On the Recognition of Quality Online Course Design in Promotion and Tenure: A Survey of Higher Ed Institutions in the Western United States

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Abstract

What constitutes excellence in teaching for university faculty when they are expected or required to create quality online courses? This is a question that will increasingly be asked of members of promotion and tenure committees as market pressures demand entire degrees be delivered online. Developing a quality online course is a significant commitment in time and effort and frequently requires learning new skills and pedagogical methods. Increasingly, faculty are expected to make this commitment, yet it may not be valued in their promotion and tenure process. This study sought to determine to what extent developing a "quality" online course (one that has been reviewed to a set of standards) receives credit in the promotion and tenure (P&T) process for all ranks. A survey across multiple disciplines at 19 western universities found that only 16 percent of the departments that completed the survey specifically include the development of a quality online course in their promotion and tenure documentation. Two hundred and forty-eight departments offering online degree programs from 19 four-year research institutions of higher education (IHEs) in the western

United States were invited to participate in this study. Of the 19 institutions (including New Mexico State University), 15 were peers of New Mexico State University (NMSU), with three additional non-peer Western region IHEs being invited to take an online survey. Survey takers were given the option to volunteer for a more in-depth follow-up phone interview.

Introduction

New Mexico State University (NMSU) is a high research, doctoral-granting, land-grant institution located in the southern part of the state, with an enrollment of slightly over 15,000. NMSU offered its first three online courses in 1997. Since then, the University has significantly increased its capacity, offering 450-500 classes in the fall and spring semesters. In addition, there are 36 distance education programs, including BA degrees (6), Masters (19), Doctorates (3), Graduate Certificates (4), and endorsements and licensure (4), which are predominantly online with many being 100% online. The NMSU administration, like many IHE upper administrations, directed this expansion. Born-digital and non-traditional (e.g., employed full-time) cohorts wanted more distance education opportunities. Additionally, as the state's land grant institution, NMSU's mission is to serve the educational needs of all its citizens, and online options offer a direct means for reaching remote areas of the state. The upper administration saw the advantage of serving in-state students at remote locations, as well as increasing enrollment of out-of-state students. Distance education not only improves the University's reach, but also is recognized as a cost-efficient means to increase enrollment and revenue (Bischel, 2013; Li & Chen, 2012; Zhang & Worthington, 2016).

Apart from meeting students' requests for more online options, administration and students alike expressed an interest in the quality of the online courses. In 2009 the NMSU Student Technology Advisory Committee, which decides how the Student Technology Fee monies are spent, partnered with the University's Office of Distance Education to provide matching funds to support a faculty professional development program for better quality online courses. The Online Course Improvement Program (OCIP) was thus established. OCIP uses Quality Matters™ (https://www.qualitymatters.org) as the framework for improving online courses. OCIP is committed to implementing the Quality Matters™ (QM) standards for the design of online courses, and evaluates courses using QM's research-based standards. The QM standards assure that the online components of these courses promote learner engagement and provide students with tools and information they need to be successful learners. For the purposes of this study, a quality online course means an online course that has been through a peer review process and evaluated to meet a set of criteria or standards like those used with the QM framework.

NMSU faculty, departments and colleges have responded to the push to increase the number and quality of online courses to varying degrees. In order to incentivize increasing the quantity of online degree programs and ensure course quality, a revenue sharing model was offered for pre-approved online degree programs. When a program's online course meets the quality metric, the college receives 75% of the tuition and fees paid by the students who take the quality course, whereas non-certified courses do not. A quality course is one meeting an informal review, as in being reviewed by one QM Certified Peer Reviewer with all three-point QM Standards met, and scoring ≥85% total points. Since 2014 when this program became available, there has been a lot of interest from colleges and departments with three of six academic colleges launching online-only degree programs.

