Introduction

A FRAMEWORK FOR THE ANALYSIS OF CASE STUDIES OF ONLINE HIGHER EDUCATION

Executive Summary

In order to fully benefit from the case study approach to online higher education, it is useful to start with a social-economic model to frame this collection of case studies. All of the cases, examples, applications, contentions, and assertions presented in each of the chapters that constitute this collection can be best understood within such a broader framework that will be developed in the following introduction. Since this collection offers many diverse emphases and points of view, the editor presents a set of five basic propositions that incorporate many of the key points presented in the chapters. These propositions support an overview of the collection, and should facilitate an integration of the case chapters. The editor examines, limits, contextualizes, and explores these propositions in some detail, and concludes by presenting some empirical generalizations derived from his professional experiences and observations rooted in these propositions to provide a framework and base point for the reader.

Foundations

1. Revenue enhancement is the main criterion for advancing and evaluating the success of online higher education in all types of institutions.
2. Diverse role players in the process of online instructional programs have distinctive and sometimes conflicting interests.
3. The key dynamics of online education inevitably involve marketability, sustainability, growth, and expansion.
4. Perceptions of practicality and applicability become the basic indicators of online program quality.
5. Broad ranges of support and ancillary functions inevitably emerge and predominate in relation to online higher education.
Revenue is a common goal of public and private institutions, profit and not-for-profit. The only variations are how net revenues are allocated. While all institutions plow revenues back into programs, surplus revenues are variably distributed. Depending on the nature of the institution, net revenues may be distributed to owners (stockholders), they may subsidize conventional units of higher education institutions, advance general endowments, increase salaries of personnel who are only partially involved, etc. The key point is that online higher education is expected to bring in “profit” however this is termed, conceptualized or represented. While net deficits are tolerated for a period of time to incubate programs, deficits cannot be a permanent result of online higher education, unlike many conventional university programs that are subsidized by universities.

A principal responsibility of online administrators is to generate a positive revenue flow hopefully sooner, but definitely not too much later. While other criteria motivate administrators as well, without “profit,” online administrators’ longevity is questionable. This does not typically apply in other arenas of higher education where revenue is not a main criterion for administrative evaluation. It is ironic that not-for-profit, public universities will apply pretty much the same standards to assess the merit of online program administration as do for-profit institutions. The former may even employ administrators from the latter to implement “profitable” online programs, as I have seen the hiring patterns of top-level personnel among institutions.

Diverse and sometimes conflicting role players with their sometimes contradictory interests typify online programs regardless of institutional contexts. Although rarely exposed, conflicting undercurrents generate divides and political tiffs that may impact and impair program delivery. Goals and interests of the role players vary. Most initiatives, policies, and directives come from administration and very often reflect the revenue priority emphasized above. Most faculty focus their energies on course delivery, compliance with academic standards, avoidance of administrative sanction, and prevention of student complaints. Students strive for efficient course completion. Designers and tech support seek to provide contexts within which trouble-free academic activities may be undertaken.

When administrative directives, for example, require behaviors on the part of other role-players that expedite evaluation procedures, conflicts may result. Faculty may have to fill in rubrics, students may have to submit work in particular modes in ways that are not quite intuitive, designers must modify course structures, and tech support have to explain and support the initiatives to participants. Grumbling and hostility are not unusual and overt opposition and even resistance or subversion may occur as participants find that their lives are made more challenging by the demands. Examples of role and interest conflicts will be provided below.

Online educational programming is inherently expansive, more so than other delivery formats. Numbers are expected to increase as a measure of success and
effectiveness, and negative numbers are seen as failure. While in conventional universities, declining numbers are often tolerated, sometimes appreciated, and occasionally even sought after as a sign of quality, online programs must grow because of the criteria applied and the climate in which such programs are developed.

Growth requires marketing services which are often granted privilege so that other university units are expected to accede to their imperatives. The primacy of business interests in online education is distinctive since much marketing is done via the Internet. To attract recruits who have learned of the program online, the transition to coursework is designed to be as seamless as possible.

Growth must be sustained by not only increased enrollments, but by retaining current students. Traditional university rhetoric allowed for weeding out of lesser committed students, and some pride was implied in lower graduation rates as a sign of elevated educational standards. For current online programs, loss of students is not tolerable. Online programs need at least stable and growing course enrollments to meet the revenue targets while recruitment campaigns expand the registration base.

