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Administrative or Faculty Control of Online Course Development and Teaching: A Comparison of Three Institutions

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Abstract

Higher education has enrolled an increasing number of students in recent years through programs utilizing online delivery. This increase has occurred at both non-profit and for-profit institutions. Almost every department at every institution has some involvement with online education. A comparison of three quite different institutions, all offering fully online programs, will be provided. This paper will highlight the differences in administrative versus faculty control of the online course development process and the teaching of online courses.

Keywords: higher education, online, administrative control, faculty control, online development, online teaching

1. GROWTH OF ONLINE EDUCATION AND STUDENTS

Higher education enrollments have remained flat for the past three years with overall enrollments in the fall of 2015 down 1.7% (Clinefelter and Aslanian, 2016). However, in 2016, 3.5 million students were still expected to attend online degree programs with enrollments by 2020 projected to be five million (Clinefelter and Aslanian, 2016). The average age of an undergraduate online student is 29 and 33 for a graduate online student—the online student population is getting younger (Clinefelter and Aslanian, 2016). No longer are online programs considered only for nontraditional learners. Younger students are participating at a higher rate—either out of the need for convenience or because they are exposed to technology from an earlier age.

A study conducted for the Babson Survey Research Group that surveyed 2800 institutions of higher education found that the greatest increase in online program offerings occurred in private non-profit institutions, increasing their rate of participation from 22.1% in 2002 to 48.4% in 2012 (Aslanian and Clinefelter, 2013). By 2012, a large proportion of institutions, 62.4%, moved to providing complete online programs (Allen and Seamon, 2013). Most of this increase occurred in institutions that had previously been offering online courses. Allen and Seaman (2013) found that 69.1% of chief academic leaders believed that online learning was critical to their long-term institutional strategy.

In the past, online programs were often associated with for-profit institutions but this is also changing. Private non-profit institution

online enrollments grew by 11.3% while private for-profit online enrollments dropped by 2.8% (Allen and Seaman, 2016). Public institutions now have the largest portion of online students, 72.7% of undergraduates and 38.7% of graduate students (Allen and Seaman, 2016).

Online enrollments have grown significantly in recent years and there is no reason to believe this will change. Online enrollments are projected to grow in future years while other higher education enrollments are predicted to decline. Enrollments translate to tuition dollars that contribute to the overall institutional budget. Online programs will continue to play a significant role in the sustainability of higher educational institutions.

2. ONLINE PROGRAM INFRASTRUCTURE

There are many different administrative structures that provide direction and support to online programs. The type of structure in place at an institution often varies with the type of institution and the size of online programs. More than 60% of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) use a central administrative unit headed by a senior administrator to manage their online systems and the larger the online delivery system, the more likely that there is a centralization of administration (Aldridge, Clinefelter, & Magda, 2013). It is also more common for schools with a large online presence to manage not only faculty development and instructional design services but to also provide marketing and student retention services (Aldridge et al., 2013). Private institutions exhibit a different infrastructure for the operation of their online programs. Forty-eight percent have an administrative unit dedicated to managing online education with 58% having a senior administrator responsible for online programs (Clinefelter & Magna, 2013). Again, the most common services provided by the centralized units are instructional design and faculty development and training (Clinefelter & Magna, 2013).

One of the most successful online systems currently in place is that offered by Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU). In 2012, SNHU had 17,000 students enrolled online and 32,000 by 2014 (Kingkade, 2014). But, by 2017, there were over 80,000 online students (www.snhu.edu/about-us). What may be most amazing about SNHU is that it is a private, non-profit institution with an on campus population of about 3,000. SNHU's online programs are operated by a completely separate business unit that is structured very much like a for-profit

institution. While SNHU prides itself in being a non-profit institution, it does have some similarities to for-profit models including a large use of adjunct faculty and an online operational unit that functions much like a business. Paul LeBlanc, the President of SNHU stated the following, "We are, in many ways, creating a new hybrid non-profit, one that melds a lot of the best operational practices of the for-profits with the values and mission of our non-profit status (and don't let anyone tell you there isn't a difference." (Kingkade, 2014).

