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Ethical, Academic, and Practical Considerations for Online Teaching: Does the Search for Quality and Integrity Come at the Expense of Academic Freedom?

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Abstract

The Internet has evolved to be the new revolution in educational delivery. A 2008 Sloan Consortium report on the state of online education in the United States revealed some startling information. For example, at the turn of this century approximately 10 percent of post-secondary enrollments at degree-granting institutions were in online courses or programs; but, by 2007, the number had grown to over 20 percent. This growth translated into an average annual increase of nearly 20 percent at a time when overall enrollment growth in higher education averaged only around 2 percent. Schools recognized that students were voting with the click of a mouse, and, by 2007, the percentage of schools defining online education as critical to their long-term strategy had grown to more than 70 percent of public institutions and more than 53 percent of private colleges and universities. Online courses and programs are now offered by universities large and small, including many of the nation's most prestigious schools. As schools throughout the nation have looked to the rapidly evolving technological medium as a solution to education delivery challenges and as a way to expand existing education markets, the medium and its accompanying technologies have evoked mixed reactions among students, administrators and faculty. The pervasiveness and visibility of online instruction has served not only to magnify its strengths (e.g., the benefits that accrue to an asynchronous format) but to reveal areas of concern (e.g., maintaining academic/ethical integrity, especially in online testing, and issues relating to oversight and academic freedom) as well. It is the purpose of this paper to illuminate and elaborate on these complex issues from administrative, practical, ethical and academic perspectives, with a view toward generating further discussion on overcoming the evolving tensions related to online teaching.

KEY WORDS: Academic integrity; online learning; academic freedom; asynchronous learning; testing integrity.

With the growth of online education delivery, the face of public administration education is changing. By the change of the millennium, the Internet had clearly evolved to be the new revolution in educational delivery. Online learning at the post-secondary level has come of age. A 2008 Sloan Consortium report on the state of online education in the United States revealed some startling information. For example, at the turn of this century approximately 10 percent of post-secondary enrollments at degree-granting institutions were in online courses or programs, but by 2007 the number had grown to over 20 percent. This growth translated into an average annual increase of nearly 20 percent at a time when overall enrollment growth in higher education averaged only around 2 percent. Schools recognized that students were voting with the click of a mouse and by 2007 the percentage of schools defining online education as critical to their long-term strategy had grown to more than 70 percent of public institutions and more than 53 percent of private colleges and universities. Online courses and programs are now offered by universities large and small, including many of the nation's most prestigious schools (Allen and Seaman 2008).

Another major change in higher education that has impacted the proliferation of online courses and programs has been the growth of competition. The limitations of geographical location have largely been erased via the Internet. Competition for students in online courses, as well as the proliferation of online offerings, has been especially intense among schools providing educational opportunities for enlisted members of the military. Due to their deployment challenges, the military relies on online programs, which are used to support military recruiting and retention and to provide crucial professional development for service members.

Schools throughout the nation have looked to this evolving technological medium as a solution to education delivery challenges and as a way to expand existing education markets. The MPA-IG (Inspectors General) program at John Jay is such an example; that particular program even requires student attendance at a conference of the Association of Inspectors General (Hamilton 2010).The focus on technology and its inherent flexibility has evolved to the point where some schools offer courses to be completed on handheld personal digital devices (Meine 2008). Despite this rush to distance learning, the medium and its accompanying technologies have evoked mixed reactions among students, administrators and faculty, and have created a number of new challenges.

It is clear that regardless of the reactions to online distance learning as a delivery system, its use is expanding at an extraordinary pace. As Internet-based education has transitioned from its initial status as "the classroom of the future" to a pedagogical mainstay, it has been subjected to significant scrutiny by its proponents and detractors alike. Unlike its most prominent predecessors in distance education (e.g., telecourses and correspondence courses) the pervasiveness and visibility of online instruction have served to magnify its strengths (e.g., the benefits that accrue to an asynchronous format) as well as its weaknesses (e.g., maintaining academic integrity, especially in online testing).

For the delivery of academic information online to have become not only a viable, but highly regarded and widely utilized pedagogy, the technology had to be affordable, efficient, and user-friendly for all stakeholders. As a result, and by necessity, the initial concerns were focused on the efficacy of such entrepreneurial systems as WebCT and Blackboard. Once most of the concerns regarding delivery technology were resolved, a number of significant unanswered logistical and academic questions began to emerge. With these thoughts in mind and considering the rapid academic migration to online education, now might be the opportune, if not overdue, time to examine the issues that are likely to impact the future directions of Internet-based instruction.

Academic Issues and Concerns

Having been actively involved for more than 15 years with the proliferation of Internet-based, post-secondary instruction, as both online instructors and administrators responsible for development and supervision of online courses and programs, it is the authors' contention that a number of important issues are yet to be addressed.

Given the rapid rise in the popularity of online courses including so-called "hybrid or blended" (some mixture of face to face and online delivery) courses, there appears to be a significantly different, arguably even disproportionate degree of oversight of instructors teaching online courses compared to those teaching in the traditional in-class formats, even when the instructors are the same individuals teaching the same course. As a result, there appears to be a growing belief that faculty autonomy is being subjugated to administrative imperatives in the

oversight of online courses vis-à-vis their in-class counterparts. Perhaps of equal importance is the well-publicized concern that online courses, by their very nature are inferior to their in-class counterparts (Stross 2011), a concern that has been translated into differential policies concerning federal support for students pursuing online programs using federal student aid, and in recent veterans education funding programs. Not surprisingly, suggestions that various aspects of online courses might actually be superior to their traditional counterparts (e.g., the Discussion Board, a marquee component of online courses which, unlike the vast majority of in-class discussions, can be structured so that every student in the class, and not just a verbose few, actively participates in the discussion) are rarely mentioned and, if so, are often summarily dismissed, despite the fact that a study by the US Department of Education suggests that online classes, whether taught completely online or blended, produce stronger student learning outcomes than do classes with solely face-to-face instruction (Means et al. 2010, 18).

