Online Learning in Schools of Business: Deans' Perspectives on Faculty Issues

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Abstract: The demand for higher education is increasing, thereby widening access and creating a more diverse student body. Institutions are implementing flexible learning strategies, such as online courses, to accommodate students' responsibilities and time demands. This enables them to have choices in how, what, when, and where they learn, and extends opportunities to gain knowledge beyond a privileged few. Business schools in particular are embracing online degrees to meet demand as the programs they offer attract more students than any other course of study in many contexts. However, institutions face challenges when implementing organizational change, and particularly those that disrupt traditional practice. Deans of business schools must find ways to encourage faculty to redesign their courses for online delivery and teach online; they must also to take steps to ensure quality. The purpose of this study was to explore the current practices of business schools for online learning, particularly how deans are addressing faculty issues, and to determine the impact of these practices. Findings indicate that demand is outpacing offerings. Resistance, workload, and compensation are continuing issues. Quality assurance and training predicted the number of faculty teaching online but the former did not increase faculty confidence.

1 INTRODUCTION

Due to the benefits of post-secondary education, countries which traditionally had elitist higher education systems are expanding access to a diverse range of learners (Evans et al., 2017; Ma et al., 2016). This is increasing demand—a total of 412 million students is expected to be enrolled by 2030 compared to 99 million in 2000 (Ossiannilsson et al., 2015). Expanded access is also resulting in changes in student demographics as these U.S. enrollment statistics illustrate: 26% of students work full time, 36% work part-time, 38% attend classes part-time, 44% are non-White, 45% live off campus, 62% receive federal financial aid, 27% are between the ages of 22 and 29, 10% are between the ages of 30 and 39, 28% have children, 56% are female, and 14% study online (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, n.d.).

These students need options for "how, what, when and where they learn" (Higher Education Academy, 2015, para. 1) so that they can successfully balance multiple responsibilities. Few students have the ability to attend university full-time without some type of concurrent employment. A common approach for addressing the needs of today's students is

distance education, which most typically takes the form of online coursework. The primary purpose of distance learning is to make "knowledge accessible to more than just a privileged few" (Kentnor, 2015, p. 30). Diverse students, including those who are non-traditional (over the age of 25), (Radford, 2011; Wladis et al., 2015) have low grade point averages, are ethnic minorities, and are first-generation (neither parent attended college) (Ashby et al., 2011; Johnson and Palmer, 2015; Wladis et al., 2015) are the most likely to enroll in online courses in U.S. higher education institutions.

Business schools in particular are embracing online degrees as a strategy to meet demand as the programs they offer attract more students than any other course of study in higher education institutions in the U.S., Canada, Australia, and the UK (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017; Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2018; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2017; Statistica, 2018). Leaders in these schools must find ways to encourage faculty to redesign their courses for online delivery and teach online; they must also to take steps to ensure quality. This study explores the current practices and strategies of business schools for online

learning, particularly how leaders are addressing faculty issues, and the impact of these practices.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Various forms of student diversity affect success in both traditional and non-traditional modes of learning. Thirty percent of students in U.S. higher education institutions leave during or after their first year and 40% of those who continue beyond that period fail to graduate (Morshed, 2016). Such statistics differ by country. Only 6% leave during or after the first year in the UK and less than 1% fail to complete; however, 95% of traditionally-aged university students enroll in U.S. higher education institutions and only 6% in the UK (Morshed, 2016), suggesting more opportunity for widening access.

Student success in online courses, in particular, is an extensive concern. Forty-five percent of chief academic officers (CAOs) in the U.S. feel that retention (e.g., course completion and continued enrollment) is more difficult in online courses than in face-to-face courses and 68% view these courses are requiring more discipline (Allen and Seaman, 2015). As a result, some institutions restrict certain populations from taking online courses in general, online courses deemed to be difficult, or the number online courses (Liu et al., 2007).

