A Case Study of College of Business (COB) Faculty Attitudes, Perceptions, and Concerns Related to Distance Learning

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Abstract

Abstract With the continuous advancements in technology, public not-for profit higher educational institutions have experienced a significant increase in the demand for distance learning. As a result, public not-for profit higher education institutions are striving to meet the demand and remain competitive and relevant in the industry of higher education while concurrently ensuring that they are providing the best quality of education that can be offered for purposes of distance learning. When considering faculty in distance learning, faculty play a significant role in ensuring that the quality of education is preserved and reflected throughout curriculums and programs unrelated to the instructional method selected. Therefore, understanding their thoughts and perceptions of distance learning is paramount to uncover areas for improvement since they are the ones that experience the impact of distance learning first hand. Therefore, the results of this qualitative case study of a college within a major four-year public not- for profit higher education institution were used to determine the attitudes, perceptions, and concerns of faculty members who teach in a distance learning environment. Being informed of underlying perspectives that faculty grapple with is imperative for institutions to improve organizationally. As a result, removing obstacles that can hinder change can assist institutions' administration to discover innovative approaches that foster an atmosphere where distance learning can thrive and increase a greater embrace by faculty.

Introduction

Advancements in technology over the last two decades have led to distance learning (DL) becoming one of the most popular formats demanded for the delivery of higher education programs. At the beginning of this century, for instance, Merriam and Caffarella (1999) pointed out that:

"Computer- assisted instruction, teleconferencing, inter-active videodisk, the internet, and the World Wide Web are expanding the possibilities of meeting the growing learning needs of adults" (p. 17).

Distance education enrollments have continued to grow even in the face of declining overall higher education enrollments (Allen, Seaman, Poulin, and Straut, 2016). Public institutions command the largest portion of distance learning students with 72.7% of undergraduate and 38.7% of graduate distance learning students (Allen et al., 2016). Such significant increases can be attributed to the convenience that distance learning provides to today's college students, especially non-traditional students who are typically 32 years old, have full-time jobs, are married, and may be in circumstances that prevent them from being able to come into a physical classroom (UTEP Connect, 2018; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Over the last two decades technology has become interwoven into the very core of American universities' instructional methods as they attempt to remain relevant.

Evolution of Distance Learning

Finding innovative ways to serve students, many of whose circumstances present challenges in terms of being able to attend classes in a physical classroom, have been found to exist as early as the nineteenth century. According to Crotty (2012) "distance learning began in 1892 when the University of Chicago created the first college- level distance learning program" (p. 1). According to Bartha (n.d.):

An Englishman, Isaac Pitman, is also credited as an early pioneer of distance learning. He began teaching shorthand by correspondence in Bath, England in 1840. Students were instructed to copy short passages of the Bible and return them for grading via the new penny post system. (para. 3)

As the years progressed into the 20th century, so did distance learning. Distance learning began to use the venues of radio broadcasting and television to educate students in the early1900s and well into the 21st century. The use of computers as a method to deliver distance learning, however, has had by far more impact than many experts ever expected it would. Gaytan (2007) shared that, "In the 2000-2001 academic year, 90% of 2-year and 89% of 4-year public institutions offered distance education courses (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006)" (p. 1). In 2007, a significant increase of students enrolling in fully online programs occurred during the United States' economic downturn when many adults lost their jobs, and propelling many who did not have degrees to return to school to earn a degree and make themselves more marketable. The idea of not having to go to a physical classroom to earn a degree became very appealing to this particular demographic. It was during this economic downturn when private, for-profit, fully online institutions, such as Kaplan University and the University of Phoenix, also saw a significant increase in their enrollment numbers because they were providing a level of service in higher education that traditional universities were just starting to offer.

Leithwood (2005) in his synthesis of previous studies reported that factors that posit challenges to the virtual school leaders are both internal to leaders, as well as features of their external environment, and are critical to address to give rise to successful school leadership.

