Chapter 4
The Adjunct's Role in Delivering Quality Online Instruction

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Efforts to promote the distinctiveness of online programs in an increasingly competitive market have led to a focus on instructor expertise and instructional quality. The part-time instructor, who is most often charged with facilitating online courses, is commonly viewed as a liability to the integrity of the instructional process. However, little is known about the true nature of the motivations or competencies of this group of instructors. Most often, they are perceived as a homogeneous group with similar motivations and levels of expertise. This case challenges this notion by focusing on a single instructor categorized as a full-time, professional adjunct and is characterized by her colleagues as highly skilled. The case participant describes challenges and best practices that support her in providing quality instruction. These best practices subsequently are discussed as strategies to inform decisions upon which marketing efforts are dependent.

BACKGROUND

Technology has impacted education in diverse ways. Since the first media devices were integrated into instructional activities, learning has evolved into a multi-faceted phenomenon with the potential to meet the unique needs of students, regardless of their learning style or preference. These technological advancements have created educational opportunities that would not have been possible otherwise. Technology is an important factor in higher education marketing because it is often juxtaposed with a progressive curriculum and used to highlight the distinctiveness of a program. While universities have capitalized on contemporary technological advancements for decades,

perhaps no technology has changed the nature of how we design, deliver and market education as those associated with online learning have.

Since beginning its rise to mainstream acceptance in the mid-1990s, online education has mushroomed into one of the industry's most promising practices in terms of recruiting, retaining and graduating students from diverse backgrounds and with diverse needs. Consequently, as the demand for online education increases, the need to identify qualified faculty to assume the increasing workload becomes critically important (Allen & Seaman, 2008). To complicate the challenge, tenured or full-time faculty are often unable to fill this need due to workload or resistance. To fill the void, organizations are more frequently turning to adjuncts to meet the needs of their online learners (Milliken & Jurgens, 2008). In 2008, the National Center for Education Statistics estimated that 48 percent of instructional faculty across degree-granting universities held adjunct status. This, in turn, has resulted in an increasing concern regarding the nature of the adjunct-university relationship as well as the ability of part-time faculty to guide learners towards appropriate levels of competencies. The two primary considerations within this discourse are whether part-time faculty members are sufficiently prepared to provide quality instruction and whether organizations have built appropriate capacity to support their efforts (Shakeshaft, 2002; Bedford, 2009).

SETTING THE STAGE

In the early stages of the growth of online education, the programs themselves could be marketed as unique because of their convenience and flexibility (Garrett, 2008). However, as online education has proliferated, it has become clear that these arguments alone will not continue to be sufficient evidence of a distinctive program that will offer unique opportunities. Nor do they address issues of the quality of instruction executed by adjunct instructors. Organizational leaders need to recognize that their marketing efforts must be adjusted for a new and savvier audience. This audience is not bound by time or place but represents a growing number of individuals for whom choice is unlimited. In addition, this audience is characterized by a trend in which adult learners expect an education with broad and personal meaning attached (Forest & Peterson, 2006). For these adult learners, quality programs are a distinguishing factor in their decision about which online program will best meet their academic needs (Gibbons & Wentworth, 2002).

The proliferation of online education has led to a better understanding of best practices (Kupczynski & Hooper, 2006). Consequently, online programs have become more standardized as developers strive to align their practices with those identified as most promising. This means that courses across institutions have similar content and structure. As a result, organizations that enjoyed a market niche in the early days are finding it more difficult to differentiate themselves among their competitors (Allen & Seaman, 2008). As in traditional education, when program offerings and course content can no longer be the distinctive factor, organizations must look to broader aspects of their programs that make them stand out as high quality among many. Efforts to differentiate programs in an increasingly competitive market have led to a focus on a wide assortment of instructional features. According to Garrett (2008), these include institutional type, programs of study, levels of study and cost. However, as more programs become available, the range and scope become increasingly similar. Potential students are faced with larger numbers of schools and programs for which there seems to be no clear differentiating factor.

In higher education, marketing can be a way to create a unique identity and differentiate the focal organization from the distracters. According to Anctil (2008):

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