Assessing Faculty Leadership of Online Programs

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Abstract

Enrollment from online programs has become increasingly important to the fiscal stability of colleges and universities. Given the pivotal role program directors hold in maintaining academic quality, recruiting, and retaining students in online programs, there is a remarkable lack of literature available about their work and how their work is evaluated and acknowledged in the tenure and promotion process. This research gathered data from chief academic officers in the upper Midwest about their institutional practices surrounding evaluation of online program directors. Findings suggest most colleges and universities regularly evaluate faculty who serve as online program directors, but the evaluations may not specifically pertain to the unique responsibilities of that role. While about half of respondents reported the evaluations were used for tenure and promotion, that work was generally categorized as service – the least important of the teaching-scholarship-service trifecta of tenure and promotion. Recommendations for future research are presented.

Introduction

Online academic program directors who provide leadership and oversight to fully online degree programs are critical to the academic quality, enrollment, and retention of students in online programs. The continued expansion of online programs is vital to the sustainability of many higher education institutions. In his 2018 harbinger of college failure,
Grawe predicted 2025 to be "the cliff" where traditional enrollment drops dramatically– a death knell for colleges already struggling with declining enrollment and high discount rates. In his 2021 sequel, *The Agile College*, Grawe suggested reforms that expand recruitment and improve access to college may cushion the steep fall of traditional student enrollment. This strategy is not revolutionary; availability of and enrollment in online programs serving adult students has risen dramatically in the past decade (Seaman, Allen & Seaman, 2020). For many colleges, the additional revenue stream from online enrollment has been essential to maintaining traditional on campus programs (Bacow, Bowen, Gutherie, Lack & Long, 2012). Retaining quality leadership of these programs is essential to an institutional strategy that combats "the cliff."

Operational leadership of online programs is commonly situated in academic departments or divisions, with a faculty appointee designated as program director. Program directors are often charged with responsibility for curriculum oversight, assessment, accreditation, reporting, recruiting, retention, advising, staffing, and marketing to adult students (Cockley, 2012; Giles, 2012; Wiener & Peterson, 2019). Despite the critically important role of faculty program directors in the success of online programs, and therefore their critical contribution to sustained institutional reputation and enrollment, there is remarkably almost no research surrounding evaluation or recognition of this work - particularly in the faculty tenure and promotion process. This research is intended to establish a baseline for how faculty leadership of online programs is categorized and evaluated in the traditional trifecta of service, scholarship, and teaching for tenure and promotion. Findings may lead universities to re-evaluate their policies surrounding faculty evaluation in order to appropriately assess and acknowledge leadership of online programs.

Literature Review

The growth of online programs has created new administrative structures for academic programming that include both centralized and decentralized operations. Efficiency, scale and expertise have led colleges to centralize services for admissions, financial aid, billing, academic records, technical support, learning management system support, and the library to serve both traditional and online populations simultaneously (Cockley, 2012; Garrett, Legion, & Fredericksen, 2020; Jass, 2012; LaBelle, Lowenthal, & Rice, 2020; Williams, 2012). Decentralized operations are those led by a unit for online learning and the academic department housing the online program. These departments assume responsibility for the development and revision of curriculum, accreditation efforts, program marketing, recruitment, advising, retention, staffing and education of students.

This separation of responsibilities places directors of online academic programs as the driver for revenue generation (Giles, 2012). In a study of chief online officers, 47% of participants indicated online programs generate net revenue for their institution (Garrett et al., 2020). At institutions where the online tuition was lower than on-campus norms, that figure rose to 75% who reported their online programs were a source of net revenue (Garrett et al., 2020). While there is a growing body of literature related to chief online officers and a substantial body of literature surrounding department chairs and heads (Wiener & Peterson, 2019), almost no research exists surrounding online academic program directors despite their critical importance to institutions.