Applying a business model of market-sensitivity new programs are rapidly invented, implemented, tested, expanded, and sometimes abandoned. Such innovations are initiated by market research designed to determine the kinds of programs that will attract students and enable the graduates to market their gained competencies immediately upon graduation. Online programs come to resemble training facilities for corporations and agencies.

Image management along with manipulation of data to generate favorable impressions of online programs are essential to support administrative and marketing priorities. The idea presented to the public of “quality” education derives from rankings, scales, metrics, etc. While this may hold for all forms of education in the current period, it is more central to online program assessment because the immeasurable elements such as campus life and recreational facilities are diminished in significance if not absent.

Online program advertising on popular and social media seek to shape beliefs regarding the quality of the institution. The idea of a highly qualified scholarly faculty is replaced by the notion of instructors who derive their knowledge from field experience, or who are simultaneously employed in their field. Graduation rates are presented in ways that make the institution appear to nurture and facilitate student success. Placement data is framed in ways to encourage the sense that there will be surefire payoff for education. Online program quality is more likely associated with applicability, practicality and efficiency than other modes of instructional delivery.

The contemporary university has created many departments that are not directly involved in the educational mission. Online programs multiply the support units of an institution because of many factors including incessant technological advances, demands for broader access, complex assessments, etc. With the proliferation of
support services and functions, the scope of faculty is inevitably impacted. For example, course designers establish parameters within which subject area specialists must author their courses. Structures and systems are emplaced to require course authors to meet external criteria. The availability of flexible and innovative technology generates demands for utilization.

Online courses are team products subject to evaluation by experts in educational technology, administrators, academic committees, and so forth. Idiosyncratic course structures, whimsical creations, professorial oddities and subtle ironies are not likely features of online courses. Most such courses do not emphasize the personality of the author or even his or her identity. The online course essentially “belongs” to the university that has “paid” the faculty author in some form for the course. While the other team members are likely employees of the university or contracted to the school as consultants, the faculty author is most likely paid for the particular course so that it is no longer the unique property of that individual. Even if this author is a full time member of the university’s faculty, it is likely that the course is the “property” of the university. While these are legal matters subject to much variability, the central point here is that online program development inevitably involves many subsidiary and supportive services that require the collaborative involvement rather than the control of faculty.

**Online Faculty**

As an online instructor of well over ten years in diverse higher education institutions I have my own perceptions, observations and interpretations of the entire project of online course production, design and delivery. In the following I will provide my analysis within the above framework of selected issues that are examined by the authors of the case chapters.

As I have observed the main dynamics of the movement toward online higher education include economies of scale, positive revenue, and greater student access. To accomplish these and other related objectives, online university programs tend toward increasingly regulated, rule-guided environments that are frequently structured in great detail. Administrators who hold the reins must respond to market dynamics regardless of context, public, private, for profit or not-for-profit. Central administrative direction, regulation and control is a usual consequence of online programming.

Faculty in institutions with strong traditions of faculty autonomy intuitively detect that the emerging structures of online delivery necessarily adopt a business approach and in some cases have put up staunch resistance. Faculty resistance might possibly be a losing battle as university resources are increasingly devoted to business solutions and technological applications. It is not unusual that old-line faculty and committed scholars must be enticed to participate as we’ll see in some of our
case chapters, but the incentives and advantages for regular university faculty to teach online are not always substantial.

Since faculty except for the “stars” at major institutions are rarely revenue-drivers. They are likely to be modestly compensated to say the least, even if fulltime. Faculty members frequently have only minimal effective input despite rhetorical flourishes, and are readily replaceable components especially after creating courses for the university. Course authors may be given priority to teach their courses, but it often occurs that lesser specialized, lesser qualified instructors “teach canned” courses that they did not themselves write.

Much online instruction is provided by adjunct faculty who are less costly and more willing to comply with administrative expectations. It is not unusual that they are initially over-hired, and then underutilized while being held in reserve should demand change or if more valued faculty decline course assignments. For many institutions there is little incentive to hire more qualified, more advanced faculty since they might command higher compensation.

There seems to be a tendency for administrations to raise class-size and elevate cutoff points for maintaining lower enrollment sections. Lower enrollment sections may mean reduced faculty compensation. Larger class sizes are appreciated for their revenue benefit. Thus, it can happen that not very well compensated junior instructors teach large online sections not in their special areas of interest or competency.