Literature Review

Calls to include faculty effort in teaching quality online courses in promotion and tenure considerations have been made ever since these courses have been offered. There are various barriers or inhibitors to faculty wanting to teach online, and lack of recognition as part of the promotion and tenure process is referenced as one of these in multiple studies. In a classic, often cited article, Wolcott (1997) states:

"…institutions should continue to look critically at the existing faculty reward system.…What activities are rewarded? How well do rewards align with goals and expectations? Universities should examine current practices and policies and, where necessary, modify guidelines to reflect the changing nature of higher education and faculty work, especially with respect to advances in information technology … Policies should accommodate a range of scholarly activities, including the development of non-traditional instructional materials and use of alternative delivery systems. Redefining scholarship and revising tenure and promotion guidelines would offer faculty greater visibility for innovations and outreach as befits a land-grant institution and would open the way to awarding credit for important faculty work that has not previously been well-rewarded." The present landscape has remained remarkably similar, as the same advice was offered by Roby, Ashe, Singh, and Clark (2013) years later: "…administrators must formally acknowledge [creating quality online courses] as valid contributions towards promotion and tenure."

There is concern that the extra work required to produce and teach a quality online course will actually work against a faculty member's obtaining promotion and tenure, in that it takes time away from more highly valued scholarship and service (Bower, 2001; Blair & Monske, 2003; Schifter, 2004; Seaman, 2009; Gutman, 2012; Hopewell, 2012; Raffo, Brinthaupt, Gardner & Fisher, 2015). Brary, Harris and Major (2007) speak to this plainly:

"The ultimate sign of valued faculty behavior is generally accepted as those that are given weight in tenure and promotion decisions. However, this value cannot be spoken; it needs to show up in action. There are numerous tales of teaching being praised as having high value, only to have conversations behind closed doors focus only minimally on teaching. As it is sometimes presented, teaching (at research institutions in particular) cannot get you tenure, but it can keep you from getting tenure."

Tabata & Johnsrud (2008) found that at the schools they surveyed, older, tenured faculty were more likely to participate in distance education than younger faculty for the reason that they had the time to commit to online teaching, which pre-tenured faculty thought they could not afford. Several studies discuss the way in which promotion and tenure committees do not value distance education, often not grasping the training and effort required to produce a quality online course (Green, Alejandro, & Brown, 2009; Orr, Williams & Pennington, 2009; Simpson, 2010). Schell (2004) found that traditional U. S. universities "marginalize the value of developing and delivering online courses." Creating and teaching a quality online course - in the same way that service to the university, teaching face to face, advising students, and the writing of textbooks - is seen as being a positive academic activity, but one that will not do much to advance a faculty member's promotion and tenure goals. Blair & Monske (2003) posit that tenure and promotion committees simply do not grasp the significant amount of labor required to design, develop and deliver quality online classes and for this reason accord it less credit toward promotion and tenure than it deserves. A national survey (Hoyt & Oviatt, 2013) of doctorate-granting institutions revealed that one-third of the faculty did not know if their online teaching would factor in promotion and tenure decisions, and 40% believed it would not have a positive impact on their promotion and tenure.

Another complicating factor is that one of the standard measures of teaching effectiveness for promotion and tenure considerations has been the student evaluation. Several researchers have reported on the differences inherent between the evaluations given by students participating in a face-to-face class versus those given by students in a distance education program. In fact, Sullivan, Polnick, Nickson, Maninger, & Butler (2013) name this problem in the title of their paper: "Student Evaluation of Teaching: The Inequity of Faculty Scores in Online versus Face-to-Face Courses." The postulate here is that "student evaluations used to assess traditional classes do not align specifically to issues addressed in online teaching." In addition to there being difficulties for online students in assessing the professor's performance on such traditional classroom metrics as "displayed a personal interest in students and their learning" and "involved students in 'hands on'

projects such as research, case studies, or 'real life' activities," online students tend to have a lower response rate on teacher evaluations. Best practices would recommend a separate student evaluation instrument for online courses (Tobin, 2015), one that acknowledges that there is still a bias toward embodied teaching when it comes to evaluation of pedagogy in promotion and tenure considerations. Tobin, an administrator, describes how a department head was skeptical if enthusiasm could be recognized in an online faculty member, since he thought this could only be gauged in a "live" observation, though the professor's in-class actions and tone of voice. Speaks, Cambiano, Farinelli, & Cambiano) (2015) summarize the problem this way:

"What universities don't discuss is the impact that teaching online can have on faculty promotion and tenure possibilities. The high demand by students and universities to continually increase online course options without a quality assurance component prevents best practice in online instruction and course development and design due to the absence of time for piloting and revising courses based on practitioner feedback to best meet student needs and maintaining the integrity of course content. The probability that instructors are reduced to being teachers of how to assist students in being successful in the online learning environment forces mastery of course content to a secondary level. Couple that with the possibility of course changes causing faculty to teach online courses with new content and untested course design, the recipe for frustration and mediocrity for the sake of keeping up with demand results in the high possibility of negative faculty evaluations by students taking courses offered in an online setting."