Faculty are critically important to the success of online initiatives, yet many are resistant (Allen and Seaman, 2016). One-third of CAOs report that this is a significant barrier (Allen and Seaman, 2016). Reasons for resistance are predominantly concerns with quality or a perceived lack of institutional support (Carlson and Carnevale, 2001; Shelton & Saltsman, 2005). Even CAOs themselves feel that the quality of online learning is not comparable to face-to-face; 71.4% rated it as good or better in a U.S. national survey, but this number has declined from previous years (Allen and Seaman, 2016). In spite of this, academic leaders feel compelled to increase online offerings to meet demand, expand outreach, compete with other institutions, and generate tuition.

Professional guidelines and standards for implementing online learning initiatives in higher education indicate the importance of quality standards, the provision of appropriate technology, professional development opportunities, and regular course review and improvement processes (Community College Research Center, 2013; Institute of Higher Education Policy, 2000; Lenert and Janes, 2017). However, the impact of these practices on institutional goals such as increasing enrollments, the percentage of faculty teaching online, stakeholder confidence in online courses, or student success is largely unknown. The results of one survey indicate that 55% of faculty members disagree or strongly disagree that online and face-to-face courses are comparable in terms of student learning outcomes (Calderon & Jones, 2016), indicating that much remains to be done to address this issue.

Faculty are responbile for the content and design of online courses, including how content is presented; learning activities, interaction; and feedback and grading, although they may be supported by trained instructional designers. Additionally, peer review processes for online courses, typically based on a standardized rubric, aim to provide consistency in course features and ensure quality (Budden and Budden, 2013; MarylandOnline, Inc., 2018). The Quality Matters rubric, for example, consists of standards related to several different course aspects: introduction, learning objectives, assessment, instructional materials, interaction/engagement, technology, learner support, and accessibility (MarylandOnline, Inc., 2018).

Faculty in business fields, trained to use the Quality Matters rubric, felt that its adoption resulted in more visible information to students and clearer expectations, consistency in the look and feel of a course, and improved course structure; however, they did not feel it specifically reflected the needs of business education (Budden and Budden, 2013). A disadvantage of rubrics such as Quality Measures is that they do not examine how a faculty member actually delivers a course, but focus on only course design (Piña and Bohn, 2014). One aspect of online course delivery is ensuring that faculty members maintain currency with technology-assisted learning, its strengths and weaknesses, and how it can contribute to learning (Lenert and Janes, 2017). Other aspects might involve faculty-student interactions and faculty presence. Online course evaluation processes have yet to focus on such issues, possibly because faculty are evaluated in other ways.

The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) published an international distance learning quality document, which is distinct from its accreditation standards, but which provides institutions with guidelines for distance learning. This document emphasizes the importance of faculty commitment to online learning and the need to provide faculty with design and delivery training; it also indicates that faculty are responsible for curriculum and delivery platform decisions and evaluation (AACSB, 2007, 2013; Gaytan, 2013). These principles are critical as "presidents may dream

visions and vice presidents may design plans, and deans and department heads may try to implement them, but without the support of the faculty members, nothing will change" (Bates, 2000, p. 95). Leaders much remember and honor the faculty role to ensure the success of online learning initiatives.

Some feel that online education has become mainstream rather than a new method that needs to be justified (Kentnor, 2015), and that it may be an improvement, or even at some future point, a replacement for traditional face-to-face delivery (Arasaratnam-Smith and Northcote, 2017). Others observe that online education has been aimed at access until recently, and is now focused on improving educational quality and determining how knowledge is "transmitted, preserved, and generated" (Sener, 2012, p. 124). A perhaps unexpected outcome of online learning has been greater interest in instructional practices and improving teaching and learning across all delivery modes (McPherson and Baccow, 2015), which supports this future vision of online learning contributing to better understanding of knowledge acquisition across the board.

Leaders responsible for online learning acknowledge the importance of faculty training and instructional design services (Fredericksen, 2017), yet is it unknown if or how these strategies and others impact the achievement of strategic initiatives for online learning. Leaders must identify not only how to get faculty on board, but how to help them develop motivation and skills for online learning and future educational innovations. A larger goal is to improve teaching and learning across delivery modes to ensure that students are graduating with the outcomes employers expect (Association of American Colleges & Schools, 2015; Schneider, 2015).