In the traditional view higher education must be an experience that is guided directly and personally by a scholar/specialist who knows his or her turf very well. While online instructors who I have encountered are generally well-read, broadly knowledgeable, often experienced, mostly productive and positive persons, they are not infrequently assigned courses about which they have no specialty knowledge. It seems to this tradition-based writer that the essence of higher education especially advanced coursework is that it should be taught on-ground or online by specialists who have deep knowledge of a subject area that enables them to provide correction, revision, enhancement, qualitative feedback, and informed assessment.

**Canned Courses**

Canned courses are the hallmark of online higher education. Some institutions accept courses provided by vendors as the foundations for their courses because they come with the cost folded into a marketing/tech support package. More often, faculty are contracted to adapt publisher provided courses or write courses within strict parameters established by administration and enforced by professional course designers and tech specialists. These adapted and authored courses are established as the model or “canned” courses and would be taught by many different instructors.
Control is the core of the canned course. While some institutions allow adaptive flexibility to the instructor of the canned course, this freedom tends to decline over time as increasingly stringent criteria are applied in the administrative movement toward standardization. An independent-minded instructor assigned a questionable course may devote time and energy to revising the particular section. In my experience, some university administrations will accede to the changes, but others may not.

Canned courses make it possible for institutions to utilize lesser-qualified, and maybe lesser academically experienced course instructors. Since low pay may force adjunct faculty to teach many courses at different institutions, it may happen that students know more about the course content and requirements than partially focused faculty with limited actual instructional experience. A canned course in a shortened term becomes an easy route for an instructor to just go along with what's given regardless of the actual quality of the course. Concerned to avoid student complaints, sensing that administration would prefer not to be troubled by disputes, uncertain of some scholarly practices, overwhelmed with instructions from above, and needing high student evaluations, most adjunct online instructors of canned courses likely just try to get by, leave the course as it is, encourage students with upbeat, excessively positive, mostly uncritical comments, give lenient grades, and simply let things pass.

Canned courses make it possible for institutions to easily replace faculty. All options remain with administrators except that an instructor can choose to not teach a canned course. It is not impossible that declining a course means the termination of employment, so the understood pressure on the faculty is to accept whatever is offered regardless of the instructor’s perception and professional evaluation of the course, and implement the course in accord within its strictures.

**Grading Rubrics**

Scoring guides are very commonly provided to regulate and standardize evaluations, minimize complaints to administrators, and provide easy compiled assessments for accrediting agencies. They do not inherently provide the kinds of fluidity and responsiveness that traditional American professors are accustomed to. Forced levels of evaluations and categorizations also strictly regiment the papers students submit depriving students of the possibility to structure their work to include and especially focus on content of individual interest using creative or found perspectives.

Some instructors may feel constrained by the rubric, and may alter the final score with some manipulations. Thus, if the paper is simply poorly written but grammatically correct, one can comment on this. But if there is no grading category for quality of written expression, the instructor must either ignore this in the scoring or smuggle it in by using a category where quality writing doesn’t really apply. In
my observations, administrators will mostly look aside with tolerance toward this practice, but it could be risky if a student complains.

Scoring rubrics encourage students to meet the criteria. Even if a component requires creativity, it becomes a mechanical process of being creative to meet a standard. Scores are likely based on objective aspects that are defensible to student and higher administration. If an assignment is submitted on time, accomplishes all elements specified in the instructions, meets all rubric expectations, etc., an “A” grade is appropriate, even if the paper just meets standards.

Students learn to write to the rubric, and if subjective elements such as style and structure are not evaluated in the rubric, the student is not encouraged to consider these aspects. Furthermore, venturesome students who strive to produce a creative approach to the challenge may miss elements and be penalized for straying. Students generally prefer to have rubric grading because the expectations for assignments are fixed and the limitations of such evaluative modes are not immediately apparent. Thus, rubrics become more commanding, more detailed, more objective, and more determinative of the overall evaluation of student and even faculty performance.

### Learning Management Systems

Most often course platforms or learning management systems (LMS) are selected for administrative purposes with a focus on cost-effectiveness. Some examples are Moodle, Blackboard and eCollege (Pearson Learning Studio). When faculty are troubled by problems with jumpy systems, slow response times, inconveniently-scaled windows, failure to copy materials as intended, false new entries, grading and feedback issues, administration are usually not particularly concerned or attentive because of contractual obligations. Even student evaluations of learning platforms play a minor role in selections in contrast to the administratively-oriented concerns. Updates are determined by the service provider regardless of facility for faculty or students. In my experience newer versions sometimes offer lower levels of the kind of basic functionality that instructors and students need and desire. Tech support is asked to promote the advantages of newer learning systems and technical features whether or not there is practical benefit or greater ease for users. Thus, it seems to me personally as of this writing that Blackboard’s recent versions are less functional for instructors, less browser compatible, and more difficult for students to submit well-formatted posts than earlier versions.