Increase in Adoption of Fully Online Platforms by Traditional Public Universities

In 2013-2014, Florida International University (FIU) and the University of South Florida (USF) led the State of Florida in the number of undergraduate programs offered fully online (FIU Online, 2014). FIU went on to brand the name "FIU Online" (FIU Online, 2019) and designed their online platform to assist students from admissions to graduation fully, and completely online. Currently, FIU's online learning division is a "one stop shop," servicing all programs and providing full academic, registrar, and financial services support through a user-friendly platform. Its related faculty policies are similar to those of Kaplan and Capella, (e.g., a requirement of responding to students inquires within 24 to 48 hours). Faculty members are also required to check their online classrooms three times a week (FIU Online, 2019).

Apprehension Among Faculty

Amongst some faculty, there has been an apprehension about DL (Mitchell, Parlamis, and Claiborne, 2015). Many worry that the value of education is being compromised, while others are concerned about the very survival of "instructor autonomy" in the classroom (Ubell, 2016). More specifically, the concern of many faculty members is that, as administrators eye saving money, tenured faculty services will be rendered toward more curriculum development, leaving the actual teaching to adjunct professors and graduate assistants. One upside to this scenario is that tenured professors would have more time for research and development. On the other hand, there will be a need to ensure that students are receiving a quality of teaching and service that equals or exceeds traditional face-to-face (F2F) classroom instruction.

Academic Fear

While technological advances have created an avenue for online programs to flourish in higher education, "online courses have provoked opposition on the part of some academics, who fear that such advances will accelerate cuts to university staffing (The Digital Degree 2014). Such attitudes, perspectives, and concerns regarding distance learning can discourage the willingness of yet other faculty members to embrace distance learning. This, in turn, can hinder the implementation of distance learning within an institution.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to determine faculty members' attitudes, perceptions, and concerns regarding distance learning within a College of Business at a four-year research institution located in the southeast region of the United States. In addition, the research study was aimed to determine what factors shaped study participants beliefs and perspectives regarding distance learning. Finally, the research sought to determine strategies that can serve to foster increased willingness on the part of college faculty to embrace distance learning.

Research Questions

To fully explore the concerns, attitudes, and perceptions of faculty, this qualitative case study was guided by the following five research questions:

1. What are college faculty attitudes, perceptions, and concerns regarding distance learning?
2. What do college faculty attitudes, perceptions, and concerns, as expressed, stem from, how are they expressed, and why? (E.g., resistance related to the growth and development of distance learning within the selected college).

3. What factors, as identified, influence faculty attitudes, perceptions, and concerns
about distance learning?
4. What faculty values are similar to/different from those of the institution relative to distance learning?
5.What are faculty members' perspectives regarding how their values and institutional goals can coexist as growth and
development of distance learning becomes more prevalent, and is this attainable?

Significance

Distance education is a method of learning that is continuously growing exponentially (Koksali, 2020). Embracing such change not only involves embracing the technology itself, but also acknowledging and addressing the concerns of stakeholders responsible for its implementation. And while Business majors are the most popular majors offered online (College Consensus, n.d.), more research specifically focused on College of Business' faculty concerns, attitudes, and perceptions regarding distance learning is needed. More general research findings indicate that some faculty tend to be less willing to embrace distance learning initiatives (Kolowich, 2012; Urbell, 2020). The results of the current research can be used to make recommendations to effectively engage faculty in the DL change process.

Review of Related Research

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to determine faculty members' attitudes, perceptions, and concerns regarding distance learning within a College of Business at a four-year research institution. According to numerous writers, the evolution of Distance Learning, as a result of technological advances over the last two decades, has increased faculty concerns (Wingo, Ivankova, and Moss, 2017; Forest and Kinser, 2002; Kolowich, 2012). A study conducted by Forest and Kinser (2002) related to DL faculty found faculty to be concerned about intellectual property questions (who owns DL faculty ideas in terms of curricular and course development?) and the long-term effects of distance learning on the academic labor market. According to these writers, the utmost concern was the fear that higher education institutions, theoretically, were seeking profits [revenues] at the expense of learning.