3 METHODS

This study involved a survey of deans at AASCB-accredited business schools. The survey focused on institutional strategies, challenges, and successes based on issues identified in the literature related to online learning. Factual information regarding enrollments, degree levels, programs, length of time online learning has been in place, percentage of faculty teaching, and other particulars were also collected. The survey had a combination of forced choice and open-ended questions.

A total of 621 deans were invited to participate in the online survey and e-mailed a link. E-mail addresses were located through an internet search based on a list of 800 AASCB schools. Of those for whom e-mail addresses were obtained, 474 were in the U.S. and 147 outside of the U.S. In total, 414 e-mails were successfully delivered, 121 surveys started, and 84 completed. The majority of respondents were in the U.S. with 21 from outside the U.S., (e.g., Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Hong Kong, Republic of China, Mexico, Chile, Peru, and Lebanon). Quantitative survey data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis techniques with dummy variables created as needed. Qualitative data was analyzed using the constant comparative method to identify themes and subthemes in the deans' comments to determine those that were most representative across schools.

4 RESULTS

In this section, we present factual program information, descriptive statistics, and regression analyses based on the survey results to inform the purpose of the research—to explore current practices for online learning in AACSB-accredited schools of business and determine their impact.

Qualitative data related to the identification of institutional strategies for online offerings indicated that predominantly, deans were instituting distance learning to increase enrollments and provide students with flexible access to education, as noted in this representative quotation: "Distance learning is an initiative in our strategic plan to grow enrollment and offer students more flexibility in completing their degrees." Another noted that "demand for online was growing in popularity, so we knew we had to respond." Thus, there is a clear need to increase the number of faculty teaching online to increase student access. Survey results indicated that an average of approximately 43% of full-time faculty in the respondents' schools of business was teaching online.

The majority of schools of business participating in the study (44%) had been offering online courses and degrees for 1-5 years, with 32% from 6-10 years, and 25% over 10 years. As such, the majority were relative newcomers to the online modality. The length of time online courses had been offered predicted the approximate percentage of full-time faculty who were teaching online, demonstrating that programs can expect a gradual increase in faculty involvement over time. The regression results showed that: $R= 0.26$, $R^2= 0.07$, Adjusted $R^2= 0.05$, $F(1,79)=5.53$, $p=0.02$.

A key issue identified by the deans in the qualitative responses was faculty resistance. "Still challenged to address negative perceptions about

online and faculty resistance." One explained further: "Our current faculty are experts in a different kind of teaching and learning, and the teaching philosophies, strategies, and tactics they have learned are not always well-suited to an online environment." Another agreed, stating: "The faculty are resistant to training and development efforts. Some faculty are not very good at teaching online." A third dean commented: "Senior faculty sometimes have a difficult time reacting to change and want to turn the clock back to only face-to-face. Other senior faculty have recognized that creating online courses improves their face-to-face courses. The more recent hires have embraced online." These comments illustrate variation in faculty members' reactions.

One reason for resistance was quality. One dean described his key challenge as "HUGE faculty resistance—faculty think that an online course is an inferior product." Interestingly, deans indicated that quality was impacted by the faculty themselves. As noted earlier, deans shared that in some cases, "faculty are not that good at it [teaching online]." As such, while quality can be controlled through course design, the faculty themselves may doubt their skills or lack confidence in their mastery of online pedagogy or technology.

One way to address resistance and the development of needed skills is training. Training was required by 58% of the schools represented and optional in 42%; training positively predicted the percentage of full-time faculty who taught online, which could be partially explained by the fact that in some cases, faculty were required to complete training before being allowed to teach online. In several cases, deans indicated that "all faculty must complete training before being allowed to be assigned to a distance course." In some ways, this strategy of requiring training could act as an incentive for those wanting to teach online. Even though it could be perceived as a barrier by others, the results indicated that training predicted higher percentages of full-time faculty teaching online, with R= 0.29, R²= 0.09, Adjusted R²= 0.07, F(1,73)=6.93, p=0.01.

One dean commented that in cases where training was available but optional, "faculty do not take the opportunity." The same dean observed that the more courses offered online, "the less [he sees] of faculty in the building," suggesting that changes in organizational culture were also evident. In other cases, respondents indicated that developing faculty members' online teaching skills also resulted in these skills being transferred to their face-to-face courses. "Faculty develop better instructional skills and take those skills back to their campus classes." In other

words, leaders and faculty must be prepared for a range of consequences as the result of increasing the prevalence of online learning, some which may be considered less than ideal by some stakeholders.