Faculty are trained to use the platforms as given and are not consulted as to usability, desirability or customizability. While some universities encourage instructors to shape the canned courses they are assigned to their style, few have time or commitment to actually revise existing courses that have been formally approved and mandated by administration. Instructors may make some minor modifications
to canned courses such as posting current events along with some of their own boilerplate materials, and by inputting other items that raise no issue of copyrights or genuine authorial personality.

Making an online course personal is a realistic option only for tenured faculty at mainstream institutions who create their own online courses with the same degree of autonomy as on-ground courses. Indeed, these tenured faculty as I have observed substantially operate on their own rarely seeking assistance of course designers and tech support. Course quality varies with the level of the professor’s online design and teaching experience and knowledge. It does happen that highly gifted traditional professors who offer marvelous on-ground courses may not imbue the same quality into their online courses. Some professors do not fully realize the distinctive criteria that need to be applied to online instruction and try to transpose their conventional course into an online offering whole cloth. Poorly structured online courses may become very troublesome discouraging future faculty involvement.

While tenured and tenure-track faculty at conventional universities have a right to teach their courses their way in faculty-empowered and elite institutions, it is not the common practice for online adjunct faculty in most online programs especially in adult re-entry programs and for-profit institutions. But I’ve seen some very impressive work done by both instructors and students in all sorts of institutions using the advanced facilities and capabilities of the LMS, especially with graphics. A user can become fascinated with the creative possibilities of the LMS and devote hours to relatively minor adjustments to enhance the attractiveness and benefit of the learning experience, as has this editor.

Advisers

Many if not most institutions rely on professional advisers to support student progress through their programs. Very often these advisers align with students vis-à-vis faculty. It is not unusual that advisers offer direction that runs counter to instructional criteria. Some of my students have used advisers as leverage to gain some special privilege in a course, such as late submission permission, grade modification, waiver of requirement, etc. Advisers are full time university employees who are usually paid far more than adjuncts and can exert pressure on adjunct faculty, even if never made explicit. Students may complain to advisers about faculty more readily than to supervisors or administrators.

The ethic of advising seems to emphasize placating students, representing them to the faculty after students have not been able to obtain the results (i.e., grade) they feel entitled to. Thus, a student who cannot complete a course might ask the instructor for extra time to complete the work. Most university policies are designed to discourage Incompletes allowing them only if all work except a final project is
completed. While there may be rare occasions when a capable student cannot submit a final project after having done all the other coursework, more often it has happened in my experience that lesser capable students who have seriously underperformed in the course will request an Incomplete. When denied by the instructor, the student may turn to the adviser for support for their request.

An adjunct instructor in an engagement with a fulltime much more highly compensated adviser is at a severe disadvantage, and may feel pressure to violate policy to placate the student and obviate a possible complaint. At a minimum, much time and effort may be required for the instructor to justify the denial of an Incomplete when an advisor involved.

Since advisers represent students they may urge the instructor to, for example, allow a late admission student to enter an on-going course. As I have experienced it often happens that such students are not able to catch up, do not get the gist of the course, are not successful, and are hostile to the instructor. The instructor may need to devote extra attention to late entrants, and keep reiterating expectations that were established early to a student who may be overwhelmed with requirements to simultaneously catch up and keep up. Instructors who tend to decline late admissions to the consternation of advisers are likely to not be perceived in the kind of pro-student light that more tolerant instructors receive.

**Plagiarism**

To say that plagiarism is widespread and frequent in online courses is an understatement as I have observed. For the vigilant instructor it is quite easy to spot. But to pursue the issue with the student can be extremely burdensome. To inform the student that certain practices are not acceptable frequently elicits no response. Rarely does an admission come forth. Affirmations by students that there will be no recurrence without acknowledgment of wrong-doing, if expressed at all, are not unusually followed by repetitions, mostly taking sections of websites that are easily searchable by the instructor.