Faculty Concerns

1. Increased workload and effort to develop and conduct online courses as noted during a 2008–09 survey of over 10,000 faculty members (Faculty Views about Online Learning 2010).

2. Differential criteria for evaluating instructors, developing syllabi and establishing exam parameters.

3. Difficulty in obtaining adequate numbers of student evaluations resulting in inequities in evaluating faculty performance. Whereas in traditional classes there can be a reasonable assurance that most or all students complete an evaluation, online evaluation responses tend to be meager at best.

4. Differential processes for the handling of student complaints and for academic advising.

5. Inequities in the use of "Administrative Privileges" for observing an instructor's performance in the "classroom."

6. Administrative influences on course content (e.g., requiring "group projects" and attempts to mandate discussion processes and response times) and for example limiting the desired ability of faculty to retain their freedom to design their courses as they see fit.

7. Mandated examination and proctoring processes to include examination length and timing.

8. The imperative that distance learning instructors undergo specialized training, complete with competency testing for technological "innovations."

9. Inequities in course scheduling and student enrollment parameters and online posting of individual syllabi for multiple sections of a course, which enables students to opt for sections with less rigorous requirements (some of which may be taught by part-time faculty who perhaps may be of the opinion that maintaining their popularity with students is a necessity for their continuing employment).

10. Extensive use of adjunct/part-time faculty who are often not located on or even near the school in question, resulting in inequities for office hours and administrative requirements.

11. Differences in office hour and administrative requirements for full-time online versus full-time in-class faculty.

12. Pressure to include attractive "bells and whistles" in the delivery of online courses, which, when included in the Student Evaluations, can potentially and differentially influence the perception of faculty performance in the eyes of students and administrators.

13. The continuing debate about quality differences between online and face-to-face courses, with each side claiming inferiority of the other (Milliron 2010).

14. Professors having their teaching practices evaluated by non-faculty, course design staff.

Administrative Concerns

1. The competitive education environment requiring new marketing strategies focused on student enrollments and retention (Aldridge 2010).

2. The pressure to ensure comparable quality of all courses, regardless of delivery format, in order to satisfy regional and specialized accreditation criteria, oversight from funding sources, etc.

3. Extensive pressure to standardize course content and formats, especially among universities that utilize large numbers of adjunct faculty to teach online courses.

4. Extensive administrative policies for ensuring that online and in-class instructors are comparably involved with their students in the teaching-learning process.

5. Questions of intellectual property ownership.

6. Concerns regarding faculty compensation and overhead costs.

7. How to equate office hour requirements in-class versus online.

8. Documenting/monitoring attendance and course participation through use of software and other methods.

9. Competing pressures with regard to policies and practices relating to online course enrollments.

Mutual Concerns

1. Relentless pressure for frequent and timely communication with students, far more frequently than might be expected in a traditional class setting, leading to an "always at work" expectation for faculty and staff.

2. The pressure to structure online courses in ways to demonstrate frequent faculty student interaction.

3. The logistical challenges for both faculty and administrators to ensure testing integrity.

4. Some of these have been addressed by creating a mandatory "meaningful convening event" whereby instructors can actually meet their online students and the students themselves can interact not only with each other by with other professional in the field. Such events also provide the opportunity for instructors to serve as proctors for their own exams (Hamilton 2010).

Student Concerns

1. The additional expense involved with online testing options, such as equipment purchases (Remote Proctor Devices) or testing fees at commercial testing centers (e.g., Sylvan Learning Centers, ProctorU).

2. Frustrations that arise when legitimate technical problems (lock outs, loss of data) occur during testing, even to the extent of students having to re-take exams.

3. Personal privacy issues that can result from the utilization of technology designed to ensure testing integrity in online courses.

4. The realization that online courses may well require more effort and self-motivation due to regular interaction requirements for each student (lack of student participation becomes obvious and is recorded in online classes).

Conclusion

While most discussion of online delivery of academic courses and programs seems to focus on quality questions, delivery and teaching strategies, and technology innovations, this paper seeks to encourage a focus on other important issues for online education as well. With the proliferation of online-based programs and courses, after having highlighted concerns regarding the differential treatment of online versus traditional classes, it is the authors' conclusion that the initiation of a more formal investigation of these issues at the graduate and undergraduate levels is not only warranted but is at least somewhat overdue. To that end, it may be the appropriate time to consider more formal data-gathering initiatives designed to determine the current status of online courses and programs, including an estimate of the number of courses (by subfield), the demographics of faculty who teach the courses (adjunct or full-time by rank), the availability of undergraduate online majors and minors as well as ascertaining the attitudes of faculty, administrators, and students regarding the quality and quantity of online courses and/or programs. It can certainly be argued that this online course and program proliferation and its

impact on faculty, students and program administration should be a matter of concern and further examination by relevant academic and professional accrediting organizations.

An important part of any such investigation should be to assess if there is a disparity in the treatment of online delivery versus face to face, and if so why. In other words, is there distrust of the online environment in the academy, and is there cause for concern or is the issue just a resistance to or concern about change. This evaluation is critical in the face of the rush to online education noted at the beginning of this paper.

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