

Administrators' Views on Factors Influencing Full-Time Faculty Members' Participation in Online Education

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Abstract

This pilot study was conducted in order to explore factors that facilitate and inhibit the teaching of online courses from an administrative perspective. A random sample of community college and public and private universities was selected, and administrators working closely in online education were invited to participate. A qualitative (interview-based) research design was used. Administrators of two public universities, one private university, and two community colleges participated; 12 interviews were completed and 1 additional participant e-mailed responses for a total of 13 data sets. Facilitating factors included concerns for institutional survival, student demand, fulfilling professional responsibilities to one's field by expanding access to the profession through online programs, and the flexibility afforded by online courses. Inhibiting factors included preparation time in terms of designing high-quality online courses, fear of and resistance to change, the fit between online education and select curricula, and missing the "energy" of the classroom. The study considered blended education as well but the data pertained exclusively to online education. Disruptive Innovation Theory (Christensen 2003; Christensen et al. 2011) was used to interpret the data.

Statement of the Problem

This study explores the factors that facilitate and inhibit faculty members' participation in online (including blended) education in colleges and universities in one Midwestern state. Given the growth in online education (IVC Report 2010), a focus on both facilitating and inhibiting factors may seem paradoxical. On the one hand, literature suggests that online education is a "growth industry" (IVC Report 2010); on the other hand, negative perceptions of and resistance to online education on the part of faculty continue (Ruth 2006). By determining what these facilitating and inhibiting factors are, administrators in similar settings throughout the world may be able to articulate and influence policies and procedures so that online education enhances rather than inhibits the future of higher education.

Related Literature

While not as intense as a decade ago, skepticism about online learning still persists in higher education today (Benton 2009; Ruth 2006). As is well known by scholars of the pedagogical process, quality education has to do with instructor expertise, course content, teaching methods, student engagement, and related supports (Fink 2010; Cross 2005; Magjuka, Shi, and Bonk 2005). Delivery modes are important to the extent they are used properly and their complexities and flexibility are not taken for granted (Bornsdorf 2005). At the same time, earlier assumptions about the value of online education are being challenged today by full-time faculty (Paulsen 2003; Magjuka, Shi, and Bonk 2005). Some institutions recognize the value of online education for what residential instruction cannot offer: courses in specialized areas that need the support of a broader array of students than exists on a single campus; flexibility and access to those unable to attend programs on campus; and innovative ways of teaching that are encouraged in online education, which can enhance all modes of instruction.

Faculty reward structure, intellectual property (Bonner 2006), and administrative support (Magjuka, Shi, and Bonk, 2005) are among the factors that research in this area suggest influence faculty members' participation in online education. A 2003 meta-analysis of the literature found that both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards facilitate faculty participation (Parker 2003). The early research seems to indicate that while faculty are motivated by increased stipends and release time, the lure of a more flexible schedule, the ability to reach a wider audience, and self-satisfaction can be more significant motivators. Literature also indicates that across the United States, colleges and universities are transforming themselves so they can "capture the growing learning market" online (Magjuka, Shi, and Bonk 2005). Given the growth in online education in Illinois (IVC Report 2010) and across the country (Allen and Seaman 2005, 2008), researchers have begun to explore those factors that both facilitate and inhibit participation of faculty in online education. Allen and Seaman's 2008 report found that the most important motivational factor for teaching online was flexibility in meeting student needs. Recently, a major study released by the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities—Sloan National Commission on Online Learning (2009) increased our understanding of faculty perceptions of online education. It found that while the perceptions of inferior quality remains an issue for many faculty members, increased access for students is a motivating factor to participate. In addition, the lack of campus support structures e.g., instructional design & technical support, and additional effort on the part of the faculty are seen as barriers to participation.

Disruptive Innovation Theory and Online Education

Disruptive Innovation Theory (Christensen, Aaron, and Clark 2003) postulates two types of technological change: sustaining technological changes and disruptive technological changes. A sustaining innovation is an improvement of a product or service that grows out of the needs and desires of existing customers. Such innovations may enhance a product, but will not lead to major changes in the market or its audience. In contrast, a disruptive innovation is one that replaces the original product with something that is more easily accessible to a new population of customers, enabling new companies to emerge and then dominate the industry (Christensen et al. 2011).

