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3-1-2005

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Manouchehr Tabatabaei
mtabatab@georgiasouthern.edu

Bea Schrottner

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Recommended Citation

Tabatabaei, Manouchehr and Schrottner, Bea, "Who is Teaching Online? " (2005). *SAIS 2005 Proceedings*. 18.
<http://aisel.aisnet.org/sais2005/18>

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WHO IS TEACHING ONLINE?

Manouchehr Tabatabaei
Georgia Southern University
mtabatab@georgiasouthern.edu

Bea Schrottner
University of Munich
beantje@aol.com

Abstract

The number of courses offered online is constantly increasing at institutions of higher education. One main issue surrounding online courses is the quality of education when it is compared to in-class teaching. All parties involved should be concerned about this: The institutions, including faculty and administrators, must consider if there is a possible lack of learning of students enrolled in online courses compared to in-class courses. The concern of students is the impact of online courses on their career opportunities and advancement. The concern of employers might be the quality of potential employees with only online courses on their transcripts.

Many factors can impact the quality of online courses which include the adopted technology, the institution's infrastructure, administrative buy-in, administrative support of faculty, communication between faculty and administrators, faculty motivation and incentives. One important factor that is not given much attention is the qualification of individuals who are in charge of offering an online course, faculty. Offering an online course involves two important components: preparation of materials and delivery.

The purpose of this study is to investigate who is teaching in online education. An online survey of faculty teaching online courses is conducted for the purpose of this investigation.

Keywords: Online education, Quality of education

Introduction

Institutions of higher education are adopting online education for many reasons, one of which is competition. Many institutions pursue online education quickly to answer to competition, and therefore do not prepare themselves sufficiently for this line of education. Many consequently lack a long-term strategic plan for this major transition. However, a strategic plan is needed to properly define the technology and infrastructure to be used. A plan is needed for the communication between faculty and administrators to ensure they are on the same page. Last but not least, plan is needed for identifying who should teach online courses. A quick move often entails the hiring of part-time adjunct faculty members and the reliance on tenure-track faculty members who are fresh PhDs for offering online course. However, the blessing and involvement of senior tenured faculty may be needed to ensure the quality of online courses in institutions of higher education. Faculty members, who have been around for many years, know the environment and culture of the institution, and their substantial experience might make them more qualified to offer online courses.

The purpose of this study is to emphasize the importance of who is teaching online courses. A survey of faculty members teaching online courses will be conducted to answer the research question: Does the experience of faculty members impact the quality of an online course?

Related literature

With the increase in distance education (e.g. Allen & Seaman, 2003) there has been a rise in the academic publications which analyze factors that might motivate faculty members to teach online (e.g. Parker, 2003; Giannoni & Tesone, 2003; Rahman, 2001). This is a justified endeavor, since faculty are one of the decisive factors in ensuring the quality and the success of online programs. However, with the flurry of research on faculty motivation and strategies to engage faculty in online teaching it is somewhat surprising that little research has been conducted into the demographics of faculty who currently make up online educators.

A National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) study conducted in 2000 found that in 1998, 5.9% of instructional faculty and staff at degree granting institutions were teaching online. Those 5.9% taught an average of 1.5 classes online, in other words almost half their respective teaching load was delivered in an online format. The survey found part-time faculty taught a higher percentage of their for-credit course load in an online format (68%) when compared to full time faculty members (40.9%). With regards to academic ranking, instructors taught the largest percentage of their for-credit courses through a distance medium (59.3%), followed by full professors (50.2%), associate professors (45.4%) and assistant professors (44.3%). Tenure-track faculty, on average, taught the least of their classes through a distance medium (42.2%), compared to 43.3% for tenured faculty and 59.9% for non-tenure-track faculty. Slightly more female faculty taught online 6.8% (vs. 5.2% of male faculty). The age distribution of those teaching online showed that 5.0% of faculty under the age of 35 teach online, 5.5% of faculty between the ages of 35-44, 6.6% of those aged 45-54, 5.7% of those between the ages of 55 and 64 and 5.4% of those aged 65 years or older. These findings contradict the traditionally held view that older faculty members might be less supportive of technology.

The 2000 study by the NCES is the most comprehensive among the very few studies that concern themselves with demographics of faculty teaching online. Since the data for that survey was collected there has been a substantial increase in online courses and programs. In addition, there has been a significant advancement in supporting technology to offer online education. Therefore, a further investigation into who teaches online education is warranted. The current study attempts to compile faculty demographics, which are essential for adequately forecasting and planning online education.

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