

## **Faculty Perceptions on the Benefits of Instructor Evaluation for Improved Online Facilitation**

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**Abstract:** This research study reviewed the Online Instructor Evaluation System (OIES) used by Park University's Distance Learning program. The system is a peer/administrative means to evaluate adjunct instructors for effective online class facilitation. Online instructors who had been evaluated by the OIES were surveyed on their perspective of how the OIES impacted their online instruction. Both quantitative and qualitative results of the research survey indicated that online adjunct instructors perceived the OIES as a beneficial system to gauge and improve online facilitation.

### **Introduction**

The growth of online learning over the past two decades has been exponential. Various research statistics show this rapid growth among higher education institutions (Allen & Seaman, 2008; Lokken, 2009). Additionally, students cite the convenience and flexibility of online courses as a determiner (Northrup, 2009). Naturally, faculty benefit from the same convenience and flexibility of the online learning mode. Expanding upon existing distance education and continuing education processes, online education has provided even greater opportunity and flexibility for students and institutions alike.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The primary focus of the Distance Learning division at Park University is fulfilling the University Mission relative to academic excellence, critical thinking, effective communication skills and lifelong learning. Park is committed to high standards, academic integrity, course content consistency, and effective measures of learning outcomes. To meet the mission as it relates to online courses, Park Distance Learning (PDL) developed a process whereby adjunct online instructors are trained and evaluated through a formal process, the Online Instructor Evaluator System (OIES). The OIES model began in earnest in Fall 2004 and experienced several modifications over 4 years to arrive at the current, stable iteration. However, the overall effectiveness as a tool to increase facilitation abilities of online instructors had not been determined. This study surveyed instructors that have been through the OIES to reflect on the evaluation process and its effect on improving instructor online facilitation skills.

It is important to provide some definitions at this point. Some institutions term “instructor evaluations” as a survey completed by students. Rather, this research project and Park University term “instructor evaluations” as the process where full time faculty members observe the teaching facilitation of other full time faculty or adjunct instructors. Student surveys of instructor facilitation are gathered and used to determine personnel decisions at Park University, but the OIES is a peer/administrative instrument that enhances the overall data set on instructor ability and fit for online instruction.

**Retention and Promotion** The OIES is an innovative and bold process to mentor and evaluate instructors in their ability to facilitate online courses. Park uses the results for retention, hiring, retraining, and promotion decisions. The OIES is a move forward in distance education in that it provides a working model for other institutions to emulate and develop their own evaluation process for online instructors.

**Focus on Facilitation** The OIES focuses on the facilitation of the course, not the course content. At Park University, online course core content is created by a subject matter expert who is approved by the academic department. The OIES evaluates instructors on best online teaching practices and does not judge the content of the course; only the facilitation of that content in the online environment.

### **Review of the Literature**

As higher education institutions have embarked upon and enhanced their online learning programs, they have also sought models that support student and instructor online learning needs. As a necessary element of quality assurance, evaluation of online courses is a popular topic in the research literature (Dykman & Davis, 2008; Lord, 2009; Mandernach, et.al, 2005; Weschke & Canipe, 2010; Villar Angulo & Alegre de la Rosa, 2007; Avery, et.al., 2006). This existing research shows the struggles involved in creating effective online learning systems as well as the challenges of evaluating online courses and instructors.

**Needs of Online Higher Education** Park University’s answer to the charge of maintaining academic quality and high level instruction is the Online Instructor Evaluation System (OIES). According to Katz and Associates (1999), those institutions that develop faculty to become “designers of learning experiences, processes, and environments” (pp.120 - 121) will succeed in the new learning technologies. The OIES provides the support for faculty to become better equipped as the “designers” and facilitators of high quality online learning environments. Additionally, Park benefits as the OIES provides Park with consistent standards and expectations of instructors which can be applied online and adapted for on ground evaluation for its many campus centers if it chooses to move in that direction.

**Needs of Park University** Park University has 40 nationwide campus centers, 42,000 annual student enrollments in online baccalaureate degree-completion programs and fully online graduate programs. Park University regularly utilizes approximately 350 online

adjunct instructors during an 8 week, accelerated term. A challenge for any institution that offers programs at a distance is how to maintain academic quality and consistency in instruction. Park has taken the initiative to develop a program that ensures instructors are trained and mentored in the established criteria and standards on which they will be evaluated. The program was designed using current literature from adult education, best practices in distance education (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996; Council for Regional Accrediting Commissions, 2001; Weiss, Knowlton & Speck, 2004), effective training concepts (Katz, 1999; Tobin, 2004) and peer review at the end of the pilot implementation.