Supervisors and advisers are not pleased to have to move forward with plagiarism accusations, and the burden is on the instructor. The instructor must not only demonstrate the plagiarism, but show how efforts were made to rectify the problem all along the way. Much work for the instructor ensues with investigations, depositions, consultations, and it is always possible that the student’s position or “explanation” will prevail against the instructor who may be viewed as being difficult. An adjunct earning minimal compensation for the course, and having to teach many courses will likely see the futility of pursuing plagiarism. The instructor may ultimately allow it to pass without more than a casual indication of concern to the student.
This fits in with the entire avoidance of student complaint pattern that adjunct online instructors need to follow for continuous re-appointment. A student accused of lapses of academic integrity, criticized for inadequate performance, and given low grades, may turn against and accuse the instructor of insensitivity, incompetence, prejudice, etc. Adjuncts who have to defend themselves are rendered highly vulnerable even if vindicated. I have observed that instructors tend not to persist with criticism of any sort, even with blatant plagiarism.

This may dishearten some of the better students, who themselves can see how much is tolerated in online courses where all can see posts that clearly do not reflect original work. Questions are not infrequently raised by some students about overall value of the degree when they see what others present and is accepted. The degradation of academic integrity in online courses is a major concern that use of Turnitin and other technologies does not fully obviate except in the most egregious violations.

Instructor Retention

Very many of the faculty teaching online at various institutions are without tenure, and a huge proportion are adjunct faculty. The process of renewal and course assignments is a continuous one with student evaluations of instructors a major determinant of re-appointment. Since schools tend to over-stock faculty, selection very often becomes a popularity contest on two levels. Principally, faculty who provide minimum trouble, receive maximum positive student evaluation scores, and demonstrate willingness to teach whatever is offered will have the inside track. A relationship with the person in decisional authority probably does not hurt although I cannot confirm this from personal experience.

Faculty who create work for administration, experience friction with staff, students, tech support, etc., would be less likely to be given courses on a continuous basis. High student dropout rates, student complaints, nuisance requests, high maintenance requirements and the like, are predictors of discontinuance. Supervisors are pressured by administration to pressure faculty to comply with policies, and are armed with certain levers to “encourage” faculty to move in desired directions. The main lever is the capacity of supervisors to allocate limited course offerings to anxious and sometimes needy faculty. Interested faculty must comply to retain their teaching opportunities. Issues of academic freedom rarely enter the equation although lip service may be given to faculty autonomy.

More and more constraints, expectations and demands are piled on untenured and especially adjunct faculty with only at most rare positive incentives such as increased compensation, or anticipations of steady employment offered. Faculty are frequently required to not work for competitive institutions. They are expected to be consistently available without breaks in instruction, in effect at the beck and call of
their institution. In a counter-reciprocal manner, there is no enforceable commitment on the part of the university to renew the untenured faculty member beyond a limited contract or work agreement period. However, as I’ve experienced an instructor who complies with policy, does a good job, and gets along will likely be allowed to continue at whatever level of activity that meets the needs of the institution.

**Administrative Policies**

Faculty engagement is a major expectation of accrediting agencies which want to see open lines of communication and administrative support for faculty. To accomplish this universities provide Internet conferences, handbooks, checklists, “best practices” emailing, etc. These all essentially serve as vehicles for top-down transmission of policies. Faculty feedback is frequently solicited with surveys but are rarely heeded unless in accord with administrative policies. Policy is decided at the higher levels, sometimes with what seems to this writer to be pseudo-consultative practices. Faculty feedback rarely has any significant impact on policies. But the feedback may be used by administration to evidence their faculty engagement for accreditation purposes.

The policies that are handed down primarily support revenue stream rather than actual instruction. My observation is that there tend to be fewer faculty prerogatives and less favorable compensation procedures over time. The trend is to ever larger class sizes with more concern directed toward retention of limited capability students in an effort to improve student retention rates regardless of fit. A high course dropout rate is not looked at favorably in any instructor’s evaluation.

Nevertheless, online courses frequently have high dropout rates. Many students are bound to fall short of their degree objectives especially at open admission for-profit schools. Many entrants are unprepared, are coaxed to seek admission on promises of low interest rate loans with suggestions of enhanced employment opportunities, and emphasis on chances to obtain pay increases. Newly admitted students are encouraged to take remedial course and may even be required to do so, but it would seem to this writer that many just don’t take the remedial work seriously. Many new students appear undeservedly confident in their abilities as encouraged by recruiters. Some seem to exude a sense of entitlement since they are paying tuition. Many online students seeking advanced degrees in schools with open admission policies may lack the basic tools of literacy and many are inadequately oriented to scholarly endeavor. With administrative emphasis on retention, it is my impression that some institutions encourage advisers and faculty to reinforce student commitment with persistent upbeat messaging and by tacitly accepting inflated grades and eased standards.