This information shows that online program administrative structures can simply provide faculty training and support. Or, they can be a completely separate and autonomous business unit that handles all components for enrolling and retaining online students.

The survey of public institutions conducted by Aldridge et al., (2013) as well as the survey of private institutions by Clinefelter & Magda, (2013) found the following categories of services related to online programs: Enrollment management, bookstore, student retention and support services, academic advising, tutoring, marketing, orientation, LMS hosting, 24/7 technical support, ombudsperson, instructional design, and faculty development and training. At all public and private institutions that were surveyed, the most common services handled by the online program administration are the following: Faculty development and training, instructional design, and orientation (Aldridge et al., 2013; Clinefelter & Magda, 2013). At public institutions, it is more common for academic advising and student retention and support to be provided through the online offices (Aldridge et al., 2013) while at private institutions, more common for online to host the Learning Management System (LMS) and provide 24/7 technical support (Clinefelter & Magda, 2013). Both types of institutions indicated that the online services they considered to be most exemplary were instructional design and faculty development which were both most likely to be administered by a central online unit (Aldridge et al., 2013; Clinefelter & Magda, 2013).

3. INSTITUTIONAL EXAMPLES AND COMPARISONS

A review of three institutions as well as how they managed the foundations of their online programs, including: marketing, admissions, LMS, technology, program evaluation, student services, instructional design, and faculty development follows.

Institution A

Institution A is a large for-profit University with an initial online focus on graduate programs. It is regionally accredited. Institutional wide, fully online programs were first offered in the fall of 2006. Within a year, student enrollments approached 1000 and at this point in time, enrollments are approximately 3303 (www.princetonreview.com). At one point, the enrollments were reported at over 7,000 but the recent problems within the for-profit industry seem to have taken its toll on the institution's online enrollments.

There was a centralized, online business unit that operated virtually all aspects of the online program delivery. Academic control rested with the deans, department heads, and full time faculty within the University but there were many academic functions, including online faculty training and hiring, instructional design, and student advisement that were managed within the online business unit. Strong relationships and reporting lines were built between the business units and the main academic schools and departments of the University but the business unit held a large amount of control regarding the offering of online programs, including the daily operations of managing faculty and online teaching.

The criteria for admissions was set by the main academic entities within the institution but all marketing, recruitment, student advisement and support, LMS, 24/7 technology support, program evaluation, as well as all faculty services were conducted and managed by the online business unit which was headed by a businessman (not an academic officer) whose highest degree earned was a MBA. There was tension between the academic units and the business unit with the academic units believing that the business unit was most interested in profitability and the business unit believing that the academic units operated too slowly and without enough of a thought toward return on investment (ROI). The business unit was to earn a high level of profit which was invested into the corporate structure and into supporting the online business unit.

Full time faculty members were hired on an annual contractual basis. Part-time faculty members were hired only for a specific term with no guarantee of employment beyond the term. All faculty members completed an online training certification that was delivered via online by the business unit. In addition, the LMS collected a large amount of data on a daily basis that tracked faculty involvement in the course, including, the

number of days a faculty member was in the online course each week, the number of discussion postings submitted for each discussion, the timeliness of grading assignments, and all interactions with individual students and the class. Faculty members were required to contact students via phone at the start of each semester and to monitor all students each week for at risk behaviors—lack of participation or poor grades. Each morning a list would be produced that supplied the names of the faculty members who were not meeting the requirements for teaching—they may not have been in the online course for two days or may not be participating to the required level in the online course. This list was submitted to an academic department head within the online business unit who would then be required to contact the faculty members to advise them of the corrective actions that were immediately needed.

All faculty members were required to complete the online teaching certification prior to being assigned courses. Faculty members were approved to teach courses through a faculty credentialing office housed within the business operation. During the delivery of the course, if the faculty member was found to be involved less than was desired or was not meeting any number of teaching criteria, that faculty member was immediately counseled. But, if corrective action was not taken, the faculty member would be replaced during the actual term of teaching. The teaching process was structured, mandated, and with little flexibility, even at the doctoral level.