As a subset, studies on the role of graduate program directors may provide insight. Because almost 40% of graduate students are enrolled in a fully or partially online program (US Department of Education, 2019), it is logical to assume online program directors include graduate program directors. However, the number of undergraduate students enrolled in an exclusively online program is more than double the number of graduate students studying exclusively online (US Department of Education, 2019). Students enrolled in an online undergraduate degree completion program may have more in common with graduate students than traditional undergraduate students (Cockley, 2012), but very little research exists on academic directors of those undergraduate programs. Given that most colleges plan to launch at least one additional online undergraduate program and as many as 3-6 online graduate programs by 2023 (Garrett et al., 2020), research on academic leadership of online programs appears desperately needed.

Petersen, Chesak, Saunders and Wiener (2017) observed that despite the critical importance of graduate programs, the position of program director has not been fully formed or institutionalized and is under-researched. Their longitudinal study, updated in 2019 (Wiener & Peterson), resulted in preliminary findings about the role. Most program directors in their sample were faculty, and 93% held the rank of assistant, associate, or full professor. Most (73.7%) were appointed by a department chair, and over half (52.5%) had an unlimited term appointment. In their role as graduate program director, almost all were responsible for responding to requests for program information (95.7%), reviewing and signing forms (94%), advising students (91.4%), coordinating admission decisions (90.3%), recruiting new students (86.1%), and serving as a liaison between departments and other units (82.5%). These duties are significantly related to enrollment endeavors, particularly in recruiting and retention.

The research of Wiener and Peterson (2019) suggested almost all academic leaders of graduate programs are faculty. One distinct advantage of faculty leadership, particularly for programs available online, is the assurance of quality resulting from the tenure and promotion process (Williams, 2012). Unfortunately, program directors note their duties impinge on time for teaching and scholarship (Petersen et al., 2017) – both critical for success in tenure

and promotion. Though no research is readily available on the topic, program leadership is most aligned to the category of internal service in the scholarship-teaching-service trifecta of T & P – similar to that of department chair, and the least important category of the three (Gaurino & Borden, 2017; Green, 2008). More, there are no standardized evaluation measures to assess or validate the quality or impact of work performed by an online graduate or undergraduate program director.

Clearly there is a conflict of interest for program directors and institutions. Faculty who lead online programs are integral to developing quality programs, and ensuring there are students enrolled in them. The enrollment is necessary for the longevity of their institutions. Regrettably, their service is most important to the success of their institution, and least important to their personal success in tenure and promotion. The purpose of this exploratory research is to establish a baseline survey of how institutions have organically evaluated and acknowledged the work of online academic program directors in tenure and promotion decisions.

Methods

Of the 132 public and private nonprofit colleges located in the upper Midwest states of Iowa, Minnesota, North Dakota, Nebraska, South Dakota and Wisconsin, email addresses for 113 chief academic officers (CAOs) were obtained from publicly available websites. CAOs were invited to participate anonymously in a brief digital survey to share data pertaining to their institutions' approach for evaluating online program directors, and whether/how the evaluations were included in tenure and promotion. Participants were invited to share the survey with a designate at their institution best suited to provide accurate responses if they were unable to complete it. The survey was responsive; questions were presented to participants based on their answers to previous questions using survey logic. The institutional review board of Northwestern College approved the application for research and experimentation, and survey participants provided their consent to participate by completing the survey.

Findings

Of the 113 invitations to participate, 30 participants provided answers to the survey questions for a response rate of 26.5%. Participants were invited to share their name and email address if they wished to read the completed research after it was published, and 23 of the 30 participants (76.7%) provided that information, suggesting high interest in the research question. The volunteered email addresses allowed for verification that participants were representative of the research sample. CAOs from all five states responded, 10 from public colleges and 19 from private nonprofit colleges. Four colleges were large (more than 10,000 students enrolled), three were medium (5,000 – 9,999 students), and 22 were small (fewer than 5,000 students). Most of the small college respondents were from the private nonprofit sector (18 of 22; 81.8%), and most of the large college respondents were from the public sector (3 of 4; 75%). The three colleges reporting medium enrollment were public institutions.