Many have pointed to online education as a disruptive innovation within higher education. A market that was not previously well served has seen its options for education enhanced as the number of online courses and programs have grown. Many established institutions of higher education, late entrants into online education, are now seeking to reach this underserved market in order to compete with early adopters. It should be noted, however, that online education in itself may not be classified as either sustaining or disruptive. Many institutions of higher learning have introduced online or blended elements to their courses, either to improve instruction or to alleviate resource constraints on campus. In these cases, the innovation would be a sustaining one because the market they are serving remains the same, and the innovation can be easily absorbed into the current organizational framework. It might be argued as well that online courses offered by community colleges can be sustaining innovations. These colleges have traditionally reached out to students who need flexibility and lower-cost options, so the population they serve with online education may not be radically different than the one they serve in the classroom. Online education has helped them extend their reach, but not radically alter their mission.

However, we have seen many examples of disruption as online education has expanded. The University of Phoenix, a private for-profit entity, chose to serve a population that wanted a lower-cost option than many universities, allowing students to earn their degree without having to move to campus or pay for brick-and-mortar buildings and top professors. While these students may have missed out on some of the benefits of college life, many did not want these benefits nor have the resources or flexibility necessary to take advantage of them. A population that had been underserved or not served at all was responding to this new, disruptive model. While some have sought to marginalize for-profit online institutions, many mainstream institutions of higher learning are now seeing that this previously ignored population may be one that will help them survive into the 21st century, (Allen and Seaman 2008) This has led to a great deal of debate as faculty and administrators respond to a changing environment.

What would Disruptive Innovation Theory predict in terms of faculty and institutional perceptions of online education? First of all, one would expect that innovation related to online education would be initially a "bottom-up" affair. Rather than seeing the expansion of online education beginning with a strategic plan formulated in the boardrooms of leading universities, one would expect that the movement would be initiated by those who are in direct contact with the underserved. These individuals and institutions would see firsthand how online education would benefit students who do not fit into the traditional model of education.

Secondly, one would expect that those institutions that are already serving a population that seeks a low-cost, flexible education would be the first to jump on the bandwagon. For these institutions, particularly community colleges, the innovation would be minimally disruptive, and in fact go along with the core mission of the college to provide an education to those who don't want to or cannot move to a residential campus. One would expect that the faculty at these institutions would have more positive perceptions of online education, and would have chosen to participate at an earlier time than their peers at institutions serving predominantly residential students.

Method of Inquiry

A qualitative research design was used for this pilot study. Questions were constructed by the investigators to guide the exploration. A semi-structured interview approach was chosen to facilitate a substantive exploration of factors influencing participation in online education. The intention of the pilot was to gather generic themes based on administrator perceptions and experiences that would illuminate issues facing higher education, in terms of faculty participation in online education. The data gathered would be used to help design a survey instrument for the second phase of research focusing on faculty perceptions of factors that facilitate or inhibit their participation in online education.

Two public universities, one private university, and two community colleges participated in this study—all were located in one Midwestern state. Twelve interviews were conducted and one additional participant e-mailed responses to the questions. Eight of the interviews were conducted in person; four were conducted via telephone, and one by e-mail. Participants held

administrative roles, although several also held faculty appointments such as department chairs.

Results

Facilitating factors were grouped by institutional, departmental, and personal themes. For example, at the institutional level, survival was noted as a facilitating factor for engagement in online education—campus enrollments in some cases are on the decline and in order to thrive, some institutions are now required to offer degree programs online. In one case, an institution was about to “close its doors” and a shift to online education enabled the entity to remain viable. In another case, online education facilitated an influx of revenues without the expense of new buildings. The institution became more efficient in course delivery and was able to expand what it could offer.

Furthermore, a number of administrators noted the relevance of online education to core missions of their institutions. One institution stated that online courses enabled it to reach students who hadn't been reached before, fulfilling its mission to increase access. Another example was a school of nursing that found it necessary to move online, given the shortage of nurses in the United States and the mission of the school to provide opportunities for prospective nurses to be well educated.

At the departmental level, facilitating factors included financial incentives and competitive necessity. An increase in tuition revenue would help them survive in the midst of cutbacks at the institutional level. With competition, a college of business noticed that an increasing number of colleges of business at peer institutions were moving online. This became the “tipping point” for this college of business to make the adjustment. At the same time, departments saw that their students (both on campus and nonresidential) were demanding online courses in order to be able to afford higher education. They saw that it was through the flexibility of online education that students are able to retain employment and also not have to travel or relocate to fulfill educational goals.

On the personal level, stipends provided by the institution were a motivating factor for participating faculty, as well as the ability to teach their online courses on-load. In addition, the flexible schedules that appeal to students, also appeal to faculty. Faculty have more time for research and deeper discussions with students through online learning and so flexibility and access emerged as facilitating factors for faculty participation. Faculty themselves have demonstrated increased interest in technology. In one case, a faculty member whose first experience teaching online was negative returned to online education with a passion for it after completing an online degree program for professional development from another institution. Improvements in technology support enthusiasm on the part of faculty who don't want to “put PowerPoint slides online.” Rather, faculty often wish to use online education to do what they aren't able to do in the classroom in terms of strengthening instructional options. Similarly, faculty members who have been skeptical see their peers being successful and even enjoying teaching online, and that promotes their engagement.