Methods

Fifteen universities were identified as NMSU peer institutions. An additional three four-year public research universities were also invited to be part of the study for a total of 19 including NMSU. An internet search was performed identifying the online programs from the selected institutions. From the identified programs, department head names and emails were compiled. The survey was then sent to 248 department heads from 19 institutions. Eighteen of the 19 institutions responded with an average of three responses per institution. There were 57 survey completions for a return rate of 23%. In the survey, 11 respondents self-selected to do a follow-up phone interview, which used a protocol. The phone interviews were transcribed and coded for common themes.

Results

We present the results of this work in the next two sections. First we report and comment on the survey population and quantitative results of the survey instrument, and secondly we report on the post-survey interviews conducted. Our survey population included persons in leadership positions at NMSU, 15 of NMSU's peer institutions and three other 4-year public research schools with a significant presence in online education. We targeted department heads and program/division heads as these would tend to be more senior faculty who have been through the sometimes opaque P&T process, giving them a more global view of its requirements. The 34-question survey used skip logic so the number of responses for each question varied depending on how a respondent answered. Thus, not every respondent answered all 34 questions.

Section One: Survey population and quantitative results of the survey instrument

Figure 1 lists the roles of the 57 survey participants responding to the question, "What is your role?" Seventy percent of the participants were either department heads or program/division heads. Note that another 14% were members of department P&T committees. It is reasonable to conclude that this entire group has been through the P&T process for promotion to all ranks and consideration for tenure.

What is your role?		
Answer Options	**Response Percent**	**Response Count**
Department P&T Committee Chair	8.8%	5
Representative on the Department P&T Committee	5.3%	3
Department Head	57.9%	33
Program/Division Head	12.3%	7
College P&T Committee Chair	0.0%	0
Representative on the College P&T Committee	0.0%	0
Dean	1.8%	1
Provost	0.0%	0
Other (please specify)	14.0%	8
answered question		57
skipped question		11

Figure 1: Role of Survey Participants

The dominant format for delivery of distance education (DE) programs were completely online and hybrid, which we defined as a combination of online and face-to-face elements. This reflects the interest by many administrators in delivering content with a low requirement for bricks and mortar infrastructure. Figure 2 below includes both the response percentages and counts.

The delivery formats for your Distance Education program(s) are: (Select all that apply.)		
Answer Options	**Response Percent**	**Response Count**
100% online	87.7%	50
Hybrid (online combined with face-to-face)	26.3%	15
Offsite but face-to-face	12.3%	7
Program delivered via Interactive Television (ITV).	8.8%	5
Other (please specify)	8.8%	5
answered question		57
skipped question		11

Figure 2: Delivery Formats

The survey next asked for survey takers' responses to the statement: "Our department/ college/institution has adopted quality online course design standards to guide the design and development of online courses." Of the 47 responses, 30 indicated that some form of a quality metric was used to guide the design and development of online courses. Ten indicated no such quality metric was used and seven indicated they did not know.

Our next question asked about the inclusion of faculty design and development of quality online courses in the P&T process. Nearly 70% indicated that this was directly or indirectly included in the P&T process and it is specifically addressed in the existing P&T document. See Figure 3 below.

Does faculty design and development of quality online courses currently count in the P&T process at your institution?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes, specifically, in the P&T documentation.	19.6%	11
Yes, indirectly, in the P&T documentation.	50.0%	28
No,but it's been under discussion and consideration.	8.9%	5
No, not at all.	14.3%	8
Not really; except it can count against a candidate	7.1%	4
answered question		56
skipped question		12

Figure 3: Inclusion of Faculty Design and Development of Quality Online Courses in the P&T Process

We then asked this group at what levels was it included in the P&T process. The response count was low (6), but those six indicated that all departments and colleges did formally include faculty design and development of quality online courses in the P&T process. Notice that the commitment to including this as part of the P&T process is 100% at both the department and college level. The commitment is slightly lower, 83% at the institution level. See Figure 4 below.