## **Methodology**

**Structure of the OIES** Park University is committed to high academic standards, academic integrity, course content consistency, and assessment measures that effectively measure student learning. The Online Instructor Evaluation System (OIES), used by Park Distance Learning (PDL) to mentor and evaluate its many part time online instructors, is designed to ensure the finest quality education experience for online students and to provide the best instructional support for online instructors. The OIES is a process by which PDL seeks to gauge the needs and strengths of its part time online instructors. The system is a dual mentoring and evaluation process in which instructors are teamed with an online instructor evaluator who mentors the faculty member throughout an accelerated, 8-week online term. During the mentoring and evaluation process, instructors have an active and crucial role in the process and in their ultimate success as online instructors. The mechanisms of the mentoring begin with a required online training course which teaches the online course delivery platform, Park policy, and best practices in online teaching environments. The training includes many online resources. The OIES process occurs during the instructor's first term teaching and includes four formative assessments (mentoring) and four instructor self-reviews throughout the term. The final summative evaluation occurs at the end of the term. Included through the term are ongoing email and telephonic dialogue between the instructor and the instructor evaluator. After an instructor's first term of online teaching, OIES mentoring and evaluation occurs annually.

The OIES formative reviews are checklists and reminders to help instructors stay on track with the pragmatics of teaching online (Park policies, etc), but also to encourage dialogue about best practices and instructional methodology in online environments. Using the OIES reviews as a template, instructor evaluators observe an instructor's online course on a regular basis to provide timely feedback during the term. Best practices, University specific policies, and facilitation requirements are all discussed. Evaluators do not, however, review the content of a particular online course. Curricular content is the realm of the academic department in the Park University system. Rather, the OIES is meant to enhance good instruction and to encourage online teaching excellence. The OIES culminates with a Summative Evaluation, completed by the instructor evaluator, at the end of the term. The Summative Evaluation is then forwarded to the instructor's academic department, along with the instructor self-reviews and student course evaluations.

Academic departments use these various artifacts from the Park Distance Learning to make informed decisions on teacher retention and promotion within the university. The OIES is intended to encourage professional development of all Park online instructors. The evaluation system is a practical academic portfolio artifact which showcases teaching strengths and online facilitation talents of online instructors. Additionally, the formative and summative mechanism foster instructor reflection on best online teaching practices. Finally, results of the overall OIES are linked to institutional assessment to meet regional accreditation requirements.

**Mentoring and Evaluation** Evaluation of instructors can be a taboo topic, however, the establishment of an evaluation process illustrates Park's commitment to academic quality to students, instructors, and the field of distance education. The OIES is unique in that it mentors and evaluates. The mentoring aspect benefits instructors that are new to online instruction or are new to Park University. These new instructors may be unaware of Park specific policies and guidelines, therefore to have them mentored during a term of actual online teaching allows them to function as a bona fide Park online instructor, but still with the reassurance that they can rely on their mentor/evaluator for help and guidance. The evaluation aspect benefits Park Distance Learning (PDL) and the various departments with information about the attributes of these online instructors. Departments use the information to prioritize adjunct instructors and PDL uses information about which instructors correctly follow Park policies and procedures.

While the Summative Evaluation is focused on an overall evaluation of the course, it emphasizes the instructor's ability to incorporate suggested changes and required modifications (including an evaluation of instructor responsiveness and adherence to administrative requirements) from the formative reviews; although the formative reviews, in keeping with their function, are not included in the summative package, the particulars of those reviews are generalized to reflect either the instructors' strengths as a reflective, improved practitioner or to note unresponsiveness and lack of participation in the process. The summative evaluation package is particularly effective as a means of online faculty evaluation as it incorporates multiple perspectives to present to the department a comprehensive portrait of the instructor. This integrative evaluation emphasizes an instructor's growth throughout a term rather than simply highlighting the mistakes made throughout the instructional process. (Mandernach, Donnell, Dailey & Schulte, 2005, pg. 5)

**Rich Data Capture** The OIES captures rich information on key competencies for effective online instruction. These include instructor response and availability to students, quality and frequency of presence in the online classroom (e.g. discussions, announcements, virtual office, Gradebook), timely grading of course assignments, and maintenance of course administrative duties (e.g. attendance reporting, proctored exam arrangements, facilitating use of University student support resources). These components are a mixture of Park University policies and accepted best practices from the research literature in online learning.