The design of the online courses was done utilizing a master syllabus that had been approved by the academic department head and full time faculty within the institution. However, there was a complete standardization of all online courses—an instructional design team worked with a person approved by the department head to be a subject matter expert (SME). This may have been one of the faculty members who taught the course once it had been created or the SME may never have taught or would teach the course. The SME worked with a team of instructional designers and media creation experts to create the complete online course. The SME created the content map with the design team and provided oversight and review to the content created by the design team. Once the course was completed, it was reviewed by the academic department. This process may have taken as long as six months though there was a huge effort for it to be completed in less than four months. A SME would receive approximately \$2500 for their services. Once the course was

ready for delivery, it was copied into every section being offered online, whether or not a full time or part time faculty member was teaching. All faculty members needed to teach the course as it had been designed with little flexibility. The concept of master course design and the standardized teaching requirements were viewed as ensuring a high quality student experience and avoiding a situation in which one student may have a robust online experience while another received little faculty interaction or inferior course learning materials. There was no faculty freedom regarding the teaching of content and there were tightly constructed requirements regarding teaching and responsiveness to students. This included a 24 hour response time for all emails and course messages, a 48 hour turnaround time for grading all assignments, and a requirement to be actively present five out of seven days each week with no two consecutive days absent from the online course.

Institution B

Institution B is a small, non-profit professional school whose major online initiative was created in 2006 to target graduate students at the master's and doctoral levels. It is also regionally accredited. Within a year, enrollments were close to 1000. Current enrollments are listed at 1308 as reported by the school to the U.S. Department of Education (www.collegetuitioncompare.com). When the initiative first began, there was a centralized online administrative unit that functioned as an independent campus, headed by a campus president who reported to the system president. The unit was headed by an academic administrator who had a terminal degree in higher education management and many years of on ground and online teaching experience. The president also had business operations background and experience with managing the profitability of online programs. However, the largest focus was on the academic quality of courses and programs, superior student support, and in providing best practices training to the faculty who taught online, full time and part time. Faculty members who taught online were hired from the on ground faculty, hired full time for the online campus, or were part time faculty on ground or part time faculty hired to teach only online. All faculty members were required to complete an online training certification course that was offered via online delivery through the online campus.

An academic dean reported directly to the online campus president with a dotted reporting line to the institutional Vice President for Academic Affairs (VPAA). All online programs that also had

an on ground offering were connected in terms of reporting to the on ground department heads while programs that were created to only be online were housed under the online academic dean within the online campus. All admissions criteria were approved by the VPAA. Marketing and advertising was done through a joint venture of the online campus and the traditional department of the institution to save startup costs. However, admissions, financial aid, registration, financial services, student advisement and support, LMS, 24/7 technology support, instructional design, and faculty training and management were handled by the online campus. The online campus was provided a high level of autonomy, both academically and financially with an expectation that there would be significant profitability from the online programs being offered returned to the educational system and that the online campus would be self-supporting.

Faculty members were not able to teach online (even if they were full time faculty on ground) unless they completed the online faculty certification course. In addition, they were required to maintain standards of best practice that included: weekly participation requirements-five days per week in the course with no two days in a row off, timeliness of the grading of assignments (all grading completed with grades posted within 72 hours after the assignment due date), and responsiveness to students, ex: less than 24 hours for email response. If a faculty member, full or part time was found to be performing to a less than stellar requirement, they would be counseled but if this was not effective, they could, in fact, be immediately replaced during the term. All full time faculty members of the institution were contractual employees and most were on multi-year contracts. However, this would not prevent them from being replaced in the online courses if they were not performing to the required level. Part time faculty members were contracted only for the current session and could also be replaced at any point during or after a session.