According to a study conducted by Kolowich (2012), it was concluded that, "the faculty view of online quality is bleak, with 66 percent of respondents saying learning outcomes are inferior compared to traditional courses, and only 6 percent saying online is superior" (p. 3). Kolowich (2012) also mentioned that, "The level of concern about learning outcomes among faculty members is far greater than either the previously surveyed chief academic officers or the academic technology administrators" (p. 3). Wingo, Ivankova, and Moss (2017) also found that faculty were more concerned about the legitimacy of online education (and thus opposed it) than administrators were found to be.

Wingo et al. (2017) used the Technology Acceptance Model2 (TAM2) to determine faculty concerns. TAM2 is an extended version of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) which describes how people accept new technological tools. TAM2 has two constructs: (1) perceived usefulness (PU) and (2) perceived ease of use (PEU). One issue identified was that "Faculty were less satisfied with teaching online when they had technical problems" (Wingo et al., 2017, p. 19). Other faculty indicated a desire for "clearer statements of institutional goals and policies regarding online education" (Wingo et al., 2017, p. 20) and that "faculty teaching online needed strong institutional support in various forms" (Wingo et al., 2017, p. 20). Wingo et al., (2017) went on to find that under a factor termed "Image", an area where most of the concerns were found, the faculty had concerns about how teaching online would affect their image" (p. 19). Related study results revealed that faculty also worried teaching online would negatively affect their promotion and tenure attainment. These faculty indicated that they were unsure about how their teaching courses in an online format would be measured. Under the output quality of the TAM2 construct, Wingo et al. (2017) found that faculty were also concerned about interacting with students online, the potential for students to cheat in online courses, the effectiveness of various forms of technology used in online courses, students' technical skills, their access to equipment, and student ability to use technology effectively in online courses, (p. 21).

At the forefront of the major concerns for faculty regarding distance learning, has been cheating in particular in online education even though research has proven that there is no difference in the amount of cheating that occurs in online education when compared to other F2F teaching methods. Beck (2014), for instance, found that "students in online courses, with unmonitored testing, are no more likely to cheat on an examination than students in hybrid and F2F courses using monitored testing nor are students with low GPAs more likely to enroll in online courses" (p. 72). More recently, in reaction to the "Purdue-Kaplan Deal" one professor was quoted as saying for instance that, "when speed and cost become more important than quality, faculty are going to object" (Kelderman, 2017, p.1).

Conceptual Framework

Conceptually, one can look at this study of faculty members' attitudes, perceptions, and concerns through relevant change theories including, Senge's (1990) mental model, Vroom's expectancy theory (1964), Greenleaf's (1970) servant leadership theory, and Argyris and Schön's (1978) single and double loop theory.

Senge's (1990) mental model provides a lens through which one can understand how faculty perceptions and attitudes are constructed so that they can be viewed, discussed, and revisited through a lens that helps facilitate the existence of a thriving learning organization. Vroom's (1964) expectancy theory helps one gain an understanding of whether faculty either are or are not motivated to teach in distance learning environments. Greenleaf's (1970) servant leadership theory proves instructive to academic leadership relative to the implementation of distance learning in higher education. Finally, Argyris and Schön's (1978) provide useful insights with their single and double loop learning theory demonstrating the importance of two-way communication as an effective leadership change strategy necessary for organizational success.

Methodology

A qualitative case study approach was used to determine College of Business faculty members' attitudes, perceptions, and concerns regarding distance learning. The target population was COB faculty members that teaching undergraduate online courses on a branch campus of a 4-year higher education institutions. These faculty members also had prior experience teaching in a physical classroom (F2F) within the selected institutional setting

Site selection. The site selected was the branch campus of a large, public, non-profit research university's College of Business located in the Southeastern region of the United States. Creswell (2014) notes that, "in purposeful sampling, researchers intentionally select sites and [or] individuals to learn or understand the central phenomenon" (p. 205). The purposefully selected site was chosen based on its recently expanded distance learning programs throughout the institution, and especially within its COB. The site selected has also recently greatly expanded its DL resources available to both faculty and students. Further, the selected site's student body was representative of a significant number of non-traditional students. Lastly, the selected institution's COB was selected as a focal point as business majors are the most popular majors offered online ("College Consensus," n.d.).