**Online portal** Park University maintains the OIES through an online internet portal. Formative and summative reviews are archived in a server database for use and retrieval by instructor evaluators, instructors, and departmental administrators. To ensure the mentoring, nurturing aspect of the formative reviews, administrators are provided access to only the final, summative OIES evaluation. The portal incorporates both security features and ease of accessibility. Online forms are cost effective and save in both hardcopy costs and inter-office transfer of information. Access is 24/7/365 for instructors and evaluators. As with online learning, the OIES data retrieval process is not restricted by time/place constraints.

**Benefits for and attributes of Instructor Evaluators** Instructor evaluators have a high level of satisfaction as they are constantly exposed to a wide variety of disciplines, course designs, and teaching techniques each term. As one instructor evaluator stated, “I feel like I’m able to make a difference in service to my colleagues [as an evaluator], and my own teaching is strengthened through this exposure to others’ teaching styles.” The OIES signifies an interest and commitment by the University to faculty development. Instructor evaluators are full time faculty with ½ administrative release to mentor and evaluate online adjuncts via the OIES. This budgetary and administrative commitment to faculty development is encouraging to full-time faculty and part-time faculty alike. It shows that their improvement is valued by the University. Furthermore, this commitment is beneficial in official accountability to students, community members and accrediting bodies.

**Modern application of traditional evaluations** The OIES is a transfer of the traditional peer/administrator evaluation visit in an instructor’s on-ground, face to face classroom. As online learning is a mixture of old and new teaching techniques, so too is the OIES a mixture of old and new instructor evaluation mechanisms. Rather than take a “snapshot” of an instructor’s teaching in a brief visit to the online classroom, the OIES continues to guide an instructor through the eight week online term. Just as online learning is a distinct and separate mode of learning, so too is the OIES a distinct mechanism to improve and gauge online instructor facilitation.

**Structure of the OIES research study** In an effort to collect both quantitative and qualitative instructor perceptions, an online survey was created. The survey tool was guided by the following research questions:

**Thesis statement:** The OIES process serves as an evaluation process for online instructors and also serves as a professional development exercise; instructors' online facilitation improves as a result of the process.

**Questions:** 1. Does the OIES serve as professional development for online instructors as a means to improve online course facilitation? 2. Which areas of the OIES best serve as professional development? 3. Do online instructors that have been through the OIES consider their online facilitation improved?

**Sample** The survey was sent to all the online instructors that had been through the OIES process since it began in Fall 2004. The vast majority of these instructors were adjunct

undergraduate instructors. All online instructors that had received an OIES evaluation since it began in 2004 were requested to complete the survey. There was no exclusion criteria such as, gender, age range or any special characteristics. Approximately 357 instructors received the survey. 183 responses were received for a response rate of 51.3%. Participants were not compensated.

**Measures** Data collection included participant demographic data and quantitative data from a Likert scale with statistical significance of responses reported. There were two qualitative open ended questions which were coded for themes and trends. The survey included demographic questions, objective Likert questions pertaining to instructor perceptions of the OIES, and subjective qualitative open response questions which invited rich respondent feedback.

**Data Collection** This research study was conducted through an online survey tool (Survey Share). There was an introduction to the survey explaining the survey, time estimation for completion, and risks involved. Because the survey tool was an outside vendor the research team did not have access to the email addresses of those who filled out the survey. When the reminder email was sent out - it went to all participants as there was no indication of who took the survey. The research pool and respondent sample was large enough to protect against demographic data being used to identify individual instructors. The survey return was anonymous. The survey was available for a two week window with the initial request and a one week reminder.

**Threats/Limitations** The research was limited to instructors who chose to participate in the study. No enticements were offered. As such, there was the possibility that only instructors who had a strong perception (either negative or positive) concerning the OIES chose to respond. To decrease technical writing or computer survey errors, a pilot study was conducted with Park University Distance Learning staff members. No pilot study members were a part of the actual research study pool or sample. Slight grammar adjustments to question phrasing were made as a result of pilot study feedback.

## **Results/Findings**

**Demographic Results** The majority of survey respondents were male (59%), age 40-59 (61%), Caucasian or self-identified as White (78%) and had taught for Park University for more than three years (81%). The majority also taught online for other schools/universities as either a full time faculty or adjunct instructor (59%). Most had attained a master's degree in their field (71%).