Instructional designers (IDs) were housed within the online campus. A master syllabus that was approved by the appropriate academic department was used by a SME, who was also approved by the appropriate academic department, to create the online course learning materials. The SME would complete the content map and the instructional designers would functionally create the online course materials and all associated media and utilization of technology. The process would take

approximately 16 weeks with a number of review steps built into the system. Once the course was created, the appropriate academic department head would complete the final review or assign another faculty member to complete the review. A completed course would entail the SME receiving approximately \$4,000 for his or her work. Once a course was deemed acceptable, the course would be placed into operation. Most often, the SME would also become the first instructor to teach the course online. Again, if multiple sections were being offered, the course would be copied across all sections to ensure the standard student experience and the same learning materials. There was little opportunity for flexibility with the online course content. Faculty could add materials to their courses but were not able to delete any materials from the standard course. This option did provide them with an opportunity to use a current event or something from a personal teaching interest without compromising the standard course offering. Once the course was offered for the first time, the SME with the assistance of an instructional designer would make any needed corrections to the online course content. There was a prescribed method of teaching with standard online course content duplicated across all sections.

Institution C

Institution C is a private, non-profit institution that began a focused online initiative in 2010. Online programs focused on enrolling undergraduate and master's level students though there has been a recent expansion to include one online doctoral program. In the fall of 2010, 74 students were enrolled online with enrollments increasing to a high of 922 by October of 2013. Online enrollments for the spring of 2017 were 628. The institution has undergone a number of changes in the administration of online programs, including several changes in management and multiple changes in oversight regarding the components of online program delivery. For example, at one point there was an academic administrator at the Vice Presidential level in charge of most components for online programs. Currently, there is a senior level administrator in charge of online programs but no longer is this person dedicated to online but instead manages multiple operations within the University. There have also been numerous changes to the management of operations such as LMS, 24/7 technology support, and admissions. Furthermore, the online offices are less involved in marketing and advertising than in the past. While it cannot be proven that these changes contribute to the decline of online

enrollments and there can be any other number of reasons, it is important to recognize these operational changes.

As mentioned, in 2010 an online initiative began with an institutional commitment to creating a large online presence at the University. The President indicated that full support would be provided to the online operational unit and that while it would function from within the academic affairs division, it would have sufficient autonomy to allow for rapid growth and flexibility. At the point of startup, the following operations fell directly under the online office: marketing for online programs with a cooperative relationship with overall marketing with the traditional marketing department (ex: website updates), admissions, instructional design, online faculty training and development, student services and support, LMS, and helpdesk support that was not yet 24/7. This placed online program components almost 100% under the jurisdiction of the online program division. Though it had been initially discussed to have a completely separate business unit created (much like SNHU), this had been vetoed by the President. It was also not long that a decision was made to house admissions within the traditional admissions department which had little experience in the recruitment of online students. Subsequently, admissions was moved back to the online division and then, again, ultimately moved back to the admissions department where it currently resides. Student services, instructional design, and faculty training remain within the online offices but all other components are now managed by the traditional departments within the University.

Before further discussion takes place regarding instructional design and faculty training and support, it should also be understood that both the full time and part time faculty members are represented by unions. While full time faculty members have been so represented for many years, it has only been in the past year that the part time faculty members voted to join a union. For the sake of this writing, focus will be on the collective bargaining agreement (CBA) of the full time faculty and its implications on online teaching and development. At this point, little is known regarding the implications of the part time faculty union.

All online course creation, online faculty training requirements, and faculty online teaching requirements are governed by the CBA and negotiated with the faculty union. The current contract provides many details regarding what

