Community Colleges Friendlier to Online Ph.D.'s

Leon M. Guendoo, Ph.D
Chair of Business Department
Katharine Gibbs College
pctutor4u@hotmail.com

Abstract

Those with online PhD's stand a better chance of being hired by a community college than by other colleges or universities when seeking a faculty position. In a 2007 study, administrators of some of the largest community colleges in the United States indicated that they were receptive to hiring applicants with online doctorates for teaching positions once the candidate possessed the "total package elements," namely teaching experience, publications, presentations, and demonstrated professional service. The investigation of the community college perspective on possible institutional bias surrounding the online doctorate was prompted by an earlier study which concluded that those applying for faculty positions in higher education institutions would have only a slim chance of obtaining employment if they had earned their doctorate solely online. Despite concerns about accreditation, face-to-face interaction, academic experience, mentoring, faculty preparation, and diploma mills, the group community college administrators in this Delphi study overwhelmingly confirmed that they did not view the online doctoral credential as a disadvantage to the candidate in a hiring situation.

Introduction

It is common for the majority of doctoral students to envision themselves in academic positions upon attaining their degrees (Gemme, 2005; Golde & Walker, 2006; Nettles & Millet, 2006). Yet, as the first generation of online doctoral scholars graduate, they face not only the typical limited opportunities in academe, but also strong resistance to the credibility of their degrees. Although 70% of our nation's colleges and universities offer distance learning programs, many of them are reluctant to hire applicants with online degrees for faculty positions (Chaney, 2002). This study comes at a time when online doctoral programs are experiencing the "greatest penetration" among all levels of online higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2006), and when the debate surrounding their legitimacy has barely begun. Concerns from the "guardians of academe" have resulted in skepticism and apprehension about the degree's credibility, leading to strong resistance by certain groups of academics.

In their 2005 study, Adams and DeFleur (2005) concluded that "from the quantitative results, it seems clear that those applying for a faculty position in the institutions (public and private) included in this analysis would have virtually no prospect of gaining employment if they had earned their doctorate solely online" (p. 79). Of the 109 search committee chairs surveyed from a group of traditional colleges and universities, an overwhelming 98% preferred the candidate with the conventional degree over one with an online degree with 85% of them indicating they had reservations about the latter. The names of the institutions from which the candidates obtained their doctorates were not disclosed to the respondents in the study. If these findings reflect the prevailing sentiments of academic employers, then online doctoral graduates now face a heightened barrier to employment considering that the doctorate in the United States has historically been afflicted by a mismatch of academic preparation and career opportunities (Golde & Dore, 2001). Furthermore, as masters' and doctoral programs continue to experience the "greatest penetration" in online enrollments (Allen and Seaman, 2006, p. 8) one can anticipate the increasing numbers of graduates being produced to exacerbate the situation of very limited opportunities in the professoriate. In spite of this, both online and traditional PhD scholars seem attracted to faculty employment as their top career choice (Nettles & Millett, 2006).

The implications of Adams and DeFleur's (2005) findings raise two important questions: (a) To what

extent are the results representative of all higher education institutional groups? and (b) How will perceptions about the online doctorate change over time? Given that community colleges enroll half of all online postsecondary students in the United States (Allen & Seaman, 2006) and are a relatively new fixture in the higher education system (with less steeped traditions than the four-year colleges and universities), one can assume that they might have different perspective about online credentials than what preliminary studies indicate. Furthermore, since these colleges employ a significant percentage (over 20%) of all doctoral graduates (NCES, 2005), it is important that those with online PhDs know the extent to which their degrees might be challenged when applying for faculty positions there. For the purpose of clarity, the "online PhDs" (or "online doctorates") referred to in this paper are those granted by either primarily online universities or primarily traditional universities with online doctoral programs.

Population Sample and Methodology

The Delphi study involved a group of 52 administrators (deans, associate deans, chairpersons and associate chairs, directors of departments, college vice presidents, and senior faculty members serving on hiring committees) drawn from the largest (by student enrollment) of 145 community colleges across the United States. To characterize the demographic profile of the participating group of respondents, the majority (67%) were female; between the ages of 51-60 years (54%); in an academic supervisory role as dean, chair, or director (79%); with an average of 6.7 years experience in their current position. The highest degree discipline varied between Social and Behavioral Sciences (23%) and Professional and Applied Fields (31%). The majority of respondents did not complete their degrees online (85%) and most had a doctorate level education (71%). The total years of faculty hiring experience were 12.2 years on average and nearly twice the average years of experience in their current position. The institutional classification for all respondents was public in nature and 100% also offered some online/hybrid courses. Ninety-four percent of the group reported that their institutions offered more face-to-face traditional courses than online courses. The majority (62%) has taught a pure online postsecondary course, but 41% were not teaching courses at the time of the survey. The majority of respondents were very willing (64%) to take employer-sponsored training for teaching courses online and 15% were already teaching online. The majority (62%) reported a very high knowledge of quality in online education.