If Yes, select all levels that apply:		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Department	100.0%	6
College	100.0%	6
Institution	83.3%	5
answered question		6
skipped question		62

Figure 4: Directly Included in P&T Process

Fifty percent of the respondents indicated that faculty design and development of quality online courses is informally included in the P&T process. When asked at what levels it was included, 89% and 81% indicated it was included at the department and college level, but only 48% at the institution level. See Figure 5 below. As reported above, Tabata & Johnsrud (2008) found that at the schools they surveyed, older, tenured faculty were more likely to participate in distance education than younger faculty. These faculty would have influence directly on both department and college policies and somewhat less influence on institutional policies.

If Yes, indirectly, please select all levels that apply.		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Department	88.9%	24
College	81.5%	22
Institution	48.1%	13
answered question		27
skipped question		41

Figure 5: Indirectly Included in P&T Process

The next survey question was directed at the respondents who indicated that faculty design and development of quality online courses was not included in the P&T process. The figure below shows the responses, but note that the response count is very small. Sixty-five of 68 respondents skipped this question with comments to see their answer to the previous survey question.

If faculty design and development of quality online courses is currently not part the P&T process, has it been discussed?		
Answer Options	**Response Percent**	**Response Count**
Yes, but only informally.	66.7%	2
Yes, formally in the P&T Committee.	33.3%	1
Yes, the P&T documentation is under revision.	0.0%	0
No, it has not been discussed.	0.0%	0
	answered question	3
	skipped question	65

Figure 6: Is It Being Considered?

The next several survey questions worked to quantify the perception of the amount of academic effort needed to design and develop a quality online course. In the experience of one author, the academic effort in redesigning an existing online course to meet quality recognition standards was similar to the work of preparing a journal article, in terms of time, academic effort, intellectual effort, and the peer-review process. Thus. we used the metric of producing one journal article as a means to compare the value of two academic activities. We first asked if the development of a quality online course that meets a set of standards was more, the same or less value in the P&T process as writing one journal article. Eight percent selected more value, 20% the same value and 8% selected less value. Sixty-three percent added comments which were placed into four categories: 1) course development is considered teaching and is valued differently than writing journal articles, 2) either not equivalent to a journal article or research is not required at the institution, 3) quality rather than quantity is valued or 4) it is a teaching and not considered a research activity.

Do you consider development of a quality online course that meets a set of standards or criteria as		
Answer Options	**Response Percent**	**Response Count**
having more value than the requirements of writing one journal article.	8.6%	3
the same value as the requirements of writing one journal article.	20.0%	7
or less value than the requirements of writing one journal article.	8.6%	3
Other (please specify)	62.9%	22
	answered question	35
	skipped question	33

Figure 7: Academic Effort Required Compared to Writing a Journal Article

We next asked respondents to compare the amount of academic effort needed to design and develop a quality online course with that which is required to write a conference paper. Ash shown in Figure 8 below, twenty-two percent selected more value, 17% the same value and 3% selected less value. Fifty-seven added comments very similar to those on the previous question.

Do you consider development of a quality online course that meets a set of standards or criteria as:		
Answer Options	**Response Percent**	**Response Count**
having more value than the requirements of writing one conference paper.	22.9%	8
the same value as the requirements of writing one conference paper.	17.1%	6
or less value than the requirements of writing one conference paper.	2.9%	1
Other (please specify)	57.1%	20
answered question		35
skipped question		33

Figure 8: Academic Effort Required Compared to Writing a Conference Paper

We next asked about respondents' perception of where their department would like to be in terms of including design and development of quality online course in the P&T process in five years. Only half of the respondents answered this question, but their comments were quite revealing. Forty-three percent were comfortable with their current P&T policies in this area. Twenty-seven percent expected faculty to utilize the latest technology and pedagogy in their course development, including some set of standards. Fourteen percent saw no difference in online and face-to-face course design and development. Ten percent advocated for some set of standards to be met in all courses, irrespective of being offered online or face-to-face. Finally, one respondent was not sure and another indicated they had not discussed including designing and developing quality courses in the P&T process "since the start of our online Master's program."