the online unit may require and enforce. These include: the academic department determines who is qualified to teach online courses; no single model of instructional strategies will be required with each academic department and the online unit working together to determine a model for each course; and, faculty must complete designated training and agree to course assessment (Collective Bargaining Agreement, 2017). There is also a minimum set of standards for all online courses at the University based upon Quality Matters, the Online Learning Consortium Quality Scorecard and the regional accrediting body of the institution (Collective Bargaining Agreement, 2017). While courses are to be based upon the departmental syllabus, there is no requirement for standard content in courses; two sections of the same course could have very different materials and requirements. In addition, there are no set rules regarding faculty participation in courses, response time to students, or turnaround time for grading assignments. The following could take place, and actually has: a faculty member sent email to students stating that after 5pm on Fridays s/he will not be available to students until 9am on Mondays, student assignments are not graded until the final week of the course, faculty have little or no participation in the weekly discussion questions, or, content has been created that is very basic with little opportunity for student-student or faculty-student interaction. There are no steps in place to formally counsel a faculty member (the academic department head can have a discussion with the faculty member) or to remove the faculty member from a course in the event of inferior instruction. In addition, once a faculty member has taught an online course, that course becomes their first right of refusal for the next three years even if they have a less than stellar performance in teaching online. All faculty mentoring or counseling is done by the traditional academic department head. The online office has no ability to discuss performance with any faculty members, full or part time. Faculty members are paid \$2448 for the development of an online course.

In the past, the use of part-time faculty was actually more attractive in a number of ways since part-time faculty did not necessarily have seniority. They had no protection from being replaced. The unionizing of the part-time faculty may significantly change this in the future.

While completion of training in order to teach online is required, the ability to hold faculty to the standards of best practices does not exist. Once faculty members complete their training and are

assigned to an online course, they are fairly free to teach as they wish.

Comparisons

Table 1 in the appendix shows the accountability of the main components of online program delivery and support across the three institutions. Table 2 shows examples of issues and some institutional responses.

The previous section and tables 1 and 2 exemplify the differences across the three institutions. Institution A placed the online unit clearly in charge of all areas of online programs. While there was coordination with the academic departments, clearly the ultimate decisions and operations rested with the online business operation unit. There was a standardization of all online courses, faculty performance requirements, and no special consideration was given to full time faculty who did not perform well in online teaching.

Institution B had much stronger connections to the academic departments and recreated an academic structure within the online campus itself. There was standardization of online courses, faculty performance requirements, and no special consideration given to full time faculty who did not meet performance requirements.

Institution C has the strongest connection to the traditional academic departments. While there is a requirement for faculty training and instructional design support supplied, there are few set standards for course design and the online department has no ability to enforce performance standards for faculty. In addition, faculty members are provided much more freedom regarding the manner in which they design and teach their online courses. They also have a stronger guarantee to remain teaching no matter their performance.

The Learning House, Inc., and EducationDynamics (2014) found that while academic rigor and faculty engagement are relatively equal between non-profit and for-profit institutions, faculty members at for-profit institutions were reported to be higher touch with a slightly higher level of engagement than faculty members at non-profit institutions, 70% versus 59% of faculty providing quite a bit or very much feedback on assignments. In addition 73% of students at for-profit institutions versus 62% of students at non-profits reported that their faculty used examples or illustrations to explain difficult concepts (The Learning House, Inc. and EducationDynamics, 2014). This may be

explained by the enhanced course design that is often found in the for-profit sector such as that which existed at Institution A.

It should be noted that none of these institutions were public. While there may be similar organizational structures at public institutions, these were not addressed in the comparisons offered here.

4. ONLINE STUDENTS' EXPECTATIONS

A study in improving student satisfaction with online faculty conducted by Schubert-Irastorza & Fabry (2011) showed that students want the following: timely and meaningful feedback with useful feedback on improvement; grades posted in a timely manner, well-organized sequence of instruction, clear explanations, encouragement, and instructor participation. This means that faculty members need to be well prepared with clear grading expectations, need to provide consistent course information, need to respond to students quickly, and, need to be actively present in the course through participation and establishing relationships with the students (Schubert-Irastorza & Fabry, 2011). Clearly Institutions A and B have these requirements for faculty in place while Institution C does not.

Trammell & Aldrich, (2016) found that students did not have different expectations regarding online versus on ground faculty—they wanted faculty to be approachable, enthusiastic, positive, knowledgeable, organized, consistent, friendly, quick to respond, and with strong teaching skills. The ability to meet these expectations online may be more difficult than the ability to meet them on ground. Furthermore, if there are no standards that must be met or for which faculty may be held accountable when teaching online courses, it is quite possible that some students will not receive the best experience.

