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THE VIRTUAL PROFESSOR: A NEW MODEL IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Traditional colleges and universities face a unique challenge of increasing the scope of educational operations to accommodate the growing demand for online education. While online enrollments in higher education have grown at a rapid pace, faculty resources have remained stagnant at many institutions due to budget constraints and a sluggish economy. Many administrators in higher education struggle to find a balance between meeting course demands and maintaining quality of instruction while adhering to financial constraints. This paper proposes a model to manage costs by supplementing traditional faculty with virtual faculty who would operate primarily in an online environment and work for a fraction of their market costs. The concept of the virtual professor is facilitated by modern technology that allows remote participation in all aspects of academic responsibility ranging from campus meetings to student advising. This model is of particular significance to universities that are located in geographical areas where it may be difficult to attract and retain qualified faculty.

Keywords: higher education, online faculty, budget constraint, online education

INTRODUCTION

Economic downturns and the increasing growth in online education have changed the traditional scope of colleges and universities. In a recent survey of four-year public universities, 89% report offering some form of online education (Parsad & Lewis, 2008). Many institutions have been forced to maintain academic standards despite experiencing instructor layoffs and employee pay cuts (Simon, Jackson, & Maxwell, 2013). With the growing propensity of colleges and universities using online classes, it has become a challenge for administrators in higher education to provide adequate resources for staffing these classes.

Staffing issues for online classes is complicated by requirements set forth by certain accrediting agencies such as the AACSB and ACBSP mandate that a certain percentage of business faculty have terminal degrees. This requirement drives colleges and universities to find a balance between paying a minimal amount per class for an adjunct instructor versus hiring a full-time tenure-track or tenured professor to teach the class. Accreditation bodies also require business programs to have academically qualified faculty. To meet this requirement, colleges and universities must find a way to adequately staff these classes with professors who have terminal degrees and current research and still provide these resources in a cost-effective manner.

This paper proposes the concept of the virtual professor as a solution to accreditation and staffing woes. A virtual professor is a faculty member who does not physically appear on-campus more than once a month. Instead, they teach classes remotely and participate in campus meetings via electronic means such as Skype. A virtual professor can still maintain the same responsibilities as a traditional professor, including teaching, research, and service. The only difference is the virtual professor uses technology to actively participate in these various activities. For purposes of the accreditation of the college or university, these professors are considered as full time qualified faculty. The biggest advantage to the university lies in the reduced cost of the faculty. First, a virtual professor has no need for office space and does not require the university to provide space, computers, technology, and electricity. Second, a



virtual professor conducts classes in an online format, so there is no need for a physical class space. Third, a virtual professor is willing to accept a significant reduction in salary in exchange for choosing where they live and avoiding possible geographical relocation. With relocation being a non-factor, recruiting faculty becomes less challenging.

PREVALENCE OF ONLINE EDUCATION

The proliferation of the internet has created a huge demand for college courses to be taught online. The growth rate for online enrollments far exceeds the growth in higher education overall (Babson Survey Research Group, 2011). In response to this demand, colleges and universities have created a multitude of online classes and degree programs (Carroll & Burke, 2011) that are accompanied by a range of academic and economic issues.

One promising avenue to help universities contend with the issue of attracting faculty is offering flexibility in instructional methods used by the faculty member and the degree to which the faculty member is on-site and in residence (Bollinger & Wasilik, 2009). Technological advances in communication, collaboration, conferencing, and especially instruction have effectively reduced the amount of time a faculty member has to physically be on campus in the traditional sense. When recruiting new faculty, many potential candidates may be attracted to the flexibility that goes along with online alternatives to being on campus and presenting traditional classroom instruction.

The forces that urged educators to utilize technological advancements to offer distance learning as an educational alternative should also seemingly embrace the use of such advancements to offer faculty the flexibility to operate from a distance, in much the same way that many employees in industry have embraced the option to telecommute (Curran, 2008). A number of societal trends have driven online instruction as one of the most profound revolutions in higher education history. Students have become much more computer savvy and the internet has become a mainstay in the daily lives of all Americans. In addition, Americans have transitioned to more hectic, multi-faceted lifestyles that make the traditional four-year, on-campus collegiate model less practical. The alternative of distance education offers the benefit of higher learning for many people who may not obtain a college degree otherwise, such as those who are full-time employees. This environment can also offer the professor many of the same benefits via telecommuting and interactive online instruction that would be very attractive to many faculty members and minimize recruiting difficulties for a variety of institutions.

THE VIRTUAL PROFESSOR

With the recent economic downturn, college and university budgets have become increasingly tight. University administrators are often reluctant to pay the necessary salary required to hire qualified faculty for business positions. According to AACSB International (2011), the average starting salary for business faculty is \$132,000. The concept of the virtual professor allows universities to maintain accreditation while also staying on budget. Instead of hiring a large number of adjunct professors to cover classes, a virtual professor can cover the course load and still allow the institution to meet accreditation and staffing goals. Many schools and colleges of business around the country face obstacles in attempting to attract quality new faculty members to their institution. Obstacles could be issues as simple as budget cuts, or more complex geographical disadvantages such as modest school systems or inadequate housing options. Over the years, traditional schools located in rural areas and smaller towns have faced the challenge of attracting and retaining quality business faculty. Many schools also face the budgetary challenge of attracting academically qualified faculty members in disciplines such as finance and accounting where quality faculty are relatively scarce and the market rates to hire these faculty have become inflated over the years. Overall, it can be difficult for smaller institutions seeking to maintain accreditation standards to attract qualified faculty to smaller towns and rural areas with a budget restrictive salary.

By supplementing the faculty with virtual professors who would operate primarily in an online environment, administrators in higher education are able to fulfill their accreditation requirements at a fraction of the actual market cost. The concept of the virtual professor allows active, remote participation in academic responsibilities and provides a greater degree of flexibility in the work schedule. The virtual professor can still actively participate in student mentoring, advising, committee involvement, and curriculum development. In the same way that technology has changed and enhanced instruction, it has allowed alternatives for faculty contributions through technological media such as Skype, email, online conferencing, and other avenues. Virtual professors can also be instrumental in

maintaining the academic experience and quality of instruction for students. A number of studies in online education indicate that students rate online courses as highly as they do on campus courses and that learning objectives are met equally in both settings (Simon, Jackson, & Maxwell, 2013). The virtual professor is able to post instructional videos and voice messages, and be accessible to the students via email, instant message, chat rooms, and discussion forums online. Many of these online features promote an interactive element that supports a more active learning environment for students and results in higher satisfaction for both students and faculty (Bollinger Wasilik, 2009).

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