Intentional Innovation: Strategies to increase administrative consistency and engagement for a hybrid faculty group.

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A program with faculty who work in different locations can create barriers to administrative consistency such as lack of training, resistance to using technology, technology failures, and a sense of isolation and fatigue (de Jonge, & Rodger, 2006). The sense of isolation is a primary concern, as faculty disconnection can lead to student disconnection. Brooks (2010) noted the need to incorporate both face-to-face and webinar-based options to train faculty, and Hale & Bridges (2020) noted counselor educators transitioning to online teaching obtain minimal support from university departments.

The Central Michigan University counseling unit launched a fully remote online program and began hiring fully remote core faculty in Fall 2021. The program currently employs three full-time remote faculty, three tenure-track faculty who live near the main campus and one tenure track faculty that lives two hours from main campus. During the transition to onboarding more remote faculty, the program also merged with a new department. These rapid changes required a need to approach faculty engagement with intentionality. The faculty approached this challenge using three tenets; ensuring all faculty had access to all required support to do their jobs effectively, providing faculty with ongoing mentorship, and creating initiatives focused on faculty engagement.

The first tenet involved a thorough review of all the policies, procedures and everyday functions faculty would need to access to do their job effectively. The program director created an orientation course using the university’s learning management system. The course included information on the program, advising information and video demonstrations, links to important forms and ways to access support for students. As the program grew and more faculty were onboarded, the program director developed a faculty handbook with links and information that was readily accessible. The counselor education faculty moved all unit and department meetings
online to ensure accessibility and developed a robust SharePoint site that all faculty could access. This repository provides access to prior syllabi, advising documents, student files, faculty hiring information for search committee members, accreditation compliance, and admissions information. All faculty have access to needed links to university sites as well. The creation and ongoing evaluation of the learning management system site and SharePoint, with feedback from remote faculty, ensure that everyone remains engaged and has access.

The second tenet, mentorship, required faculty to be intentional on how to onboard remote faculty. Available research supports mentorship programs aimed at increasing online adjunct faculty’s efficacy in asynchronous courses and online faculty development (Vitale, 2010; Cook & Steinert, 2012). While limited information on engaging remote faculty (adjunct or core) exists, opportunities that encourage connection and mentorship to increase faculty engagement and satisfaction were supported (Brooks, 2010; Boice, 1990 and Cawyer et al. 2002 as cited in Hsieh & Nguyen, 2020). Within the CMU program, remote faculty were matched with experienced, on-campus colleagues who met with them, initially, to complete the onboarding process and then in regular follow-up sessions (formal and informal) to provide information about protocols and program operations. This allowed the remote faculty an opportunity to ask questions and have input on how to integrate with processes such as admissions reviews and student support planning. It also promoted further engagement and an opportunity for more organic relationships to develop.

In addition, a content specific mentor was assigned to each remote faculty member. For example, the coordinator of the school counseling concentration was given the responsibility to engage weekly around issues related to curriculum, student needs, and state/national developments relative to the program and the profession. This provided the newly hired remote
faculty with a school counseling background to engage with someone who had not only a similar academic focus but also a shared interest in this specific division of the counseling profession. From those meetings, initiatives emerged such as activities to recognize National School Counseling Week and a school counseling column for the CSI chapter newsletter. These connections not only engaged the two faculty members with one another, they also had the outcome of promoting connections to both on-campus and online students. Similarly, remote affiliate faculty received mentorship from core faculty; each term a core faculty member subject matter expert provides consultation and support around the learning management system, assignments and classroom management.

An outgrowth of these engagement efforts was a greater sense of connection to the program, department, and university. Remote faculty partnered with on-campus colleagues to complete various unit/departmental tasks and engage in committee work. The decision to have these meetings fully virtual rather than in a hybrid format promoted communication efforts and created an even more cohesive work environment.