5. HOW CAN ONLINE COURSES AND FACULTY MEET STUDENT EXPECTATIONS?

One method of ensuring that the expectations of online students are met is through quality course design and quality teaching. Quality Matters (QM) is a set of rubrics that contains eight general standards and 41 specific standards with the eight standards as follows: Course review and introduction, learning objective/competencies, assessment and measurement, instructional materials, learner interaction and engagement, course technology, learner support, and accessibility (Crews & Wilkinson, 2015). While QM centers mostly on quality online course

design, good teaching as researched by Chickering and Gamson, 1987, as found in Crews & Wilkinson, (2015), is described as that would do the following: encourages contact between students and faculty, develops reciprocity and cooperation among students, uses active learning techniques, gives prompt feedback, emphasizes time on task, communicates high expectations, and respects diverse talents and ways of learning.

Utilizing a system such as Quality Matters and requiring an adherence to the practices of good teaching can only serve to increase the quality of online course delivery. However, there are implications when dealing with union contracts as was explained in the discussion regarding Institution C. In an article written by McGahan, Jackson, & Premer (2015), it was found that instructional designers exhibited some difficulty in developing online course evaluation standards for faculty at the University of Nebraska due to the academic freedom protected under the faculty contract. This is the same problem at Institution C.

If course development is predominately left to the faculty to control, there could be a number of instances in which courses are not designed to standards such as those of Quality Matters. If there is little to no standardization or requirements, the quality of the course and its delivery are left completely in the hands of each faculty member. This is not the case at Institutions A and B but is at Institution C.

6. CONCLUSION

The more ability an organization has to ensure standards of design and practice, the more likely there is to be a positive student experience in the online classroom. Utilizing the best practices in instructional design leads to higher quality online courses. Training faculty in the best practices of online teaching further enhances the likelihood that the students will receive a quality instructional experience. While many faculty members reject the standardization of course design and the implementation of faculty requirements related to participation and feedback, research shows that such standards could further contribute to the successful student experience.

Institutions must continue to develop methods to provide students with quality courses and teaching while at the same time balance the professional treatment of the faculty. The faculty must recognize that they have a duty to provide students with the highest quality of instruction.

Hiding behind collective bargaining agreements or the concept of academic freedom is not the best way to provide a quality teaching experience. Taking advantage of technology, training, support, and working cooperatively with instructional designers will provide all constituents with the best possible experience and opportunity for teaching and learning.

There are a number of lessons to be learned from the reviewed organizational structures. An administrator might argue that the more control administration has the better. A faculty member might contend that they are most qualified to determine course content and teaching practices. The optimal situation to allow for the creation of quality online courses and the most effective online instruction is for administration and faculty to work together. Both should acknowledge that the student experience and subsequent learning should be the ultimate goal of everyone.

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Appendix

The following table shows the accountability of the main components of online program delivery and support across the three institutions:

Component	Institution A	Institution B	Institution C
Marketing	Online	Shared	Online and Shared
Admissions	Online	Online	Multiple changes
LMS	Online	Online	Online to IT
Technology	Online	Online	Online to IT
Student Services	Online	Online	Online shared with Student Affairs
Faculty Training	Online	Online	Online Shared with Teaching Center
Instructional Design	Online	Online	Online

Table 1: Institutional accountability for online

Issue	Institution A Resolution	Institution B Resolution	Institution C Resolution
Faculty online training	Training required	Training required	Training required
Faculty best practices adherence	Performance required	Performance required	No performance standards enforced
Instructional design	Course standardization across sections	Course standardization across sections	Minimum standardization across sections
Full time faculty rehire	Only if meeting performance standards	Only if meeting performance standards	Three year commitment
Removal from teaching an active course	Possible	Possible	Not possible

Table 2: Examples of issues