Accompanying the need for training were "bureaucratic challenges to instructor pay and incentives outside of traditional model." Frequently, comments pertaining to this were made in connection with training as in the following two quotations: "Work load and compensation as well as adequate training support is an ongoing issue." "Faculty need training, development, compensation and recognition to ensure high quality online education." The most common recognition for faculty completing training was a stipend (45%). In spite of this, however, recognition for completing training did not predict approximate percentage of full-time faculty in the school of business who taught online, with R= 0.12, R²= 0.01, Adjusted R²=0.00, F(3,51)=0.24, p=0.87.

Reasons for resistance were also explained as follows: "We have experienced considerable push-back because of the additional effort required and the negative impact that this time has on the completion of research." Another dean agreed, indicating this challenge: "Coordinating course offerings across departments to support a variety of students while ensuring faculty are not overloaded and we maintain the required balance of research/tenure and tenure track faculty and adjunct instructors to support the need of online programs." Both statements indicate that balance is important—the balance of teaching and research and the balance of full- and part-time instructors interacting with students in online courses.

The mean percentage of online courses offered by the schools of business in the study was 22.72%, which is relatively low. In schools where deans indicated their course enrollments were increasing, the percentage of full-time faculty teaching online was not increasing, perhaps suggesting the need to hire part-time faculty to fill the gap. A regression to explore this showed R= 0.15, R²= 0.02, Adjusted R²= 0.01, F(1,78)=1.80, p=0.18.

These issues concerning the faculty role and the ratio of full- and part-time faculty are critical to faculty acceptance and involvement. Faculty will most value what is rewarded, particularly when tenure and promotion are at stake. In other words, leaders must ensure that reward systems are aligned with strategic planning and goals.

One approach to overcoming resistance is to take specific measures to ensure quality. An overwhelming 89% of respondents reported using some type of quality evaluation procedures for online education. The use of these standards predicted the

approximate percentage of full-time faculty in the school of business who taught online. As such, this is an effective practice, with R= 0.18, R²= 0.03, Adjusted R²= 0.02, F(1,78)=2.75, p=0.05, one tailed.

However, although 42% of respondents indicated evaluation processes increased faculty confidence with another 36% neither agreeing or disagreeing, regression analyses demonstrated that these evaluation processes did not increase faculty confidence in the quality of online offerings, with R= 0.08, R²= 0.006, Adjusted R²= 0.00, F(1,68)=0.40, p=0.53.

5 DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Fewer than half of the faculty in the schools represented, on average, is teaching online. This is an issue due to increasing demand for online programs and the need for business schools to provide flexibility and access to diverse populations of learners and to remain competitive with other schools. Findings also indicate that school of business deans are struggling with some common issues, namely faculty resistance in a variety of forms, balancing the number of full- and part-time instructors, the need for faculty training and professional development to foster appropriate skill sets, and quality. These issues also reflect those reported in the literature.

The main takeaways from the research are summarized and discussed below.

- The majority of business schools have been offering online education for 1-5 years. As such, they are relatively new to this modality and their capacity and expertise is evolving.
- The number of faculty teaching online is not keeping pace with increasing online enrollments. This is a significant issue and requires leaders to explore reasons for this (e.g., resistance) and implement appropriate strategies. The latter might include instructional design support, hiring new faculty with the expectation they will teach online, requiring training to build needed skills, nurturing faculty-to-faculty mentoring, aligning rewards or performance evaluations with desired behaviors, or other incentives. Otherwise, more part-time faculty will need to be hired, which may result in an imbalance in the ratio of full- and part-time faculty teaching online.

- Faculty resistance is a significant barrier to expanding online offerings. Reasons vary, but predominantly include the following:
  o Faculty do not possess the skills for it.
  o Faculty believe that the quality of online learning is lower than traditional face-to-face learning.
  o Senior faculty tend to be more resistant to online delivery than junior faculty.

