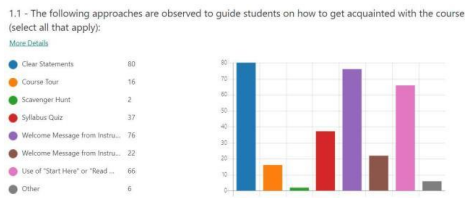
Figure 2. Campus Data, Course Introduction Activities (2018-2019)

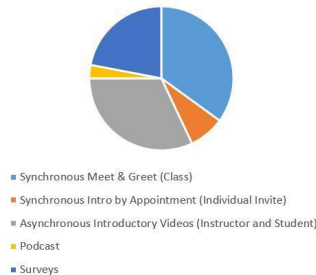Figure 3. Campus Data, Interactive Welcome Message (2019-2020)

TABLE II. CAMPUS INSTRUCTOR TO STUDENT INTERACTIONS (NOTE: THIS DATA REFLECTS ONLY OBSERVED SECTIONS, NOT TOTAL CAMPUS SECTIONS)

Observation Year	Percentage of Courses Observed with Substantial Instructor to Student Interaction	Most Common Course Tool Employed to Promote Instructor to Student Interaction
2018-2019	16%	Discussion Board
2019-2020	28%	Blackboard Collaborate

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Two years into the implementation of an efaculty coaching model, the results are encouraging. While quality and compliance related to communication and interaction continue to advance, the researcher acknowledges there is one major component yet to be deployed: the actual coaching. Data sharing has been primarily limited to department chairs, deans, and administrators. To achieve a full coaching model, the third year implementation goals must be executed. Mapping individual professional development opportunities, ensuring ongoing calibration among coaches, and allowing instructors to self-assess their own courses prior to dialoging with coaches are logical next steps to ensuring that the data collected is utilized to its potential. Additionally, while all campus efaculty coaches and instructional designers have been certified per Quality Matters, the majority of the online instructors have limited training and prior knowledge of the rubric standards. It is recommended that the campus fully embrace this training opportunity in order to align expectations.

One notable challenge to address involves observation protocols for courses relying on third-party content providers or labs. For example, most math courses offered by the given campus are linked via student subscription to Pearson's MyMathLab. Coaches only have access to Blackboard, and thus cannot view all elements of a course. This situation brings into question a broader issue: how can the institution of record be held in compliance for aspects they do not directly develop or manage? As we enter into a new season of distance education, post-COVID-19, this will be one of many topics for additional study and consideration.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author/ researcher is currently employed as the campus administrator responsible for facilitating the efaculty coaching model described in this paper. However, the quantitative data presented was not collected by the author.

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