

THE CHALLENGE OF FACULTY COMPENSATION FOR ONLINE COURSES

Nick Linardopoulos
School of Technology and Professional Studies
Drexel University
USA

Abstract

This paper explores the issue of faculty compensation as it relates to the development and teaching of online courses in higher education. In light of the importance of faculty compensation as a motivator for teaching and developing online courses, this study attempted to review compensation policies of selected higher education institutions in the US that specialize in online programs. The almost complete lack of specific compensation policies related to online course development and teaching is striking and makes it very challenging for higher education institutions to determine a 'market rate' for online faculty. The paper provides recommendations for establishing a compensation rate for developing and teaching online courses.

Introduction

The exponential proliferation of online programs and courses has multiple implications for the key stakeholders of higher education (students, faculty and administration). According to the Sloan Consortium, in the Fall of 2007, almost 4 million students in the US were enrolled in at least one online course. This number represents an increase of 12% (or about 450,000 students) compared to the year before. As a result of market demands more and more faculty are asked by university and department administrators to focus more on the development and teaching of online courses. At the same time, a number of faculty members in several institutions in the US have indicated that it takes much more time to develop an online course compared to a face-to-face course. While a few studies have attempted to address workload issues associated with online course development and teaching, the current research literature does not directly address the issue of faculty compensation for online coursework.

The issue of faculty compensation for online courses is closely linked to universities' workload policies. In addition, the faculty compensation rate may affect the quality of the online course offerings. Typically, the term 'compensation' in the context of this discussion has been interpreted as the amount of money that the faculty member will receive for developing and/or teaching online courses.

Literature Review

The increase in online offerings has multiple implications in terms of the faculty workload and faculty experience with respect to teaching. According to Meyer (2002), some faculty members have criticized the growth model of online education as evidence of “commodification” in higher education. Those faculty members view the online expansion of educational offerings as an example of focusing on profit initiatives instead of academic quality. Meyer further argues that the debate on the quality of distance education is affected by political and emotional considerations. Critics of the e-learning model believe that use of new technologies in education means, by default, poor quality whereas proponents argue that online education can result in a valuable learning experience. Meyer states that the discussion of quality is also influenced by the perception that online education changes both traditional power structures and institutional roles. According to this view, as a result of market demands faculty are asked by university and department administrators to focus more on the development and teaching of online courses. Meyer argues that many faculty members fear that they will not be able to fulfill the increased workload demands of online instruction and the consequent decrease of educational quality.

Faculty concerns regarding online education can be traced back to the issue of acceptance of the use of computers in education. Postman (1995) cautioned against having a “sleepwalking attitude” towards computers in the classroom which would result in a distraction from the key educational objectives such as team based problem-solving. Postman further argues that new technologies are a powerful force of societal change due to their intellectual, emotional, political, social and content biases. A parallel could be drawn between the concerns pointed by Postman regarding technological innovations in education and online education which is in itself a new form of technology. After all, online education has already had a profound effect in the way universities deliver courses.

The rich literature on the issue of faculty perspectives on online education focuses on three main variables: time spent developing and teaching an online course, motivation for or against teaching online as well as the overall perceptions towards online education held from faculty members. Specifically, Maguire (2005) after reviewing 14 research studies on the subject of faculty perceptions towards online education, reports that intrinsic and extrinsic motivators such as flexible hours and recognition make faculty more open to teaching online. Administrative support (credit for promotion) and technological support are also listed as factors that make faculty more willing to teach online in Maguire’s review. In addition, Maguire lists some of the above mentioned factors as inhibitors to online teaching for some faculty (that is some faculty state that they are intimidated by new technologies). The most frequent deterrent cited in Maguire’s review is faculty workload; the time required to prepare an online course was noted as an inhibitor to online teaching for faculty in several studies. Maguire indicates that the results of her review warrant additional research on the factors that motivate or discourage faculty from teaching online (especially via qualitative methodology for

additional description). Furthermore, Maguire calls for additional research for the role and perspective of the administrators of online programs and courses.

Tomei's (2006) study compares the degree to which teaching online requires additional time from faculty members and if so, what would be the ideal class size for an online course. Tomei uses instructional content, student counselling and advising, and assessment as variables for comparing faculty workload for online and face-to-face courses. The study finds that on average teaching online requires at least 14% more time compared to face-to-face instruction (mostly due time spent in the presentation and preparation of instructional content). Based on the three variables above and in light of the additional time required for online instruction Tomei's computation indicates the ideal traditional class size for a face-to-face class to be 17 students and for an online class 12 students. Tomei's findings are significant in the sense that we are provided with an indication of the ideal class size for online instruction.