Of the 29 participants who responded to the question "Does your institution offer any fully online and/or hybrid online degree programs?" only 4 indicated a response of no. Two CAOs invited to participate responded directly to the researchers' email containing the survey link to indicate their institution did not have online programs, though they were interested in the research question. IPEDs data from the fall of 2018 indicated 25 of the 132 (18.9%) institutions in the research population had fewer than 10 online enrollments, which is a likely indicator those institutions did not have online programs (U.S. Department of Education , 2021). As 6 of the 32 (18.75%) CAO respondents provided data that their institutions did not have online programs, the sample appears representative of the population. The one participant of 30 who did not respond to the question regarding whether the institution had fully online or hybrid programs commented their institution held partnership in a consortium to offer "very few online programs."

Of the 25 CAO respondents who noted their institutions offered online programs, 24 (96%) indicated their online program directors held a faculty position. Only one institution, a private nonprofit college, indicated their online programs were led by staff members. Of the 24 institutions that reported faculty leadership of online programs, 19 (79.2%) noted the online program directors were tenure-track faculty and 4 (16.7%) institutions employed non tenure track faculty for those assignments. All ten public institutions reported their faculty program directors were on the tenure track, and 9 of the 14 (64.3%) private nonprofit institutions indicated their online program directors held tenure track positions. One of the 14 private nonprofit institutions did not respond.

Regardless of tenure, CAO participants noted evaluation of online academic program directors was a common practice. Of the 4 institutions who employed non-tenure track faculty online program directors, three specifically evaluated their program directors' performance in leading online programs. Those performance evaluations were conducted on a consistent basis; one evaluated bi-annually and one annually using a general employee performance evaluation. Both associated their evaluations with promotion in rank and salary. The other institution that employed non-tenure track online program directors evaluated their directors every three years on a faculty performance evaluation that was not tied to promotion.

Of the 19 responding institutions with tenure-track faculty online program directors, 12 (63.2%) evaluated their program directors specifically on their leadership of online programs. This practice was somewhat more common at public schools (6 of 10 respondents, 60%) than private nonprofit schools (6 of 14, 42.8%). The evaluations were conducted by a department head, division head, academic dean, promotion and tenure committee, or vice president of academic affairs.

There was little consistency in the measurement instruments used by institutions to specifically evaluate tenure-track faculty program directors' leadership of online programs. The following instruments were mentioned by the respondents: annual review document and promotion dossier, promotion and tenure portfolio, faculty performance evaluations, departmental annual review rubric, college performance evaluation for administrative employees, reflective narrative, self-evaluation, student evaluations, internal instruments and department chair evaluation. One respondent noted the criteria for evaluation stemmed from the department by-laws, another indicated the criteria for evaluation were provided in the agreement between the state system and the faculty organization, a third pointed to department criteria, and a fourth indicated evaluation was based on the duties listed in the job descriptions.

Program directors' leadership of online programs was considered as part of the tenure and promotion process in 11 of the 12 cases (91.7%) where the tenure-track faculty were evaluated specifically for their leadership of online programs. In the one instance where it was not considered in tenure and promotion, the respondent noted the institution was considering ways to include it. Seven of the 11 (63.6%) institutions who consider faculty leadership of online programs in tenure and promotion attributed program leadership to the service category of the promotion and tenure review process. One included it in the teaching and service categories. Another respondent stated categorization depended on the size of the program; it may be considered either service or special administrative assignment. One respondent noted "the program director and program lead roles are considered as a part of service, though work done related to curricular review and development can be counted toward teaching." That institution also allowed for a path for scholarship for faculty with "engaged scholarship agendas." In five of the six instances where the online program directors' responsibilities were not specifically evaluated, respondents indicated the online program directors' role still counted toward tenure and promotion but did not provide details on whether the work was attributed to service, teaching, scholarship, or a combination thereof.

Of the 19 respondents who reported their online academic program directors were on the tenure-track, 16 (84.2%) addressed the frequency for which their online program directors were evaluated. Eleven of the respondents' institutions (68.8%) performed evaluations on an annual basis, four (25%) indicated it was dependent on the status of the faculty, and one respondent (6.2%) stated there was not a formal process for evaluation. All sixteen respondents indicated the online program directors were held to the same standards and expectations as face-to-face discipline-specific program directors in relation to tenure and promotion.