The next question asked about the mode of development of online courses. As shown in Figure 9, 10% of faculty have no support for developing online courses, 25% faculty act only as subject matter experts (SME) while a centralized online course design/development team develops a course, 36% of faculty choose to design their courses independently, and 64% of faculty have access to assistance from instructional designers. The comments from respondents on this question indicate that the level of assistance is largely the choice of the faculty member.

In our department/college/institution online courses are designed and developed by: (Select all that apply.)		
Answer Options	**Response Percent**	**Response Count**
Faculty, whose only option is to design and develop online courses on their own.	10.6%	5
Faculty, whose only option is to work with a centralized online course design/development team, where faculty are the subject matter experts on the team.	25.5%	12
Faculty, who choose to design and develop online courses on their own.	36.2%	17
Faculty, who choose to do most of the hands-on work, with some assistance from instructional designers or consultants.	63.8%	30
Other (please specify)	19.1%	9
answered question		47
skipped question		21

Figure 9: Mode of Online Course Development

Next we asked about specific standards for the development of quality online courses. Figure 10 reports that locally developed standards are used in 58% of the responding institutions. The Quality Matters™ Standards and the Quality Score Standards were chosen as 40% and 12% respectively. The comments reflect a broad spectrum of practices. Three reported no standards are in place. One commented "Quality Matters is lowest standards. Just a checklist. We expect a lot more". One reported it is up to the individual faculty member. One reported the use of "principles of good

practice". One response reported "The only measure of quality is student course surveys at the end of the course".

Our department/college/institution uses: (Select all that apply.)		
Answer Options	**Response Percent**	**Response Count**
In-house developed standards for quality online	57.4%	27
Quality Scorecard Standards for Course Development /	12.8%	6
Quality Matters Rubric Standards	40.4%	19
Other (please specify)	21.3%	10
answered question		47
skipped question		21

Figure 10: Standards for Developing Online Courses

Finally, the survey asked if the responding institutions provides professional development in some form to assist faculty in online course development. Figure 12 reports that nearly 77% of the reporting institutions indicated that faculty were supported with professional development related to developing quality online courses. 13% of the reporting institutions indicated that their faculty did not offer professional development related to developing quality online courses.

Our department/college/institution provides professional development to assist faculty in online course development.		
Answer Options	**Response Percent**	**Response Count**
Yes	76.6%	36
No	12.8%	6
It depends (please explain)	10.6%	5
answered question		47
skipped question		21

Figure 11: Assistance in Developing Online Courses

Section Two: Post-survey interviews

Eleven telephone interviews were conducted that included nine institutions representing seven western states. The interviewees included one dean, eight department heads or chairs, one faculty member, and one coordinator of graduate studies. The sample was representative of different colleges including Engineering, Arts and Sciences, Agriculture, Business, and Education (Table 1). The interviews were conducted following an established protocol (Appendix A). The interviews took approximately 35 minutes, were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for common themes.

Table 1. Colleges Represented

# Interviews	College	Department
2	Engineering	Computer Engineering Industrial Engineering
3	Arts & Sciences	Anthropology Physics Apparel, Events & Hospitality Management
1	Nursing	Nursing
3	Agriculture	Ag Education & Communications Natural Resources Fisheries & Wildlife
1	Business	Agribusiness
1	Education	Family Consumer Science & Human Development

The interviewees reported that their institutions began their distance education offerings between 2000 and 2009. Seven of the 11 interviewees reported that faculty developed online content with the assistance of an instructional designer. Of the seven, two reported it was mandated to develop online courses with an instructional designer, while two reported that working with an instructional designer was optional. Six of the 11 interviewees reported they focus on quality in their online courses as measured by a formal metric for online course reviews. These interviewees also reported they use templates in their course design, and are provided instructional design support (Table 2).

In seven interviews, student course evaluations were identified as a metric to determine online course quality. Six out of seven interviewees said a standard course evaluation is used regardless of delivery format. Only one interviewee mentioned adding additional questions specifically addressing the design of the online course. This issue wasn't mentioned in four interviews.