The list of public community colleges and their enrollment data were obtained from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) College Opportunities Online Locator (COOL) database. Enrollments ranged from 11,261 to 42,438 based on fall 2004 data (NCES, 2005). Three survey phases (rounds) were administered via the Internet over a period of five months using an online survey application. Based on the responses to nine open-ended questions and one closed-ended question about online doctoral education in the initial survey round, 132 questions were developed and rated on a 6-point Likert scale in round two. Seventy-two responses showing consensus (determined using measures of central tendency) from round two were selected for iteration in round three, from which findings and conclusions were drawn. Chi-square values and degree of significance measures were applied to determine the degree of consistency in responses to questions between the second and third rounds. Of the 72 statements in round three, 65 met the criteria for consensus and were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively tp produce the findings.

Significant Findings

From the preliminary round of the Delphi study, the following main issues about the online doctorate emerged, ranked in order of importance by the frequency of references to them by the respondents:

1. Rigor, quality, standards, and accreditation
2. Human interaction
3. Learning outcomes
4. Preparation for college teaching
5. Content and delivery

6. Overall academic experience
7. Academic dishonesty
8. Mentoring
9. Residency
10. Credibility with employers

The key finding significantly contrasts with that of Adams and DeFleur's (2005) study, with an overwhelming majority (89.2%) of the community college administrators indicating that they did not view the online doctoral credential as unfavorable to the credibility of a faculty candidate. 94.6 percent of them disagreed with the statement "I would not hire a candidate with an online degree for a faculty position even if the degree came from a reputable institution." Almost all (97.3%) of the panelists confirmed that they were more interested in the "total package" of a faculty applicant than whether the doctorate was earned online or conventionally. One respondent characterized the "*total package*" as a candidate who came "from a reputable institution, had experience teaching, had a good list of presentations and publications, and demonstrated evidence of professional activity and service." The central concerns about the online doctorate expressed by the participants from both studies, namely academic experience, accreditation, face-to-face interactions, mentoring, do coincide in both studies.

There was almost equally strong disagreement (91.8%) to the statement "Online doctoral programs have too many drawbacks to make them credible." While convenience was regarded as the biggest advantage of online doctoral programs, the group generally responded that accreditation, mentoring, fine-tuning and good design could resolve the issue of credibility. It was clear that the keys to the credibility and acceptability of a faculty candidate's online doctoral degree were the accreditation and reputation of his or her university. 89.1 percent confirmed that they would be satisfied with an online doctoral program that met the accreditation standards of a similar conventional program while 81% indicated they would have no issues with the online degree once it came from an institution with a reputable conventional program.

The three top themes emerging from the study (measured by the frequency with which respondents raised an issue in the preliminary round) were (a) rigor, quality, standards, and accreditation (63%); (b) human interaction (55%); and (c) learning outcomes (43%). Eighty percent of the group indicated that they had no concerns with the rigor, quality and standards of online doctoral programs as long as the programs were accredited. Furthermore, while 69.5% of the group agreed that online doctoral programs had not yet withstood the test of time, 90% did not consider the quality of instruction and academic rigor as a weaknesses of the online PhD. In terms of learning outcomes 81% of the respondents indicated that online doctorates could achieve the same as conventional programs if the instructors were well trained and the courses well-designed.

Consistent with the literature reviewed, there was significant concern about the extent of human interaction. Although more than 70% of the group agreed that virtual (online) interaction does not impair the level and quality of engagement among learners and between learners and faculty, 83.3% indicated that the limited face-to-face interaction and interpersonal experience were the most significant drawbacks of online doctoral programs. There was high consensus (91.6%) on the statement "Online learning misses some non-verbal cues that are important aspects of communication valuable to teaching and learning."

