Full-Time from Afar

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Abstract

With the dramatic increase in the demand for distance learning opportunities in higher education, staffing demands have created a new opportunity for faculty members to teach full-time from remote locations. Previously, a significant portion of online instruction was taught by full-time faculty as part of their regular teaching load or as an economic opportunity for teaching "overload" courses. In addition, online classes are frequently being taught by adjunct, or part-time, faculty members. Increasingly, however, institutions are now found hiring full-time faculty members with the express intent of assigning them to teach fully online. Given the nature of asynchronous delivery, some institutions have begun allowing these faculty members to teach from afar. These non-residential full-time faculty members create a number of issues that affect students, faculty life, and distance learning administrators which must be addressed. Some ready-made solutions for these issues already exist, but other concerns still require attention.

Introduction

Distance learning has evolved from century old correspondence courses through the radio and television-based learning opportunities of the mid 20th century to the emergence of the internet and digital-based learning in the last decade of the 20th century. In more recent years, the spectrum of distance learning has broadened from a unique niche within higher education to an integral part of the educational process. Institutions of higher education have debated – and continue to debate - the pedagogy and the appropriateness of online learning. However, after more than two decades of experience, few institutions have not embraced this new form of learning as part of the learning process. In particular, an increasing number of institutions are offering full programs and degrees completely online.

Education is witnessing the rapid increase in the use of technology in distance learning. In the initial issue of the Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration (OJDLA), Hyatt (1998) noted the potential of a variety of learning formats and teaching strategies necessary for effective distance learning. Among the variety now available, such as Facebook, e-books, Podcasts, none appears more impactful than the evolution of Learning Management Systems (LMS). Learning Management Systems come in diverse forms and today's higher education institutions are increasingly utilizing them in order to accommodate increased enrollment and varied classes, supporting both student learning and faculty teaching (Dobre, 2015). So much so, that nearly 99% of higher education institutions have adopted an LMS at some level (Dahlstrom, Brooks, & Bichsel, 2014). Not surprisingly, LMS vendors have recognized the increasing demand for their products which has resulted in various forms of LMS such as proprietary LMS, open-source LMS, and cloud-based LMS (Center for Educational Innovation). To further emphasize the expanding role of LMS technology in higher education, an Educause Center for Analysis and Research (ECAR) survey, found that 85% of faculty use an LMS in most of their courses, particularly in those delivered online (Berking & Gallagher, 2016; Brown, Dehoney, & Millichap, 2015).

The rapid development of new technology surrounding distance learning has, however, out-paced the pedagogical practices of most faculty. New journals, such as the OJDLA, focused significant effort in providing guidance and information related to how to teach effectively via the online format. Accreditation agencies stressed the importance of providing learning formats that were appropriate and effective (SACS/COC 2018). In fact, for most of the past decade, pedagogy has attempted to catch-up to the ever-increasing sophistication of new learning technologies. Borrowing an analogy from Malthus, whereas technology increased geometrically, pedagogy has increased in a more limited arithmetic manner.

Aside from pedagogy and technology the equation of distance learning has a third component that Turoff (1998) noted in his early look at the future of distance learning. Turoff described this third component as administrative and management choices. While pedagogy trailed technology, administration and management models have been even slower to evolve. In particular, faculty staffing demands have proved sufficiently challenging as to slow the growth and even stifle the potential of distance learning within academic communities.

Online Faculty Staffing Challenges

Distance learning being a rather new phenomena, when compared to the long-standing method of classroom and laboratory delivery, one should not be surprised that adoption of this new method comes with several significant challenges for the students, faculty, and administrators. The majority of these challenges have been and remain the topic of numerous studies and research. One area of concern associated with administration that is increasing in its significance, involves online faculty staffing.

With the advent of digital distance learning, administrators generally assumed that full-time faculty members would embrace teaching the limited number of online courses that were being developed and offered. These pioneers would do so as part of their regular teaching duties or be compensated for course overloads. However, debates over course size, content rights, the demands of a different pedagogy, along with having to deal with learning management systems, limited the number of regular full-time faculty addressing the growing demand for distance-learning instructors (Lesht and Windes, 2011).