Three of the 11 interviewees mentioned professional development for faculty teaching online courses. As one interviewee stated, "... we have discovered it takes faculty development. So we've invested a lot in that too, it takes faculty development to help faculty learn to teach online. You can't just take what you do in your regular class room and put it on the web. You have to teach differently." Three of the six reported that incentives are provided to the faculty member to meet the defined metric by offering stipends, course buyouts, revenue sharing, or funds to attend conferences (Table 2).

For hiring and contract requirements, six of the 11 interviewees said online course development and teaching is expected, but not explicitly stated, for new faculty hires ? whereas three interviewees shared that online teaching is explicitly stated in faculty job postings and hiring documents. In one interview, this issue was not discussed. For P&T, one interviewee shared although there wasn't a specific algorithm for determining the value of developing an online course, it was integral to the P&T process along with online teaching, which aligned with the criteria in the original job posting and hiring documents. This person also noted inclusion of developing and teaching online courses in P&T was a faculty grassroots effort and not led by administrators or the administration. For nine of the interviewees, the value of developing quality online courses is only indirectly measured as part

of teaching and it's the same as teaching face to face courses (Table 2). One interviewee did not address this issue.

Table 2. Major Themes and Subthemes of Interviews

Quality in online courses	Course evaluations Same course evaluations as face to face courses Quality metric Instructional designers
Faculty support	Instructional designers or consultants Professional development programs and workshops Incentives
Online teaching	Part of teaching expectations Quality expected regardless delivery format Online courses weighted the same as face-to-face courses in Promotion and Tenure

Conclusions

Our survey across multiple disciplines at 19 western universities found that only 16 percent of the departments that completed the survey specifically include the development of a quality online course in their promotion and tenure documentation. These results echo findings from earlier research showing there is lack of formal recognition for quality online course development in Promotion & Tenure (Roby, et. al, 2012; Schell, 2004; Wolcott, 1997). Most of the study participants reported developing quality online courses is expected and only indirectly counts toward P&T and in the same way teaching a face-to-face course does. One interviewee stated that job postings for newer positions and contracts include "developing and supervising online courses," which is then formally evaluated and included as part of P&T. However, none of the study participants reported having a formal metric that defined how developing a quality online course would be factored into P&T. Based on the interviews, this study also found the use of a standard course evaluation, which is geared to face to face teaching, is used for measuring quality in online courses (Sullivan, et al., 2013).

Although to a lesser extent than in earlier research findings, this study also found that faculty avoid teaching online because they think it will negatively impact their chances of earning P&T (Brary, et al., 2007; Gutman, 2012; Hopewell, 2012; Hoyt & Oviatt, 2013; Raffo, et al., 2015; Schifter, 2004; Seaman, 2009). The authors agree this avoidance might be due to two interacting factors: 1) lack of formal recognition for developing quality online courses and 2) the perceived greater time commitment developing a quality online course requires.

What constitutes excellence in teaching for university faculty when they are expected or required to create and present quality online courses? This is a question that will increasingly be asked of members of promotion and tenure committees as market pressures demand entire degrees be delivered online. Developing a quality online course is a significant commitment in time and effort and frequently requires learning new skills and pedagogical methods. Increasingly, faculty are expected to make this commitment, yet it may not be valued in their promotion and tenure process. Including the creative and scholarly activity of quality online course development in the promotion and tenure process will yield great long-term value to both students and our institutions.

Recommendations

Based upon our analysis, we make the following recommendations for institutions committed to developing quality online courses.

- Include quality online course development in job descriptions and hiring contracts for faculty who will be expected to develop online courses. Clarity in expectations including course development that directly aligns to the promotion and tenure policy would assist in establishing common goals for faculty and the institution.
- Provide a clear statement in the promotion and tenure policy about the value of developing quality online courses. This should help address the reticence of faculty to develop quality online courses since it will be a positive contribution toward promotion and tenure.
- Invest in support for faculty such as instructional designers, professional development, release time, stipends, and recognition for quality online courses. High levels of support for faculty to meet the expectation for developing and teaching quality online courses should increase the likelihood of success and integration of quality in online as the cultural norm at the department, college and institution levels.
- Call to administrators and P&T committee members to understand the time, effort, and rigor required in developing quality online courses and as noted above value this investment. Increasingly, ensuring quality in online courses is an accreditation issue. Thus, administrators and faculty need to understand the investment in online quality by the faculty, department, college, and institution.

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