In response to whether online doctoral graduates are less prepared for postsecondary teaching than their conventional counterparts, the majority of participants (65%) did not think so. At the same time, however, about 70% of the group believed that the administrators of college and universities do have issues with the credibility of these graduates. Furthermore, 78% agreed that those with conventional doctorates typically possess more classroom teaching experience than those with online doctorates because the latter affords fewer opportunities for teaching assistant positions. Some panelists commented that online doctoral programs do not focus on preparing graduates for the professoriate.

Concerns over "the academic experience" (somtimes referred to as "academic socialization") and

mentoring did not factor as significantly with this group as they did in the Adams and DeFleur's (2005) study. Nevertheless, the socialization issue was raised by 22% of the panelists in the preliminary round of this study while 6% of the responses cited the mentoring factor.

Explanation of the Results

It is evident that community college administrators are more predisposed to hiring applicants with online doctorates than the respondents in the Adams and DeFleur's (2005) study. What accounts for this significant disparity in perception? One possible answer might be the differences in the population and sample characteristics. While Adams and DeFleur's sample group comprised an almost equal representation of public and private institutions (49 public and 43 private), this study concentrated on community colleges only. In their 2006 "Making the Grade" report about online education in the United States, Allen and Seaman observed the following:

> Public institutions and the largest institutions of all types have consistently been at the forefront of online offerings. Those that are the least likely to offer online courses, and typically have the most negative opinions about online education in general, have been the small, private, four-year institutions. (p. 2)

Since public community colleges are the largest postsecondary institutions by enrollment, they accommodate more than half (51.5%) of all online students in higher education. Consequently, these "associates institutions are clearly making more inroads among the online learners than they have for the higher education student population in general" (Allen & Seaman, 2006, p. 6). In this study, the entire panel of experts surveyed belonged to community colleges that offered online courses, with 50% of them indicating that they knew their college had hired faculty with online academic credentials. Additionally, 7 of the 52 panelists (13.5%) reported having an online graduate degree (2 master's and 5 doctoral). Comparable information could not be obtained from the Adams and DeFleur's study. Given this level of exposure to distance education, one can understand why administrators of community colleges might be more receptive to candidates with online PhDs than their counterparts in private institutions.

Are perceptions changing? Resistance to change should always be considered as part of the normal course of events when a new phenomenon has the potential of significant impact on a long-established system. Maki & Borkowski (2006) characterize the reaction to change in the following way:

> Those who venture outside the parameters of conventions and norms simultaneously experience both exhilaration and trepidation. Exhilaration emerges from the prospects of discovery and renewal; trepidation emerges from uncertainty about how discovery and renewal will challenge conventions and norms and those individuals who are comfortable with and accustomed to supporting those conventions and norms. (p. 1)

Considering that distance education is a relatively new phenomenon in the higher education landscape, one can reasonably expect longitudinal studies to portray evolving perceptions over time. Allen and Seaman (2006) noted, for example, that while in 2003, 57% of academic leaders rated the learning outcomes in online education as the same or superior to those in face-to-face, there was a "small but noteworthy increase" to 62% in 2006 (p. 2). Additionally, from 2003 to 2006 administrators across all types and sizes of the 2,200 colleges and universities surveyed by Allen and Seaman (2005) reported a steady increase in the importance of online education to their institution's long-term strategy. If these trends continue, one can predict that the gap in perceptions between the subjects of this study and those of the Adams and DeFleur's study will continue to close over time. As one panelist stated, "I expect that 50 to 100 years from now, critics (of online learning) will be saying that classes taught face-to-face by a single person in a classroom have too many drawbacks to make them credible."

Several other reasons might explain why community college administrators are more accommodating to hiring online doctoral graduates. These are as follows:

1. Community colleges are a relatively recent fixture in the higher education system and therefore may not be as steeped in tradition or convention as their older, private counterparts. Consequently, they are less resistant to change that involves new learning approaches such as distance education.
2. Community colleges are driven by the primary goal of access to higher education, with budget control an overriding constraint since they do not normally have huge endowments or other alternative funding sources. Distance education delivery promises good economics through cost efficiencies. It would therefore seem rational for these colleges to implement online programs, and hypocritical not to accept faculty with graduate online degrees, when they do.
3. Community colleges specialize in lower-level higher education preparation and shorter-term preparation for careers than baccalaureate and graduate type institutions. As a result, they may not be as discriminating in their selection of doctoral candidates given that the master's degree has traditionally been the minimum academic qualification required to instruct at this level.