Faculty may be told of administration policies, requirements, demands and directions with the admonition that courses will be checked for compliance. “Best
practices” lists are often distributed that may be implicit statements of administrative preferences. A part of faculty assessment and continuance is quantitative assessment of adherence to the directives for amount of time and activity in the online classroom. Metrics are frequently employed in larger systems that cover quantifiable dimensions with only rare examination of the depth and effort reflected in actual faculty activities in the online courses.

An instructor may focus intensely on trying to support the learning of a limited capability student at the beginning of a course, yet find these efforts are not productive. The instructor may turn attention as the course progresses to the students who are actually offering some meaningful content in their submissions. These stronger students, seeing the tolerance of instructors for the inferior work of their peers, may become disheartened. Metrics may show some diminution of faculty activity while the instructor is seeking to advance the more promising student whose commitment may be flagging in questioning the instructor’s acceptance of low quality work of weaker students. The point here is that the discretion of the instructor on how to best support learning might be compromised by administrative assessment use of quantitative measures of faculty engagement.

In this writer’s view administration of online programs tend to be excessively imbued with the idea that technology and one-dimensional quantification can fix or solve the problems that are typically encountered, such as plagiarism, quality assessment, and student and faculty participation. The implication that I detect is that administrators do not quite trust the professionalism of faculty and other frontline employees.

Sometimes it appears that administrators have focus on “solutionism,” a belief that problems exist only when they are solvable with a nice, clean, technological fix. For example, inconsistency in course structuring is often viewed as a problem that is solvable by aligning course components with a set of overarching objectives. Paradox, contradiction, uncertainty, dialectical process in courses may thus be considered problems that seek a solution. These “problems” might be inherent in the subject matter or could be employed as appropriate methods of instruction in this writer’s mode of instructing, but might be “resolved” by an administrative fix.

Quality

I know from experience that I can make a difference and enhance students’ scholarly capabilities if they actually read my feedback. In my view this is the nub of quality of instruction: guidance! Most students know that the power of instructional faculty is limited especially in for-profit and adult-focused institutions. Students may understand that institutions need revenue, are fearful of discontent, do not want litigations, and that they as student consumers are the ultimate system drivers. So,
why should a student heed the instructor? Fear of low grades is minimal because
the grading rubric must be used, and there is always the supervisor, chairperson,
adviser or dean who can be counted on to constrain the instructor who imposes
demanding standards. As I’ve seen, most frequently, the instructor senses that ad-
monitions to seek tutorial assistance, which all institutions provide in abundance,
result in only limited actual use by deficient students who merely persist in doing
inferior but acceptable work. Feedback requests to provide greater substance, make
use of proper scholarly sources, to submit more effective posts and assignments, etc.
may be ignored by students who are paying their tuition (not infrequently through
federal loans) thereby providing revenue.

Quality is a buzzword often equated with external variables beyond course con-
tents. In certain paradigms quality is said to exist if elements of a course align. For
example, a major concern of quality advocates is whether objectives are fulfilled
by activities. The grading rubrics are designed to confirm that the activities mesh
or “map to” the objectives. The objectives themselves are often set by committees
to be measurable and easily reportable. Whether these objectives are worthwhile
or actually relate to the fundamental values of the educated person are not usually
directly assessed in and of themselves.

Individuals with higher education degrees who are expert in course design and
format are more likely to be involved in quality assessments at the upper levels than
are content or subject matter specialists. Assessment experts are frequently called in
to ensure that the committee-established objectives are addressed by the assignments,
grading rubrics, and so forth. Since the full time online course designer/education
specialists may also not be in very secure positions themselves, they must meet the
expectations of administrators. Thus, it may happen that procedures and personnel
used for program and course design and quality assessment are primarily concerned
with revenue flow rather than with scholarly worth.

A substantial number of consulting and training programs have cropped up to
facilitate the achievement of “quality” instruction. There are many conferences,
webinars, workshops and so forth sponsored by these entities to promote their ver-
sions of “quality” in online instruction. While much of it is technical, the weight
of the quality emphasis is on how courses are structured to ensure that the whole
is integrated. There is only limited if any relation to actual foundations in classical
humanist scholarship or principles of formal scientific research practice. It would
be difficult to imagine that a classical scholar, or a creative research scientist, or a
learned professional could emerge from a series of courses that meet the highest
standards of quality established and accepted in most online programs and promoted
and honored by quality assurance programs.