Those leading online initiatives might consider identifying the root causes of faculty resistance in order to determine how to address this issue. Are the faculty blaming quality simply because they do not want to teach online? Do they not want to teach online because they are satisfied with the status quo? Do they not understand that online learning is more than grading assignments and that they can actually teach (albeit in different ways)? Are they worried about a lack of interaction with students? Greater understanding of the issues is needed and better communication about what online learning entails.

- Teaching online is perceived as increasing faculty workload and negatively impacting research time. As such, schools of business must prioritize their strategic initiatives for online learning and find ways to fund them. This might include decreasing class size, hiring teaching and research assistants, and providing student and faculty support staff and resources. Additionally, institutional and program mission statements must be guide what activities are prioritized and rewarded and the balance expected between teaching and research.
- Along with workload, incentives and compensation were concerns. Approaches to this vary and depend on context. Some institutions offer incentives for designing or teaching online courses. These can range from fairly conservative stipends to those that are quite generous. In other cases, institutions view online course design and teaching as a normal part of what a faculty member does and do not offer additional monetary compensation. These strategies may depend on the degree to which online teaching is embedded in the institutional culture.
- Faculty training at the majority of schools is required. When it is not, faculty tend to not participate. Those who do, however, may transfer what they learn to other learning modes, thus requiring such training should be seriously considered. In some contexts, pedagogical

training is required of all new faculty members as although they have all been trained in their disciplines, most have not been trained in teaching. Many faculty welcome these types of professional development opportunities, particularly new faculty who are eager to learn how to engage with students. Participating in professional development teaching programs can be acknowledged through the tenure and promotion process and through other forms of certification or recognition, such as Higher Education Academy Fellowships (Advance HE, 2018).

- Organizational culture and change are impacted by online learning initiatives, evident by fewer faculty being present on campus on a regular basis and the carryover of new skills gained through online course design and teaching to traditional teaching. Some of this may be perceived as positive while in other cases, it could be considered negative. Change is inevitable but must be managed well and focused on a common vision and the establishment of agreed-upon and specific goals to enable achievement of that vision.

This study also makes a significant contribution in terms of identifying practices that predict more faculty teaching online. These include the following:

- Training positively predicted the percentage of full-time faculty teaching online.
- Recognition for completing training did not predict the percentage of full-time faculty teaching online.
- The length of time online courses/programs had been in existence predicted more faculty teaching online.
- The use of quality evaluation measures predicted the percentage of full-time faculty teaching online.
- Increases in student enrollments did not predict the percentage of full-time faculty teaching online.
- Course evaluation processes did not increase faculty confidence in the quality of online offerings.

Given these outcomes from the study, leaders have a clear directive—implement training or review the effectiveness of current training and rewards, understand that change evolves over time and do not let up (Kotter, 2008), ensure the efficacy of quality evaluation, take measures to make sure that the number of full-time faculty teaching online keeps pace with increasing online enrollments, and

determine root causes of faculty concerns to address lack of confidence in online learning on the part of faculty members. Specific ideas for addressing many of these issues were discussed earlier in this section.

Leaders wanting to implement organizational change and ensure that it becomes embedded in the culture might consider the use of change models such as Kotter's 8-steps (2002, 2008) or Bolman and Deal's (2017) reframing. Reframing involves viewing organizational change through four frames—structural (strategy, goals, responsibilities, reporting lines), human resource (people's needs, personal growth, job satisfaction), political (conflict resolution, power base-building), and symbolic (a motivating vision, sense of purpose, celebrations that recognize performance). Reframing provides leaders with a comprehensive approach to leading change initiatives and greatly increases the likelihood of success.

6 CONCLUSIONS

Education is a "partnership between [higher education providers] and students with the goal of providing accessible yet manageable learning opportunities for a wide range of people" (Higher Education Academy, 2015, p. 4). This study has shown that schools of business are actively pursuing this goal, yet are faced with significant challenges, as are other programs and institutions that are implementing online learning. It is generally acknowledged that "despite the current drawbacks, online education is still the best prospect for the future provided the barriers of faculty assessment and course design are addressed" (Nash, 2015, p. 80). As such, this study provides specific, actionable findings to assist leaders in the effective implementation of online learning in schools of business and beyond.

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