Conclusions, Implications and Recommendations

Distance learning has managed to crash the gates of higher education, imposing significant change while affording inadequate time for evaluation and adjustment. Its rapid proliferation at the doctoral level has understandably prompted a reaction of resistance from the guardians of academe as it attempts to alter established paradigms, methods, and processes without industry-wide standards in place for this mode of delivery. Consequently, uncertainty about how distance education meets traditional standards has resulted in apprehension to the credibility of the online degree. The responses of the group in this study confirmed that significant concerns do exist in the following areas: academic experience (or socialization), face-to-face interaction and classroom dynamics, teaching preparation and opportunities for teaching assistantships, mentoring, hands-on laboratory work, diploma mills, and accreditation. However, while these concerns have become barriers to hiring online doctoral graduates for faculty positions at some institutions and for employers in general, they did not prove to be so with the group surveyed.

With respect to the hiring decision, therefore, one can conclude from the study that community college administrators are less skeptical than other types of institutions about online doctoral credentials and are more inclined to hire applicants with such degrees for teaching positions. The administrators overwhelmingly confirmed that they would hire graduates of online doctoral programs as long as the programs met the accreditation standards typical of conventional programs. They also agreed that the total package of the faculty candidate's attributes (such as graduating from a reputable institution, experienced in teaching, having a good list of presentations and publications, and demonstrated evidence of professional activity and service) was more important than the source of his or her degree. One should not assume, however, that the receptivity of community colleges to the online credential is representative of other higher education institutions. Studies focusing on other types of institutions (such as private associates-degree colleges, public and private bachelor's and master's degree colleges and universities, etc.) would be useful for comparison.

It is also clear that reputation and accreditation are the keys to the credibility of online doctoral programs. There appears to be, however, heavy reliance on accreditation to address many of the concerns surrounding the online doctorate. An online doctorate offered by a reputable and accredited traditional institution holds the highest approval in the eyes of the students, academia, and the public. Published studies, as well as the results of this study, strongly corroborate this claim. Even when the doctorate is offered by a purely online institution, the majority of administrators in this study indicated that they would have no problems in hiring a graduate once the university was accredited and had a good reputation. In the absence of an established reputation, however, an online doctoral program should maintain accreditation comparable to the standards of a reputable traditional program for it to be considered credible.

Person-to-person interaction in the learning process is highly valued by most and the loss of it in doctoral distance learning remains a predominant concern among academics. Some strongly criticize

online programs on this ground, insisting that there is absolutely no substitute for the face-to-face interaction and in-person classroom dynamics that are sacrificed. The significance of this hands-on, in-person campus experience becomes a critical factor in courses, such as those in the natural sciences, that require extensive laboratory time.

For courses not requiring lab time, there is a clear and significant disparity in perceptions between those who have had online teaching or learning experience and those who have not. The former are much more favorable in their views about the online doctorate than the latter, and they are more willing to accept the loss of the in-person experience in exchange for some of the strengths (or advantages) of online learning.

While best practices and traditional standards currently guide quality in online doctoral programs, it is debatable what quality assurance and assessment means in online doctoral education. Perspectives on the effectiveness of the online doctorate are still tied to conventional standards and experiences, and recommendations for additional or alternative assessment measures are unspecific and not well developed.

The academic administrators in this study were not convinced that online doctoral programs do a better job of preparing teachers than traditional programs. One reason might be the general perception that because the online doctorate focuses more on professional degrees than on academic research degrees, emphasis on developing teaching competencies is lacking. Bourner, Bowden, and Laing (2000b) see the popularity of the professional doctorate as stemming from the need to satisfy a broader range of career goals than those being addressed by the traditional PhD, especially those of practicing professionals who do not intend to be career researchers or teachers. They offer several reasons for its continuing growth: (a) its facilitation of careers outside academe, (b) its accommodation of the increasing numbers of part-time students who are more interested in professional enrichment than research skills, (c) its accommodation of the growing need for doctoral graduates to be able to conduct research for professional or industrial applications, (d) its alignment to the trend of vocationalism, and (e) the increasing support by government, industry, and professional organizations to the outcomes facilitated by the professional doctorate. Given that traditional doctoral programs have exhibited a disappointing track record in preparing future faculty (as ascertained in the literature review), failure of the online doctorate to improve on this image could turn into another source of criticism against it.