Administrators and public funding agencies saw distance-learning as an economical response to institutional growth. For example, at one time, Virginia legislators threatened to curtail new campus construction until a significant number of students could be served online (SCHEV, 2007). There was a belief that if a faculty member could lecture to a large seated class, then a significantly larger online audience could likewise be served. The economy of scale spurred administrative support for the growth of distance learning.

The growing demand for online faculty, however, did not keep pace with the pool of pioneers who lead the initial wave of online instruction. The traditional structure of academe combined with the generational differences between faculties trained in a pre-digital learning environment, slowed the availability of instructors who were comfortable with the new technology and pedagogies that were being developed in the late 20th and early 21st Century. In addition, many full-time faculty found online teaching to be more burdensome than traditional classroom teaching. Course preparation, especially the timing of preparation, was different from traditional instruction. In most instances, online preparation needed to be accomplished prior to a semester (Bates, LaBrecque and Fortner, 2016). Furthermore, the development phases of online course construction, the increased need for mechanisms of engagement, and new models of student learning and assessment lessened the appeal for both faculty and, to a lesser extent, administrators, who realized that distance learning was a more challenging environment than previously considered.

With limited tangible incentives given the traditional process of promotion and tenure, some faculty members resisted this type of instruction which resulted in fewer full-time faculty members willing to embrace this form of delivery. However, with the apparent economic benefits and potential budget stresses looming, the support for distance learning continued to expand, forcing administrators to employ adjunct instructors. Adjunct instructors tended to be more willing to pursue online teaching because of their desire for employment and often their more recent experience with the new technology.

Yakobski (2016) noted that among adjunct faculty surveyed, nearly 85% of respondents selected the lack of full-time faculty employment, or associated responses, as the reason for their dissatisfaction. They recognized that a willingness to venture into areas that others resisted could make a positive impression on administrators. Additionally, adjunct instructors were often more recent graduates of programs where some exposure and experience in distance learning existed, or that they were willing to acquire the requisite skills needed to teach online because of their routine exposure to digital technology in today's environment.

Full-time from Afar

The growing acceptance of online learning and the increased emphasis on it by major universities, coupled with the long-standing goal of tenure track faculty teaching a significant proportion of all instruction, administrators have not given up on full-time faculty substantially participating in distance learning. More and more, faculty job postings stipulate that new faculty should be exposed and equipped to teach in an online environment as component of their requisite skill set. Professional journals, such as the Chronicle of Higher Education, now include job descriptions which identify online learning experience, or at least expectations of early involvement in training, as part of an increasing number of position announcements.

This attention to distance learning capabilities is also beginning to surface in some professional development evaluations for tenure and promotion. Thus, over time an increasing proportion of faculty are becoming more willing to teach some online or hybrid version of online instruction as part of their regular teaching load. However, this leaves an important segment of the faculty, usually tenured senior faculty members, holding fast to their traditional methods and forms of instruction. Because of their seniority, especially on tenure and promotion committees, fully embracing and teaching multiple online course remains a somewhat risky business for many up and coming full-time faculty (Bates, LaBrecque and Fortner, 2016).

The growing success and acceptance of online education has not only provided the impetus for the development of fully online degree programs at many universities and colleges, but it has also resulted in an increasing number of fully online institutions, most of which are for profit. With a central facility, full-time administrators and related support personnel, institutions such as the University of Phoenix, Capella, Independence, Argosy and similar universities emerged as major players in higher education. They joined a growing number of existing colleges and universities which transitioned from smaller traditional schools to rapidly expanding distance learning dependent institutions with multiple learning sites in many cities and communities, again largely staffed by adjunct instructors.