Study population. For purposes of this study, only the selected institution's COB's department faculty teaching undergraduate online courses on [its south] branch campus was selected as study participants. These selected study population faculty members each also had significant F2F teaching experience within the selected institution's COB. Approximately seventy percent of faculty participants in this study worked at the selected institution for seven years or more with an average of teaching in a DL format for six years, with one outlier having taught at the selected institution in a DL format for only three years.

Data Collection

Data were gathered consistent with the use of a qualitative research design, including use of the interview method, document review and a review of the related literature, including print media.

Key documents included the selected institution's e-learning website, the selected institution's COB website, schedule of course offerings, the roster of COB professors serving at the selected study institution, and faculty syllabi. Through use of this information and related documents, data were gathered to determine what the selected institution, college, and study population had put in place to implement an online curriculum delivery environment.

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed based, in-part, on a systematic review of the related literature, the case study's research questions, and the study's conceptual framework. Nine interview questions were presented to six COB faculty members teaching at least one DL course to determine their attitudes, perceptions, and concerns about DL, and related factors influencing their attitudes, perceptions, and concerns regarding distance learning.

A document summary form was used to organize data and information collected for purposes of the study. One of the greatest advantages in using documentary material is its stability (Merriam and Tisdell (2016). "Unlike in [simply] interviewing and observation, the presence of the investigator does not alter what is being studied" (p. 182). Study related documents were reviewed to determine correlating vs. non-correlating trends between study participant interview responses and document reviews. Through use of these methods, the researcher was also able to gather data related to what the selected institution college, and study population had put in place to implement an online curriculum delivery environment.

Data Analysis

Data analysis provided for "the classification and interpretation of data collected in order to make statements about implicit and explicit dimensions and structures of meaning-making in the material and what is represented in it" (Flick, 2014, p. 5). For purposes of this study, COB faculty data collected were analyzed through the identification of key words and phrases with the intent of answering each of the study's research questions. In addition, Creswell's (2012) six-step process for "analyzing and interpreting qualitative data" (p. 235) was used, i.e., …preparing and organizing the data, exploring and coding the database, and describing findings and forming themes," (p.235)

Validity

For purposes of establishing internal validity, multiple theories (i.e., Argyris and Schön's single and double loop theory and Greenleaf's servant leadership theory) were used to set the framework, and two data collection methods (the interview method and document review method). In addition, and for purposes of triangulation, data collected were cross-referenced between the multiple conceptual frames undergirding the study, the documents reviewed, and interviews conducted. "Triangulation-whether you make use of more than one data collection method, multiple sources of data, multiple investigators or multiple theories—is a powerful strategy for increasing the credibility or internal validity of [one's] research" (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016, p. 246).

Reliability

Once finding emerged, the researcher was able to identify raw data that was consistent with the findings and used raw data as supporting evidence to ensure that findings were reliable. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016) "if findings of a study are consistent with the data presented, the study can be considered dependable" (p.252). All findings triangulated with data that derived from interviews, documents, and the literature to further ensure that findings of this research study were consistent and dependable through the strategy of triangulation. Triangulation also assisted in minimizing the researcher bias. Data sourced from interviews and documents were cross-referenced with related literature that stemmed from findings of other researchers.

Discussion of Findings

Study participants indicated that they viewed distance learning as being beneficial to non-traditional (adult) students as well as convenient for them. However, they did not, on average perceive distance learning as valuable for these students as face-to-face traditional classroom delivery in terms of educational outcomes. Further, study participants indicated, more often than not, that distance learning, in their view, is not for the weaker student. The potential for student cheating and large cap sizes were an also expressed concerns.