As for inhibiting factors, they were grouped by the themes of pedagogy, perceptions, and support. Pedagogical concerns included the devotion of time required to adapt courses to high-quality online formats and the need to ensure a good fit between online education and the curriculum. For example, it was stated that “courses that are hands-on, like studio art” were deemed not “compatible with an online teaching format” by some participants in the study. Also, there remains discomfort on the part of select faculty because they have limited experience teaching or using technology. In one case, supporting faculty in one department needed to wait until a “chair” retired as the “chair” was highly resistant to online teaching. Once the person retired, the department was better able to pursue online education.

At the same time, there remain perceptual barriers to teaching online. For one, some faculty members miss students' energy and interactivity, more easily found in the classroom than online. For another, there emerged in this sample a sense that some faculty still consider online education not as high quality as residential instruction. One administrator stated that there was “a belief that online education isn't a quality education,” particularly within some departments. Others were at points in their careers when they didn't want to learn something new. Some felt excessive pressure to “jump on the bandwagon” of online teaching even if they didn't think it was the best format for their courses. There remained a question on the part of some in this study of whether or not online education was a good match for their respective institutions, particularly when it was seen as contrary to the sense of community they were known for.

Support issues that emerged as limiting factors pertained to technical and instructional design support. Support for online education in terms of providing technical expertise as well as instructional design assistance varied within and across institutions in this sample. In some cases, there was a lack of assistance provided to faculty to adapt their course material to a high-quality online format. In other cases, the institution provided some initial support (such as an initial workshop), but expected faculty members to do most of the course design themselves. There was also the question of “Who helps when the technology doesn't work?”

The results also yielded several findings that were neither facilitating nor inhibiting factors for online education. These included: Faculty at one community college were so eager to teach online that administrators found the challenge was not encouraging participation, but rather encouraging a balance of face-to-face and online course loads. Similarly, tenured university faculty teaching exclusively online who have moved out of the campus region may not be available for work that requires more active “residential” participation. At the same time, faculty enthusiasm or lack thereof for teaching online did not present a consistent demographic pattern in terms of rank or age, based on the data.

Discussion and Recommendations

According to Disruptive Innovation Theory one would expect, and this research confirmed, that innovation related to online education was for the most part a “bottom-up” affair. Based on this preliminary study, faculty members have been the driving force behind the growth of online education at the institutions in this study, rather than administrators requiring such a shift. However, demographic factors (such as declining enrollments and increased need on the part of students to balance formal education with employment) suggest a convergence of factors that facilitate or inhibit faculty participation in online education. Institutions in the sample recognize the need for expansion online to meet societal needs. This in turn reinforces faculty members' earlier commitment to online education. However, fear of the unknown remains a limiting factor for many faculty members in terms of online education.

At the same time, based on the theory, we would expect those institutions that are already serving a population that wants a low-cost, flexible education would be the first to jump on the bandwagon. While the community colleges in this study were highly invested in online education, it is also the case that four-year institutions with an historic teaching mission were also actively engaged in online education. More “traditional” research universities in the sample were slower than the other types of institutions to adapt to online education; however, this study suggests that such institutions are using online education to broaden their sphere of influence in the educational market. To that end, technological innovations may be sustaining at some institutions and disruptive at others.

As online education becomes part of the fabric of American higher education, factors that facilitate and/or inhibit faculty participation in online education continue to play a role in educational policy and practice. For example, faculty members enthusiastic about online education are at times leaving their “home” campuses physically and therefore are less available for campus meetings and events. How will higher education address this phenomenon? Similarly, faculty wanting to teach online may be less interested in teaching face-to-face. What implication does such a scenario pose for colleges and universities? At the same time, factors that inhibit faculty from teaching online also need to be more fully explored, including ways to “chip away” at negative perceptions of online education, create a balance in the curriculum of what programs are or are not conducive to online education, and provide necessary supports for engagement.

There is a dynamic interaction between faculty and administrators in terms of online education. While this study revealed generic themes related to facilitating and inhibiting factors for teaching online from an administrative perspective, faculty members' perspectives should also be explored. In this way, leaders in higher education can shape future directions in online education based on multiple points of view.

A follow-up quantitative study focusing on faculty perceptions of factors facilitating and/or inhibiting participation in online education is also recommended.

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