**Case Study: Becoming a Distance Faculty Member**

On a personal note, in 2007 we moved a fair distance from campus so that a daily commute to and from the university would not have been possible. Technological advancements had made telecommuting an acceptable strategy for many businesses (my husband telecommuted) and I believed, as Dr. Wood(3), that I could use the same strategy to meet my responsibilities as a tenured faculty member. Though there wasn’t a term for what I was doing at the time -- I did not consider myself anything other than a full-time faculty; I just happened to live far from campus -- I would have been considered a quasi-FDNE (according to the work by Pearsall et al.1). I say “quasi” because I taught *mostly* at a distance and fully participated in all faculty missions, responsibilities, and governance – but I also came to campus at least once a month to teach intensive classes and chair/attend committee meetings.

A year before we moved, the dean and I talked about how I would fulfill my faculty responsibilities. We felt the change was doable with a combination of regularly scheduled campus visits coupled with the use of technology and good communication strategies. I appreciated the dean’s understanding and willingness to work with me to allow me to continue to be a productive faculty member. In retrospect, we should have had a written agreement to protect both the university and me; but this was a new thing for both of us, so our verbal agreement seemed enough. I do not know if the dean reported the arrangement to university administrators. To my knowledge, no official approval from the chancellor or president of the university was pursued by the dean.

Over that year, I transitioned my teaching assignments from the traditional classroom offerings to a distance education format (moving from a hybrid format to core courses completely online) that worked for me, and happily for the students as well. I did not realize that faculty-at-a distance was a “thing” in academia – this was not a hot topic in the literature at the time and I believe I was the only full-time tenured faculty member in our school of nursing to request this change. I wish I had the literature cited in this column to have used as evidence for my transition and decisions at the time! The following narrative provides more details and is from my blog post entitled: *“How I Became a Distance Educator (AKA Distance Faculty, Remote Faculty).”*

In June 2007, we moved 5 hours away from my university campus.  As a long-time faculty member, I had no plans to abandon my hard-won tenure.  At that time, I taught graduate core courses in advanced pathophysiology and applied evidence-based practice (EBP); in addition to an advanced practice role course and the clinical nurse specialist (CNS) specialty courses.

The core courses of advanced pathophysiology and applied EBP were traditional offerings delivered in the classroom.  Because I knew that the distance from campus would make a weekly commute for me unsustainable, in 2006, I began a process of transitioning my classroom-only courses to, first, a hybrid model (where I taught one face-to-face (F2F) class a month and then the rest of the content was online), and then to a fully online format.  The students liked this model because the flexibility of the scheduling allowed them to work (without needing to ask for one to two days off per week for school), and they still got to physically interact with the instructor and other students.

The hybrid model for the core courses was a pilot of sorts to see if the students would object to core classes (in this case, advanced pathophysiology and applied EBP) being delivered in a mostly or purely online format.  Online learning in nursing schools was not yet widespread.  Though our school of nursing was among the earliest to embrace online learning, most of the core classes were still being taught as traditional classroom offerings.

The advanced practice role course was already being taught as a hybrid of two intensive days F2F content (one day at the beginning of the semester and one day at the end) with the rest of the content being delivered online.  The CNS students’ specialty courses were also being taught as face-to-face intensives with the students meeting two full days a month and then engaging online for other assignments.

Because there was no course code for hybrid classes, at the time, the core courses I taught were listed as being delivered as an online-only format, but students were made aware of the optional F2F class once a month in the registration materials; the optional classes were also clearly identified in the syllabus course schedule.  The F2F classes typically had a small number of students attend – mostly those who lived close to the campus.  The classes were also taped and made available on the course webpages for students to view.

Every month I came to campus at least once for 5-10 days to teach and to attend to other faculty responsibilities.  Depending on other faculty events or requirements, I sometimes made multiple trips in a month.  This “commute” involved extra personal expenses (lodging, automobile expenses, meals, etc.) for which I received no reimbursement; additionally, I could not write off the expenses because moving was my choice and not a requirement of the job.  As an Associate Professor, I was not released from my obligations to meet the traditional academic missions (research, scholarship, and service) of tenured faculty.  I continued to chair and attend committee meetings (in person and virtually), coordinate a master’s option, advise students and mentor new faculty, conduct research, publish, and participate in faculty governance.

Thankfully, student evaluations were positive – that was a big relief!  One of the most common fears of faculty in transitioning their classroom courses to an online format is the Fear of the Unknown: how will students evaluate the effectiveness of the teacher and the content delivered when there was no physical interaction between the students and faculty?   Student acceptance and enthusiasm for my hybrid and then fully online courses gave me evidence to convince the dean that I could be an effective faculty member, even if I was not on-campus every day. Overall, this arrangement worked well for many years, though it was not without its challenges.

**Disruptive innovations** are frequently looked upon with suspicion at the outset.  This arrangement was a major change from the normal routine of faculty being physically present on campus – a definite disruption of the status quo.  Even faculty who taught mainly online were expected to be in their offices during the week.  A change in mindset among the faculty, individually and as a whole, was necessary for this plan to succeed.

**Distance faculty** (also known as **distance educators** or **remote faculty**) are faculty members whose teaching is “geographically independent of students and colleagues” (McLean, 2006, Background, ¶1).  I never thought of myself as “forgotten” faculty, as McLean noted –  I just was a dedicated faculty member who happened to live far from campus. Because I came to campus on a regular basis, I didn’t quite meet the definition of being separated from my students and I always felt connected to my colleagues, students, and college.  I’ve since read a study by Pearsall and colleagues (2012) on full-time faculty-at-a-distance nurse educators — that’s probably how I would have been classified today.

With the current **nursing faculty shortage**, more universities and colleges are looking for faculty to teach in their programs – hiring faculty who teach from a distance may be the “innovation” that keeps some nursing schools from closing down programs.

There are many benefits for the faculty member, students, and institution as a whole to employing more distance faculty.

Credit: This case study was originally published as a blog post entitled *“How I Became a Distance Educator (AKA Distance Faculty, Remote Faculty)”* and is printed here with permission from the *Nursing Education Expert* website at <http://nursingeducationexpert.com/distance-educator-faculty-remote/>