The findings have noteworthy implications for current and prospective online doctoral students, universities offering the doctorate online, and for the community college sector of the higher education industry. Those holding online PhD credentials stand a better chance of obtaining a faculty position at a community college (*ceteris paribus*) than at other types of colleges and universities where the degree might not be as well received. It also means that as far as academic careers are concerned, these graduates should recognize that community colleges might be, for now, the least resistant path to the professoriate. Consequently, it should not come as a surprise if community colleges experience an increasing number of faculty applicants with online doctorates and benefit at the same time from a higher-qualified candidate pool than before. Over time the attention to community colleges as friendlier potential employers might ease as the online PhD strengthens its acceptability among all institution types.

For those contemplating the online doctorate in preparation for faculty careers, it is important to recognize that, generally, the program might not fulfill expectations regarding effective teaching preparation. The findings of this study indicate that there is still not enough confidence among academic leaders in the ability of online doctoral programs to adequately prepare students for faculty responsibilities and roles. The teaching preparation issue aside, prospective online doctoral students would also find it expedient to pursue their studies at universities that are not only accredited by recognized regional (and if possible national) agencies, but have made significant inroads in establishing a reputation for quality in the distance learning segment of the doctoral industry.

Extending the point, it seems reasonable to propose that universities offering or planning to offer

online doctoral degrees undertake a conscientious and well-planned strategy to enhance their reputations and establish a distinct online culture and presence. Even for institutions with already established traditional reputations, one must consider the possibility that, given the choice of pursuing the PhD in an online or traditional format at the same university, a student might choose the latter if the university has not yet achieved a strong reputation in its online programs. Universities that are completely online have the added responsibility of ensuring their doctoral programs meet or exceed the quality and rigor of comparable traditional programs and that the public distinguishes them by these standards. Establishing a reputation for quality and maintaining the public image to accompany it also helps ward off the suspicions attendant to diploma mills. Smart marketing and public relations, combined with active participation in professional higher education associations, accrediting commissions, and state and federal education agencies would help achieve these objectives.

Online doctoral institutions should also ensure that their programs integrate distinguishable elements of faculty training for students, mentoring preparation for senior faculty members, and academic socialization. The first will necessitate retooling the curriculum to better address the needs of those aspiring to faculty careers. The second requires the establishment of formalized mentoring programs that take a professional approach to mentor selection, preparation and assessment. For the third element, it is hoped that the increasing competition among online universities will motivate them to seek innovations in education technologies, mentoring and socialization techniques that promise enhanced satisfaction of students with their doctoral programs.

For the decision-makers in doctoral education the pressing challenge is formulating nationally recognized standards for the online doctorate that guide practice, outcomes, assessment and accreditation. The panel suggested that the online doctorate needs strong accreditation support, uniformity and consensus on standards among universities, and the endorsement and support of state and federal agencies and professional higher education associations. This means that legislative, professional, and academic stakeholders should urgently engage in deliberations that lead to widely accepted standards for online doctoral programs. It also implies that the traditional guardianship of academe could use an infusion of new-generation leaders equipped with the requisite experience in distance learning that make them capable of better answering questions that compare online and conventional doctoral programs. Balancing the higher education stewardship with such academic leaders will help correct the misalignment and misconceptions surrounding the practice of online doctoral education and the standards currently governing it.

Since reputation is one of the keys to credibility, universities with online doctoral programs should make a conscientious effort to develop a strong, unique online culture and identity. This not only helps to improve the institution's reputation but also facilitates the socialization process and sense of community (Ledoux, 2005). A series of short, well-designed in-person residencies would also alleviate some of the concerns surrounding the doctoral student's connection with his or her scholarly community.

Yick, Patrick, and Costin (2005) suggested that expanding research and scholarship in the online doctorate would improve its credibility, especially with for-profit universities. Yet one could argue that since online programs exploit the professional doctorate niche more than the research doctorate, expanding the latter might come at the expense of the former. If institutions decide to expand their research doctorate offerings then the question becomes what is the right balance that will accommodate the increasingly diversified set of students' purposes for pursuing the degree? An alternative to Yick et al.'s (2005) recommendation might be for universities to improve their information and career advisement services regarding both academic and non-academic careers.

Although mentoring was not cited as frequently as the other issues in the opening round of the study, it deserves some attention since 83.3% of the group indicated that it was a concern when asked, and because it factored significantly in the literature review. Online doctoral mentoring is a new concept and one can safely assume that universities will continue to optimize the process to fit its mode of delivery. At the same time care has to be exercised to ensure that the background, experiences,

competencies and commitment of online doctoral mentors match the needs of their assigned students, and that the relationships translate into increased overall student satisfaction. This might require universities to institute formalized training for their faculties in online doctoral mentoring and make continued improvements to the mentoring experience.

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