Factors influencing study faculty participants' attitudes, perceptions, and concerns related to DL were expressed as stemming primarily from their prior experiences with DL students in terms of the behavior and attitude of many of the students that they taught or were currently teaching in the DL format. The latter was stated as opposed to being related to the growth and development of DL in the higher education setting. As one study participant noted, for instance, "It takes a mature and dedicated student to be able to succeed in an online environment." If students are not self-directed, they will not succeed in a distance learning environment. Self-directed learning is a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, regarding their learning. Not every student can be a successful self-directed learner (Knowles, 1975).

Another faculty study participant pointed out that [in his view] significant distance learning opportunities have caused face-to-face in-classroom course enrollments to dwindle and appear that they are not in demand, even though it is the format that is often best for the weaker student in terms of more positive educational outcomes. This study participant went on to say:

"I think what's happening is that students are jumping on board in the online courses, a bunch of the weaker ones thinking it is easier. It's not, and they are not being successful there. Some of them are having to repeat the course twice, and at one point I am wondering how cannibalizing [this all is] because they are taking the online, so that causes the enrollment to go down in the regular class where there is a benefit to the regular class room environment.

Faculty study participants also, indicated that the selected COB learning formats, more often than not, resulted in them having to do more work and to work harder [for the same compensation] than would be required using a F2F traditional classroom format. Interestingly, however, it was also found that all of the faculty participants expressed their belief that their values and the selected institutional goals can [future] coexist effectively as growth and development of distance learning becomes more prevalent, and that such co-existence is attainable.

These study findings provide productive knowledge useful to practitioners such that colleges and universities can gain a more in depth understanding of what faculty attitudes, perceptions, and concerns are regarding distance learning, how they were formed, and what DL faculty do, on a daily basis. Implications for related organizational improvements also became more apparent.

Study faculty participants' contentions that distance learning is beneficial and convenient for the non-traditional student were consistent with the sentiments of Merriam and Caffarella (1999), who at the beginning of the beginning of the last two decades noted that distance learning provides an alternative pathway to higher education, particularly when they have family and job obligations. Study faculty participants also indicated that they saw the move toward

distance learning as an indication that the leadership at their institutions was striving to provide a resource for students who might not have had this opportunity otherwise. However, these same faculty did not view the educational outcomes and experiences of "distance learners" as comparable to those that in-classroom instruction provides. This perspective is also consistent with that of many writers found in existing literature at the time this study was conducted. For example, Kolowich (2012) described distance learning quality as "bleak," and learning outcomes as inferior when compared to traditional (in-classroom) courses" (para. 14) and, as "not being as valuable" when it comes to educational outcomes.

More specifically, participating faculty members' perceptions were that distance learning has not yet transitioned to the point of producing the level of quality and educational outcomes produced in traditional classroom settings. Undergirding this perspective, for instance, is the study finding that study faculty members' perceptions were reported as not deriving from factors, such as direct or indirect pressure from their College [of Business] to teach more online courses due to the increase in demand among students, but rather solely stemmed from their concerns regarding the quality of educational outcomes produced.

Generally speaking, one can presume that every educator desire to ensure that each one of their students, (including weaker students) is receiving the best possible education. The question here is, however, to what extent can this be done effectively in a DL environment. Of course, one must also consider that faculty must be current with "best practices" in terms of their varied students' learning styles, and not simply their own.

Cheating

An increased potential for student cheating stood out a primary faculty concern in the DL environment. For example, one faculty member study participant stated, "So, one thing is that when I put things online, my biggest concern is just that they are cheating." This faculty member study participant went on to share her view that, "distance learning is not reliable, particularly when it comes to conducting exams online."

Concerns about cheating in this study, however, are inconsistent with Beck's (2014) finding that "students in online courses are no more likely to cheat than students in hybrid and face-to-face courses using monitored testing. The current study faculty's attitudes perceptions and concerns were also inconsistent with Beck's (2014) findings that, "nor are students with low GPAs more likely to enroll in online courses" (p. 72).