Discussion

This study encouraged chief academic officers to share how their institution categorized the positions of online academic program directors and reflect on their institutional practices for evaluating the work of those employees – particularly as it related to tenure and promotion. From this sample, it is clear institutions have elected to task faculty with the role of leading online academic programs as opposed to staff members or third-party vendors. The majority (79.2%) of those faculty leaders are on the tenure-track. This finding reflects previous research on the characteristics of graduate program directors (Wiener & Peterson, 2019).

More than one-third (37%) of CAO participants noted their faculty were not specifically evaluated on their work as online program directors. Of the 63% of respondents who indicated their online academic program directors were evaluated, most (91.7%) used the evaluations for tenure and promotion decisions. Despite that commonality, the actual measurement instrument, evaluator, and timetable for evaluation varied. A few CAOs noted evaluation was based on the specific job description and formalized duties for online program directors, but most identified instruments like general employee performance evaluations, self-reflections, portfolios, faculty annual review documents, student evaluations, department chair evaluations and administrative employee evaluations that may not be well aligned with the unique responsibilities of the online program director – particularly in the areas of student recruitment and retention. As student recruitment and retention are of utmost importance to institutional enrollment and financial goals, this deficit may fail to convey the value of the program directors' work in the tenure and promotion process. One survey respondent noted "Our online programs are mostly at the grad level. In general, the work of the graduate program directors is invisible and underappreciated. I like the idea of a review process to help shed some light on how much they are doing." Another participant stated "There is not a formal process for this for most of our programs. This survey has made me think there should be."

As suspected, most CAO participants (91%) noted the work of online academic program directors was typically categorized as service in tenure and promotion. Research suggests program directors are responsible for functions from curriculum to marketing, admissions to accreditation, and advising to budgeting, but this is all reviewed in the service category of tenure and promotion. Since service is often the least weighty criteria in tenure and promotion, faculty may be disincentivized or disadvantaged by serving in program director roles – particularly those who are pre-tenure. It is possible institutions represented by the CAOs who participated in this research weighted the service of online program directors differently through their systems of portfolios, self-evaluations, and evaluations based on job descriptions. Delving into the weighting for service for online academic program directors was beyond the scope of this research.

Several participants observed that tenure and promotion categories are antiquated. One stated "the traditional categories of faculty evaluation do not fit the needs of today's college, particularly the need for innovation and growth." Another indicated a desire for a fourth category related to entrepreneurship or leadership. The traditional teaching-scholarship-service trifecta of tenure and promotion must be modernized to effectively evaluate and acknowledge the contributions of online program directors.

Areas for Future Research

Three distinct areas for future research should naturally evolve from this baseline survey of institutional practices for evaluating the work of online academic program directors, particularly in tenure and promotion. There is a void in the research about online academic program directors that must be remedied. Initial research should seek to uncover whether the common responsibilities of graduate program directors revealed in the study by Wiener and Peterson (2019) are the same as common responsibilities of online program directors, which include both undergraduate and graduate programs.

In the same way common measurement instruments have been created, tested, and adopted for online teaching, performance evaluations should be developed for online program directors based on research pertaining to their common responsibilities. It would be advantageous to recognize and evaluate the academic, enrollment, and administrative efficacy of online academic program directors. Large nonprofit organizations and accrediting bodies like the Online Learning Consortium, Southern Regional Education Board, and Quality Matters who have experience developing evaluation instruments for online learning may be particularly well positioned for this research and dissemination.

Last, future research should analyze alternative models for tenure and promotion that recognize the impact of faculty leadership outside the traditional tenure categories of teaching, scholarship and service. If institutions have been organically changing the weight of service for online program directors to exceed the weight for teaching and scholarship, that should be brought to light and normalized as an appropriate structure for this group of faculty leaders.

Conclusion

The online academic program director role is critical for maintaining academic quality and discipline-specific program expansion. Institutions need to evaluate online program directors on criteria directly tied to the online program director role. Their work as an online program director should be heavily weighted in the faculty promotion and tenure process. Online programs are expanding access to high quality education, while providing new enrollment streams and contributing significant revenue to higher education institutions. Online program directors should be recognized and rewarded for their overall contribution to the institution.

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