**Survey Results** Quantitative results were measured on a five point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree". When asked if the OIES process made them a more effective facilitator in course discussion postings that address course content, 37% agreed with the next highest response rate as strongly agree (21%). Respondents also credited the OIES with helping them understand the need to be active in their online discussion postings several days a week. On this item, 39% chose agree and 25% chose strongly agree. The OIES was cited as a useful tool in providing

professional development (peer mentoring, advice to improve skills and best practices) for online instructors as 45% agreed with this criterion. Forty-four percent agreed that the OIES process made them a more effective online instructor (18% strongly agreed) and 32% agreed that the OIES was a proper instrument to gauge online instructor abilities (24% were undecided and 17% strongly agreed).

Instructor perceptions of the OIES also revealed some overall splits between instructor agreement and disagreement. One item with such a split quantitative outcome was the question “As a result of the OIES process I became better at using the discussion postings to encourage students’ continued interaction and critical thinking.” On this item, 33% of respondents agreed, but 26% disagreed. This disparate outcome was confusing until the qualitative results were analyzed. The qualitative results indicated that a number of instructors disagreed with this criterion because they believed they were already using discussion postings to encourage interaction and critical thinking. As such, their perception was that the OIES did not contribute to their already positive online facilitation. Such a perception outcome was similar with the question which posed “As a result of the OIES process I use rubrics as a tool in my grading for online classes.” 37% agreed and 22% disagreed. Qualitative analysis clarified that the disagreement was that several instructors already used rubrics and did not credit the OIES with improving their online facilitation in this area. Timely grading and providing rich grading feedback comments were yet another area where some respondents agreed, but a similar number of respondents did not attribute this good online facilitation practice to the OIES.

Reviewing the overall quantitative analysis indicated that the majority of Park University online instructors perceived that the OIES improved their online facilitation by improving the online best practices (discussions and grading feedback). The majority of respondents also stated that the OIES improved their online instructor professional development.

### **Analysis/Conclusions**

#### **The OIES has a broader application and can be duplicated by other providers.**

- While the OIES is tailored for Park University, its core principles to aid and enhance best online practices can be duplicated by any institution. Many of the criteria in the formative and summative forms check for best practices in online learning as guided by Chickering and Ehrmann (1996).
- Formative and summative forms can be modified to meet term or semester schedules.
- Also, summative evaluations can be adopted as departmental or institutional portfolio requirements or supplements.
- The end results can also be used by institutions as part of institutional assessment for regional or professional accreditation agencies.
- The OIES is housed in a secure online portal, however, the course documents can be duplicated and archived by other institutions in word document form rather than through completely online forms.

**Encouragement of Course Enhancements** Instructors are encouraged to add supplemental content to enrich the core content. In fact, there are several criteria throughout the formative reviews which invite instructors to include additional information that is timely or relevant to the students in that particular section during the term. While the OIES does not measure course content, best practices encourage that an instructor enhance course material per term for course and student needs.

**Retention of instructors** The OIES is cost effective through instructor retention of adjunct instructors. Once a new instructor is familiar with Park policies and best online practices, University resources and time can be focused on maintaining and supporting these existing instructors rather than locating and training new instructors in a “revolving door” process. In sum, it is better to retain and retrain than to train anew. The OIES supports this administrative function by encouraging professional development of online instructors.

**Academic and administrative roles** As for the instructor evaluators, they are vastly beneficial to the University as they serve in academic and administrative capacities. For a new instructor, to have access to a mentor who possesses both academic and administrative knowledge is like a “one stop shop”. Many instructor evaluators become the “online knowledge expert” for their mentees as they can speak on administrative topics for the university. The instructor evaluators are also full time faculty and must adhere to the same policies and requirements. Thus, they are an excellent resource for online instructors.

**Annual review of the system** The OIES utilizes an annual process of revision and enhancement to reflect changes in Park policy, technology advancements, and/or theory and practice modifications. All the instructor evaluators converge in a face to face meeting to plan and delegate the necessary revisions. Furthermore, this annual revision includes an OIES Review Board comprised of a rich diversity of Park stakeholders (i.e. administrators, online support staff, full-time faculty, part-time faculty). Additionally, a focus group of OIES faculty who were evaluated during the prior year are solicited for their perceptions and suggested changes.