Lesht and Windes (2011) noted that administrative views at the institutional, departmental, and personal levels can significantly influence acceptance and support of greater involvement of full-time faculty in distance learning. Because it is in the best interest of the institution to utilize their most seasoned and experienced instructors across all degree programs - including online programs - administrators continually seek to identify and implement new and more innovative ways of attracting more senior faculty members to participate in distance learning opportunities.

It is in this context that a new thought process is emerging. If the students can function and absorb course material from afar, why then can't their instruction emanate from remote locations as well? This form of employment has been expanding rapidly outside of the academic regime with positive results in attracting and retaining workforces. In 2013, Amabile & Kramer stated that the option of working remotely offers a number of benefits to the company and the employees at the same time (Amabile 2013).

Productivity benefits associated with remote employment in industry remain mixed, however. Singh et al (2017) note that the option of working remotely has been gaining acceptance and could prove to be an economic and more feasible option but cautions that more study is needed regarding some of its challenges before it can be considered an overall success. Likewise, teaching from afar poses both challenges and benefits for its three main constituents: students, faculty, and administrators.

Should institutions allow faculty to teach from a remote location and will students be more challenged to interact with their professor outside of the course itself? Will mentoring, advising and supporting online students become more stressful in such situations? While these are certainly issues that need consideration, the majority of students today have become accustomed to the digital approach to education so they are less likely to stumble when faced with these scenarios. For the student, the benefits vary. With a remote instructor, the student can feel more at ease that he or she is not missing something because, in this case, resident students would not have any more direct interaction with their instructor than they would. In addition, since the instructor is remote, the likelihood that the instructor's availability will increase because they do not have specific office hours (Benton, 2009).

The benefits of remote instruction for full-time faculty are fairly obvious. People place a premium on where they live. There can be significant tax savings for residing in a state that does not impose income taxes, for instance. As the faculty member ages, family needs often draw otherwise satisfied and effective workers away from their organizations. Being able to better balance the needs of family and their professional experience is of substantial benefit. Also, some senior faculty who have taught regularly in the distance learning environment are now approaching retirement age. Some of these faculty, wish to continue full-time teaching from afar, in lieu of retiring. Though continuing to teach as an adjunct instructor has been an option, such arrangements may not meet accreditation requirements or provide sufficient staffing for online programs, or satisfy the faculty members' financial needs. Another benefit impacts the ever-expanding requirement for scholarly activity. Research and publishing have long been a large part of full-time faculty's requirements for advancement and tenure and have often conflicted with the time constraints associated with teaching and administrative duties. The greater flexibility in time management that teaching from afar affords faculty is an attractive option for balancing these duties with continued scholarly efforts.

While the benefits of teaching from afar are more tangible for full-time faculty, the challenges are more subtle. Time zone differences pose logistical difficulties as does the potential loss of inclusion. Collegiality, the exchange of thoughts on various topics as well as pedagogy, occurs naturally in a university environment (Velez, 2009). Keeping this spirit of learning and interaction with colleagues becomes more difficult when teaching from afar. Technology is available to mitigate this challenge however the instructors would need to take the initiative to learn yet another form of technology. Functions such as library access, human resources, and budget and finance, are already available using technology, but most will agree that today's technology is not yet a perfect replacement for "being there". Of course, students who learn from afar have had to overcome similar challenges coordinating with the registrar and bursar offices, so it should not be considered a major obstacle for faculty.

The benefits of teaching from afar for administrators are significant. Remote faculty would allow administration to expand course offerings without the normal "brick and mortar", resulting in significant cost savings. The economics of the process would also allow administration to expand curricula and degree programs. And possibly most importantly, the use of remote workers has been found to positively impact employee recruiting and retention. Often institutions face a knowledge drain because they lose so many experienced faculty, for the reasons previously noted. The cost of replacing faculty is high, both financially and time-wise. In fact, it is not unusual to find that replacing a full-time faculty member can take six months to a year. During that period, course availability would need to be reduced or current faculty would have to agree to course overloads. Clearly, retaining effective, capable and credentialed faculty carries tremendous benefit to administration.