On a positive note, several faculty participants, indicated that in their view, the university is aware of the potential for online cheating and has thus provided resources to faculty to assist in combating its existence, inferring that cheating is not as uncontrollable as may be perceived by others.

Course Cap Sizes

Study participants concerns relative to DL course enrollment cap sizes also revolved around potential effects on student educational outcomes, i.e., ensuring that students are comprehending what is being taught and providing students with quality feedback.
One study participant noted:

> "When you log into an online discussion, let's say that we are discussing a case or a topic or whatever it is, and there are 20 or 30 posts, you [the student] might read most of those, but if they login and there are 40 or 50, chances are that the students are going to get tired and/or distracted, and are not going to make it through all of them. So, the whole dynamic changes with that many more students, and I think it devalues the experience for a larger portion of the students. So, the caps, I think, are too high and [will] have an effect on the educational experience and outcomes for the students.

Implications include poor student performance, if not failure. Students repeating can affect an institution's matriculation and graduation rates which in turn, can affect the institution's meeting state metrics due to students taking DL courses who do not demonstrate the characteristics of being strong self-directed learners. To date, however, there is not enough significant research that has been conducted related to this phenomenon.

Prep Time

In addition to the fact that increasing cap sizes can be labor intensive intellectually and physically for faculty members who teach distance learning courses, the fact that faculty members are given the same amount of time to prepare for both their distance learning and face-to-face courses each semester and the short terms that reside within those semesters can be harrowing Online faculty members must create and establish the entire semester course generally before the semester starts. If there are changes, faculty members may have less than a week to do this preparation. This practice possesses its own issues; not only might faculty feel overwhelmed, but such circumstance can also lead to increased burn-out, and constrict "the art of teaching".

Institutional Goals vs. Faculty Values

Regarding institutional values, one study participant explained: "I think everybody realizes there comes a point you want to be competitive and help the student, but at what point, because you're trying to be so competitive with other universities, are you hurting the student." Each of these concerns, as expressed by faculty, can add to faculty having less of a willingness to embrace DL. Each should be taken into consideration when attempting to positively engage faculty with the implementation of distance learning modalities. At the same time, it is important to implement strategies to also bring awareness to students regarding DL classroom behavior and expectations. This can be done by ensuring that classroom norms are established within DL course syllabi and at the beginning of DL classes and as reflected in course syllabi for any given term so that concentrated learning can take place. The goal is to build an environment where both faculty and students thrive.

Summary and Conclusions

Faculty attitudes, perceptions, and concerns regarding distance learning have received scant, though increasing attention in the literature over the past two decades. Distance learning will continue to be prevalent in higher education, and faculty and students, respectively, will be key stakeholder in the delivery of online instruction and distance learning. This research sought to determine if there are concerns and beliefs faculty possess that make them more-or-less willing to embrace distance education and learning even though such advancements are inevitable. Along these lines, Senge's (1990) mental model details the importance of understanding how followers' (in this case, faculty) perceptions and attitudes are constructed so that they can be viewed, discussed, and revisited to help facilitate the existence of a thriving learning organization. This study adds to the existing literature and serves as a foundation for future related research. Further, this research points toward new directions in which higher education leadership can be more strategic and effective in their efforts to implement and support faculty in the design and delivery of DL programs. Continuously assessing faculty needs and perspectives, in the end, will also facilitate the institution's alignment with faculty expectations to gain and maintain a competitive edge in the DL enterprise.

Ignoring issues surrounding faculty attitudes, perceptions, and concerns can lead to lowered faculty expectations regarding their desires being met related to student educational outcomes, or even faculty burn out, due to the overwhelming demands of teaching in a distance learning mode. The latter is especially a concern in classrooms that are significantly large. Large distance learning environments credibly decrease the possibility of providing every distance learning student with quality education feedback. The quality of education provided must be consistent despite the instructional method that students select.

By taking a more serious and sustained look at faculty attitudes, perceptions, and concerns regarding distance learning, leaders can identify areas for improvement within the education organization that can enhance the distance learning experience not only for students but for faculty, as well.

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[Back to the Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration Contents](#)