**Timely, ongoing feedback** The OIES gives ongoing, timely feedback to the instructor while they are teaching. Previous evaluation methods often made judgments at the end of the course, when the suggestions for improvement were not as relevant or could only be implemented in future terms. The OIES provides opportunity for immediate adjustments by the instructor during the active, current term.

**Rich data for administrative decisions** Many administrators are tasked with evaluating their faculty members. For administrators who are unfamiliar with the online teaching environment or who do not teach online themselves, they are deficient in knowledge of the particulars of effective online teaching. The OIES provides a rich packet of evaluation information tailored to online best practices. With better information, administrators can be confident in their retention and promotion decisions pertaining to



online faculty. In addition, having specialized evaluators for online facilitation allows administrators to focus on the administrative functions of the organization.

**Bridge of physical disconnect** Online learning invites an entirely new phenomenon to higher education. This phenomenon is that an instructor can teach a course and still be completely physically disconnected from the education environment. In the past, even part-time instructors had to physically visit the academic environment (classroom) to teach their courses. Whether the academic environment was on an actual college campus, or in a rented strip mall space, the physical space was dedicated to an education purpose. Now, teachers can facilitate their classes from their personal computers/homes and be fully disjointed from the “atmosphere” and camaraderie of academia. The OIES attempts to bridge this physical disconnect. Opportunities for contact with a mentor/evaluator through the formative reviews are ongoing throughout the term. For part-time instructors who are not regularly a part of the academic environment, this nurturing, guiding presence is necessary. In short, it allows physically separated faculty to feel part of the “group” that is academia.

**Use of new course delivery system** The OIES was developed to coincide with Park University’s conversion to a different online course delivery platform. As such, the OIES became an important tool during the transition phase. Instructor evaluators were instrumental in mentoring existing instructors on the enhanced features of the new platform.

**Ongoing faculty development of policy and best practice information** As practicing online instructors themselves, instructor evaluators teach their online peers how to best use course delivery platform enhancements when they are introduced. Already, there are numerous Park online instructors who include the OIES evaluations as professional tenure and promotion artifacts.

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## Appendix

Survey questions:

Demographic information:

**Discipline in which you teach for Park University?** (Business, Education, Humanities, Social Sciences, Biological Sciences)?

**Do you hold the terminal degree in your field?** (Yes, No)

**Amount of time you have taught ONLINE for Park University?** (Range: 1-5 terms or approximately 1 year; 6-10 terms or approximately 2 years; 11-15 terms or approximately 3 years; 16-20 or approximately 4 years; 21-25 terms or approximately 4 years; more than 25 terms or approximately more than 5 years.)

**Year in which I received my most recent OIES evaluation?** .

**Likert: Strongly disagree, disagree, undecided, agree, strongly disagree.**

### Organization

1. The Instructor Evaluator properly explained the intent of the OIES and how the OIES would affect my online adjunct teaching assignments at Park.
2. The Instructor Evaluator was effective in communicating the goals of the OIES: course facilitation, building community, discussion facilitation, grading and feedback, course climate and professional engagement.

### Climate / Building Community

3. The Instructor Evaluator set a professional tone for our interactions via email and phone.
4. The Instructor Evaluator responded to inquiries within 48 hours.

### Discussion Facilitation

5. The Instructor Evaluator provided information to use discussion postings to augment course content.
6. The Instructor Evaluator provided information to use discussion postings to encourage students' continued interaction and critical thinking.
7. The Instructor Evaluator emphasized that the instructor should actively post in all online discussion threads 4 days a week.

### Assessment, Grading and Feedback

8. The Instructor Evaluator provided information about using grading rubrics on course assignments.
9. The Instructor Evaluator provided information about using helpful, constructive, guiding feedback on student assignments.
10. The Instructor Evaluator emphasized that grading should be completed in a timely manner.

### Professional Engagement

11. The OIES contributed to my skills as an online instructor.
12. The OIES is a proper instrument to gauge online instructor abilities.
13. The OIES is a proper instrument to determine online scheduling assignments.  
(Who receives which course).

14. The OIES is a proper instrument to provide professional development (peer mentoring, advice to improve skills and best practices).

**Open response:**

15. From your perspective as an online adjunct instructor, what aspect of the OIES was the most beneficial? Please provide detail.
16. From your perspective as an online adjunct instructor, what aspect of the OIES should be improved? Please provide detail.