The final tenet was the promotion of initiatives focused on faculty engagement, in which three examples will be highlighted. The first was the creation of a department culture committee, titled FUEL or Faculty Understanding Engagement & Wellness. Volunteers were sought from the various units to collaborate within this virtual workgroup focused on building a platform to celebrate, connect, and support all department members, regardless of physical location. The group is funded via yearly donations from faculty and staff, in addition to an annual deposit from a silent auction event around the holidays. A monthly agenda and meeting time, shared drive, and financial record keeping process were established to formalize the group and work towards transparency.
One outcome from this group is the inclusion of an ongoing department meeting agenda item called “FUELed for Good” which poses the same question to each member. Questions are either light-hearted (e.g., what is your favorite candy?) or more nostalgic (e.g., share a scent that is meaningful from your past), but are designed to provide non-work related information about each person as a way to better get to know their colleagues. It also allows for each person to share to the extent to which they feel comfortable. While this does take time within the meeting to get around to the whole group, most members have identified it as a meaningful use of our time together and requested its continuation into the next academic year.

FUEL also recognizes work anniversaries and birthdays for each team member, often with a giftcard, card, or token of appreciation. Highlighting these occasions demonstrates warmth and inclusivity (Lau et al., 2023). Other initiatives include department wide service opportunities; sending flowers or meals during a loss, injury, or illness; shared meals; and monthly Fika. Fika is a Swedish concept that encourages physical presence over coffee, tea, and a snack. It is an opportunity for connection and a pause from the busyness of the day (Yngve et al., 2023). This concept has proven successful in the department as both online and in-person Fikas are held and are well attended several times per semester.

Another faculty engagement strategy included the development of a semesterly meeting to bring together adjunct or affiliate faculty and full-time core faculty. CAFE, or Connecting All Faculty Efficaciously, is a one-hour meeting in which all part- and full-time faculty for the program meet virtually over a Friday lunch hour merely for the point of connection. Ongoing agenda items include program or policy updates, student concerns, and resource sharing. Additionally, the group often works through a teaching-specific case study, or discusses a “what would you do in this situation?” scenario exercise. Providing this opportunity for transparency
and processing is helpful to ensure affiliate faculty grow their connection to the university program and brand. It has also led to increased communication and feedback provided to core faculty, collaboration on other initiatives, and overall retention of affiliate and adjunct faculty in the program.

Finally, faculty engagement has also occurred within the work of the program’s chapter of Chi Sigma Iota. Though historically a campus-based chapter in which all events and meetings were in-person, since launching the online program and hiring remote faculty, almost all aspects of the chapter have gone virtual. This transition has allowed program faculty to more easily participate in the chapter happenings, and even provided the possibility to lead the chapter as the Chapter Faculty Advisor since there is no need or requirement to be stationed on main campus. Since transitioning online, an increase in faculty engagement has been observed, and has led to greater student involvement as well. These positive student–faculty relationships can contribute to students’ involvement and achievement; they have also been shown to be related to higher student retention rates (O’Keeffe, 2013), better academic performance (Klem & Connell, 2004), sense of school belonging (Wong, Parent, & Konishi, 2019), and decreased student drop-out rates (Klem & Connell, 2004).

Faculty engagement within the chapter has been observed in a few ways. First, by informing all faculty of upcoming events or programs and inviting them to participate, faculty have an awareness of the chapter activities and can plan ahead to participate as they are able. For example, the chapter held a virtual hot cocoa social in January. Packages were mailed to all faculty and new students in the program and included a packet of cocoa, a bag of sprinkles and marshmallows, a flyer for the event, and the recruitment flyer to the chapter. Several faculty stated they appreciated the warm invitation and that the social was virtual so they could jump in
even if for a short time. Additionally, faculty members have been asked to present as a trainer or guest speaker on a topic and are consulted about recommendations for new chapter leaders or ideas for events. These small gestures allow faculty to participate in ways that are accessible and additive to the student experience.

In summary, the CMU Counseling program faculty hoped to anticipate and ameliorate the challenges involved when the program began onboarding remote faculty. By intentionally using technology, mentorship and creating a committee dedicated to engagement, the program hopes to continue to engender a sense of community and ownership among all faculty.
References


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