Indeed, the fully online programs seem mostly directed toward the lesser qualified,
lesser committed, marginal student than to the top performing student prospects. It
may actually be that the majority target student group for online instruction would not do very well in the creative, generative, challenging atmosphere created by a fine professor who seeks to stimulate and provoke students to do excellent work. An idiosyncratic professor with a distinctive view of content and style of instruction would very unlikely be able to produce a course that meets typical “quality” standards. Those variant students who would thrive in such a context are not usually attended to.

I have seen many high quality online courses created by gifted expert professors with top qualifications. They can and do design courses that really stimulate learning. I have taught many top performing students who more than fulfill expectations for scholarly creative content in online courses at different types of universities. But the tenor of many online courses and the common expectations of student performance is usually set fairly low in this writer’s opinion to accommodate the majority target group of mediocre students. The full potential of truly gifted students just cannot be adequately tapped, supported or encouraged in such courses. This is not to say that such talented students cannot persist and complete their degree objectives in ways the fit their personal and professional needs and circumstances.

**Advanced Online Programs**

An arena in which administrative policies toward adjunct online instructors is fully manifest is in doctoral programming. There are large and increasing numbers of schools and programs being offered for fully online doctorates. These programs are major revenue sources at for-profit institutions. Most seem to be open access programs that accept just about all applicants even with minimal qualification or potential to actually complete a doctorate. Some capable applicants appreciate the convenience of doing doctoral work online to fulfill personal or professional purposes.

To become a doctoral candidate in online programs requires students to complete a series of courses that are not substantively different in content, assignments and evaluative criteria from undergraduate online courses. It frequently happens that there is substantial informal pressure on faculty to pass on lesser competent but determined and insistent students. Doctoral classes may have as many enrolled students as undergraduate classes, and 30+ students is not uncommon.

At variance with traditional doctoral programs, I personally have not seen variable graduate seminars in highly specialized topical areas reflecting the current research activities of a top professor that requires independent and creative student explorations. In my experience, it is rare that the students are asked to do actual field research in graduate seminars in direct preparation for dissertation research. It may happen that a candidate will have absolutely no direct research experience prior to the requirement of doing an original dissertation. The prime emphasis is
on student retention and movement of students through the required levels up to the dissertation which is not only the ultimate challenge, but also a rigorous complex multi-layered guided process.

After courses have been completed, a candidacy exam is typically required. The exams usually ask aspiring students to write extended essays. As I have experienced, the questions themselves follow certain formulas that provide specific guidance for responses which are expected to follow prescriptions for writing candidacy essays. The topics of the questions are essentially similar for each generation of students. The evaluating instructors may be required to apply a strict grading rubric. If a low score is given on a certain criterion, the evaluator must provide supporting detail that identifies the specific weakness on that dimension and this could require much effort. The passing score criterion might be as low as 60%. Instructors might be compensated only for first evaluations, but not for re-writes, thus, raising issues of the consequence of not passing a low quality exam on the first try. Students are often allowed to re-write responses that fall below the criterion. Ultimately it is rare for motivated students to fail to move to candidacy.

While adjunct faculty with doctorates are usually placed in the front line of advanced graduate level programs, and are required to guide and mentor doctoral candidates, they are not actually supervisors in the dissertation process. They often do not have decisional capacity per se but merely approve of dissertation plans and proposals and pass the submissions on to higher levels of specialized usually full-time faculty for final evaluation. It is at the higher levels such as reviewers and IRB that candidates are given the go-ahead through the many complex and demanding stages and phases that are administratively implemented to ensure that minimal standards of scholarship are applied. Even these higher evaluations are formula and rubric-driven.

After being passed through various levels, a candidate might find the difficulty factor increasing multi-fold far beyond any challenges encountered previously when faced with the arduous task of dissertation planning. Many candidates flounder at the early stages. When administrators are challenged by this bottleneck, they tend to create and rely upon special services to support underprepared candidates with encouragements, blandishments, tutorials, and writing assistance. It is very difficult for a mentor, adviser, committee member, or any university employee to communicate candidly that a candidate just might not have the capacity to complete a dissertation.