Conceicao's (2006) phenomenological research study goes beyond the assessment of time spent in preparation time for online course development and instruction and examines the overall experience of faculty members who teach online courses. Study participants include 10 faculty members who have taught online courses through different platforms, from a number of colleges across the United States, across different disciplines. The results of the study also indicate that faculty members believe that teaching online courses involves a much heavier workload, but at the same time results in an overall satisfying experience. Specifically, the faculty participants in Conceicao's study report that an online course requires additional time compared to a face-to-face course due to the need to organize the course content and provide in advance of the course start date. Faculty members also stated that online teaching required "a more intense cognitive effort" in order to effectively manage the course related tasks such as discussions and grading. Furthermore, faculty reported an increased level of interaction with online learners via e-mail based inquires; one faculty reported that some online learners communicated outside class up to three times a day. The findings in Conceicao's study indicate that teaching online requires a higher level of commitment in terms of time and energy from faculty, but at the same time the experience can be gratifying in many ways — an area where additional research is needed.

In another comparison study Wilkes, Simon, and Brooks (2006) found that the faculty perceptions of online programs are less favourable than those of college students. The dimensions of faculty perceptions explored included the desire towards teaching an online course and the characteristics deemed to be representative of online vs. face-to-face instruction, as well as the overall attitude towards online courses. The implications of the less favourable faculty perceptions towards online education were considered to impact the delivery of online courses. The authors emphasize the role of universities in focusing on the quality of online courses by communicating with faculty regarding their concerns. Of particular interest are the qualitative findings on the faculty perspectives which for the most part show a guarded attitude towards online education. One faculty member reports that "The advantages for a few students is more than offset by the losses incurred from the lack of institutional controls and lack of interaction. . ."

In summary, issues of workload seem to be of great concern to a lot of faculty member which is one of the most critical variables associated with faculty participation in online courses (Shelton & Shaltsman, 2006). Furthermore, according to Bolliger and Wasilik (2009) online faculty members are satisfied when their work is recognized appropriately by the University. This is a critical point as there is a clear link between the levels of faculty satisfaction and teaching performance.

Methodology

For the purposes of this study, a search for faculty compensation policies was conducted using the 'benchmark' schools of the author's institution (Drexel University). The key term *faculty compensation for online courses* was used as a query in the home page of each institution and in addition in the human resources site of each selected institution. Twelve institutions were reviewed for the purposes of this study.

Results

The results of the search were surprising. Out of the 12 universities included in the search only 3 delineated how faculty will be compensated for online course development and teaching. In one of those instances (Boston University), the policy simply indicated that the teaching of an online course is compensated in the same way as a face-to-face course. Only one institution (Stevens Institute of Technology) clearly described the rationale for the compensation levels associated with the development and teaching of online courses (directly related to the number of students).

Overall, in the academic institutions that were reviewed compensation policies for online teaching and development, were rare and hard to find. When a compensation policy or rate was available, it was too general and did not really address the complexities associated with developing and teaching online courses. One striking element that emerged from the search was the range of compensation rates for teaching and development of online courses (from \$0 to \$16000 per course!).

Discussion

The results of this research highlight the importance of establishing clear and accessible faculty compensation policies. To be sure, it is possible that several institutions do not include separate policies for compensation of online courses on purpose as this is an issue that may be regulated at the department level. Even if this scenario is true, Universities still need to publicize guidelines for compensation of online courses, given the importance of online learning in several of those institutions. A possible model could be

the one describing compensation for summer teaching (which was present in a few of the institutions reviewed for this paper).

A number of variables need to be taken into consideration when attempting to come up with a university-wide policy on faculty compensation for online courses. First, the functions of teaching and developing an online course are often viewed interchangeably in the research literature. In reality teaching and development of an online course are in many instances separate functions. In light of the research results showing that developing an online course is much more time consuming compared to a face-to-face course extra compensation is likely warranted. Copyright and intellectual property rights are also related variables that need to be addressed in the context of a faculty compensation policy for online courses. In other words, an effective policy should address who owns the rights to the online instructional materials and the applicable compensation rate for owning or signing off the copyright. Last, but not least as mentioned previously the term compensation in this specific context is typically associated with a dollar amount that the faculty member is being paid as a result of their teaching and/or development. While this is understandable for the teaching component (especially for part-time faculty that do not have a contractual credit load), it is less clear why compensation for developing an online course should (only) involve a monetary figure. Additional incentives, may involve course release or release from other duties (research or service) as compensation for online course development.

Conclusion

The issue of faculty compensation for online courses is certainly not new. However, given the exponential growth of online education offerings in higher education institutions and the associated expectation that more faculty is expected to teach and develop online courses, faculty compensation issues are going to be in the forefront of online education discussions. University policies need to be adopted to reflect the new online learning paradigm of today's world. A fair faculty compensation policy (that will take into account elements such as hours spent in the development of the online course among others), should be part of any institution that wishes to be a key player in the online education field. Further research is needed in order to highlight the faculty perceptions of workload associated with online courses as well as the expected and/or desired compensation. In addition, the administrative perspective of higher education institutions regarding faculty workload and compensation policies should be studied further in order to pinpoint the areas that faculty and administrators can work together in order to improve online courses and programs.

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