Of course, remote workforces pose challenges to administrators as well. It can be difficult to properly manage faculty members who are not in residence. The process has been described as "trying to be a leader with your hands tied behind your back while you're wearing a paper bag over your head" (Fisher and Fisher 2001). But with nearly 95% of Fortune 1000 companies participating in virtual work (Hoefling 2003) it is clear that with the proper training and incentives, this hurdle is relatively easy to overcome.

Future Opportunities for Teaching from Afar

Within higher education, the type of institution can play an important role in influencing the availability and form of full-time teaching from afar. Most non-profit institutions with established campuses want their faculty to be in-residence. Faculty are expected to teach and be involved in institutional committees, advise or mentor students, and to be active in supporting the missions of their institutions. This also involves scholarship and professional development activities. These expectations and requirements can act as barriers to full-time faculty teaching from afar.

But the rapid growth of online degrees and programs have created a demand for full-time faculty to teach in this environment. Accreditation requirements limit the proportion of course that can be taught be adjunct faculty members (SACS/COC, 2018). Though many institutions prefer their full-time faculty to be in residence, the availability in certain academic areas is such that having sufficient residential faculty teaching in these areas has created opportunities for full-time from afar faculty. This requires the administration in the non-profit environment to expand their traditional view and evolve some new and innovative solutions. A number of options are available for consideration.

The first option allows an individual to continue in their role as a tenured senior member of the faculty, meeting the full requirements of their position, while teaching remotely. University service, including department meetings, committees, advising and mentoring can be done online through a variety of electronic options, such as

Skype, Face-time and video conferencing. Digital office hours provide regularly scheduled opportunities for student experience and institutional involvement of valued colleagues who can continue to contribute to the professional reputation of the department and university through their scholarship and leadership.

A second option is for a current faculty member to accept a change in their professional status. Specifically, assignment as a lecturer or senior lecturer with a loss of tenure, an increased teaching load and a salary adjustment. In this role, the faculty member does not have any service commitments, committee or advising obligations. This option allows a faculty member to teach from afar, yet continue to support the academic mission of a department as a full-time faculty member. Administratively, this also provides academic continuity and provides some financial savings for the department. On the down-side, service and student support activities must be re-allocated to other members of the program.

A third option is to emulate the for-profit sector of higher education. Full-time from afar teaching opportunities are more abundant in this sector. Institutions, like American Public University and its sister institution American Military University routinely hire full-time faculty members who teach fully online and do not have to be physically located in a campus environment. In their job descriptions, these institutions stress:

"[a] quality learning experience for students by ensuring coherence in the discipline, rigor in the content, and relevance and currency to the practice ….. and contribute to a range of activities that support student learning outcomes, program quality and discipline integrity, all of which focus on student learning and retention" (APU, 2018).

Though these types of institutions predominantly hire part-time adjunct instructors, they hire full-time faculty to be program leaders and to serve as the foundation of their academic programs. In addition, these faculty members have administrative duties including department and committee meetings (online), professional development expectations and continued training in appropriate online pedagogy.

Summary and Conclusions

Teaching full-time from afar is an increasing option within the domain of distance learning. Consistent with the emerging trend of remote employment in a number of professional environments, full-time teaching from afar offers a number of opportunities and challenges for both administrators and faculty members. Given the growing demand for courses, programs and even complete degrees, institutions of higher education are expanding opportunities for full-time faculty to teach from afar. Administrators are better able to maintain program quality and continuity through full-time faculty. Some of these faculty will be full-time faculty who evolve from their traditional campus roles to remote practitioners of their craft. Others will be hired to teach exclusively as remote faculty as institutions expand their programs or develop new learning opportunities and options for an increasingly digital based market. The management and staffing procedures in these evolving environments will challenge higher education to adjust its views and policies for dealing with a changing professoriate. Similarly, faculty in this emerging learning environment will experience similar demands and opportunities.

Full-time from afar may be a new frontier today, but it is likely to be a more significant component of higher education in the future.

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