From this writer’s experience, it would seem that the only really effective assessment of student performance can be provided in blind student evaluations. This may be done on major exams or research proposals submitted to anonymous evaluators where standards can be upheld without risk to one’s continuity of employment. But even here evaluator consistency is evaluated and scores are expected to be compatible between evaluators for continued involvement in this role. While mentor faculty can
support, encourage and even guide students, they are not in a position to directly suggest to their mentees that their scholarly or literary capability is not sufficient to enable them to achieve their academic goals.

Determined but low capability students may merely complain about the mentor and ask for another. Thus, evaluations by mentors will likely be encouraging, until the student’s product is forwarded to higher levels where it may be rejected. The anonymous or protected assessor may then imply that the mentor is not doing the job of properly guiding the student. A mentor who is not successful with lower capability students will not be well-evaluated. Success of the mentee and completion of the dissertation is the main criterion for evaluating the effectiveness of the mentor. A mentor may be given extra compensation for guiding a candidate through the process successfully, but might be sanctioned in subtle ways for not facilitating degree completion.

For the rare successful online candidate to achieve the goal of a doctoral degree is as wonderful in this as in any context. Of course, their work is held up as exemplary, a demonstration of what others can accomplish, and celebration is likely well-deserved. Gnawing questions, however, may persist as to whether such an online doctorate is actually equivalent to that obtained by conventional means.

**What Can Be Done?**

For online programs to genuinely fulfill their potential is a monumental challenge in relation to the current realities and trends of this mode of instructional delivery. While not every trend indicated above needs to be directly countered, certain fundamentals do need to be restored. In my view the single most important concept that must underlie any effort to rescue online instruction is for institutions to uphold the concept of academic freedom. Online instructors whether part or full time, tenured, entitled, contracted, or probationary must be re-empowered. Of course, this requires that all instructors of online courses be highly qualified teaching professionals possessing firm credentials, solid track records in teaching, research, and practice, and have been fully assessed in relation to traditional scholarly standards. They need to know how to provide stimulating online courses or must be very willing to learn from those who do know.

Implicit in this is the commitment of administrators to properly compensate their faculty, have confidence in them, provide support as requested, commit to them on a regular basis, defer to their judgment, and, mainly, get out of their way. All this sounds highly unlikely in view of the revenue impulse framing online education. Yet, perhaps some realistic accommodations can be developed, or at least some modifications of existing approaches may be forthcoming.
A challenge here to reform the current systems is to rescue the rhetoric co-opted by administrators regarding “quality,” “student-focus,” “engagement,” “assessment,” “faculty leadership,” and so forth. To actually attain quality, meet real student needs, assess and revise programs and courses appropriately, and engage the faculty in the creative and distributive process, the predominant business model must be properly situated outside the instructional domain. Reality demands that business principles be applied in marketing, advising, and administration. In my opinion the rest, that is the academic dimension, is for faculty to determine, including technology.

I think we need to restore the paradigm of the classical university that has proven so enormously effective in on-ground instruction and apply it to online delivery. The models are broadly available in the top public and private universities where real scholarship is present. While rigid application of systems that work on-ground cannot be directly applied in full force to online instruction, we can surely work toward the standards represented by the traditional models of higher education.

Specifically, course authorship should be coordinated with ongoing teaching responsibility where professors own their own courses. Professors should not be expected to teach courses authored by others. This does not happen on-ground and should not happen online. Compensation formulas should take into account course authorship, continuous course revision, and ongoing course delivery. Essentially, faculty rank or its equivalent should correlate with compensation. Thus, a fulltime associate professor might receive something like $10,000 per course, and an online instructor should receive about the same with similar or comparable responsibilities and expectations for student involvement, teaching performance and scholarly productivity. Tenure or some presumption of job security after a probationary period under given conditions should be systemic.

Once this is established as the “normal,” then all else follows: student evaluation, assessment, choice of LMS, program design, interaction with support personnel including advisers and tech people, would all be within the purview and direct influence of faculty in a real sense.

As unrealistic as all this sounds, I set these proposals for change forward here feeling that by setting a high expectation for online faculty empowerment, we can move toward this direction in practical ways. In the collection of articles that constitute the meat of this book, the reader will find much that is suggestive of how online higher education may be unshackled from its current constraints. One almost has to read between many lines to get at the core of the critical and normative implications. As long as the reader is seeking a genuine resolution of the contradictions between promise and current reality, a new synthesis of traditional university practices and online instruction can become clear.