Chapter 55

Ensuring Quality:
The Faculty Role in Online Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

A varied set of major stakeholders in higher education results in diverse perspectives on what entails quality in online higher education. Learners, employers, accreditation agencies, funding and regulatory authorities, and higher education institutions exist for different purposes. Yet, all have a common interest in the success of the learners' education. Examining the faculty role in ensuring quality in online higher education, developing a working definition of that role, and identifying considerations for faculty practice that are essential to achieving that end is the purpose of this chapter. The chapter conveys and explains the results of a thematic analysis of the requirements and expectations of the major stakeholders, their contribution toward the formulation of the working definition of the faculty role, their contribution toward the identification of significant considerations for faculty in exercising their role, and makes recommendations for further investigation.

INTRODUCTION

What is the faculty role in ensuring quality in online higher education? How does faculty practice contribute toward ensuring the quality of the online learning experience? One might encounter numerous perspectives on the answers to these questions given the diversity of stakeholder interests and investment in higher education. A learner may be interested in a number of factors related to faculty engagement, career preparation, and grading practices. An employer may be interested in the professional competencies developed and the preparedness of an employee or potential employee to take on responsibilities successfully, assuming the faculty role in ensuring that outcome. An accreditation agency may be concerned with the faculty role in governance, program and course reviews, curriculum currency and relevancy, and quality improvement, as well as faculty qualifications. A funding or regulatory authority may be concerned with persistence to degree, employability, and the ability to pay back student loans,

assuming with the faculty role in ensuring that outcome. A higher education institution may be concerned with meeting the quality expectations and requirements of all of these stakeholders, as well as its ability to compete in an increasingly competitive marketplace as a quality provider. The institution may narrowly define the faculty role by the expectations of the learner or may define the role more broadly by encompassing the expectations of the employer, accreditation agency, and/or funding or regulatory authorities. Potentially, the faculty role in ensuring quality may not be well differentiated by online versus other modalities and/or may not be well defined given the complexity of the expectations of the different stakeholders and varying priorities in meeting those expectations. This chapter intends to examine the faculty role in ensuring quality in online higher education, develop a working definition of that role, and identify considerations for faculty practice that are essential to achieving that end encompassing the perspectives of diverse stakeholders.

BACKGROUND

Assessing the role of faculty in ensuring quality in online higher education necessitates stepping back to identify the expected characteristics of higher education quality of which faculty are a part. There are significant policy, standards, professional, quality assessment, and research-based resources that contribute toward their identification from diverse stakeholder perspectives. The primary stakeholders are learners, employers, accreditation agencies, funding and regulatory authorities, and higher education institutions.

Higher Education Learners

There are multiple perspectives regarding what learners' desire and consider as indicators of quality in higher education. Good communication; productive faculty and peer interaction; course content currency, relevancy, and application to field of study and profession; technological currency and proficiency; constructive feedback and guidance; and career guidance and preparation are just some of the indicators of a quality online experience from a learner's perspective (Advantage Management, 2001; Bailie, 2014; Morrison, 2013; NSSE, 2014; Pepe & Wang, 2012; Safavi, Bakar, Tarmizi, & Alwi, 2013). There have been several quality assessment systems developed based on substantial market and/or scholarly research that provide insight into the learners' perspective on quality in higher education. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE), and IDEA are three good examples of assessment systems currently in use by higher education institutions. ValuGuard®, a broad platform for health and human services assessment by Robert Dyer, Arthur Smith, and Advantage Management, Inc., provided an employer-sponsored higher education program assessment system for which the findings continue to be relevant as well.

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) are companion assessment systems that focus on the learner and faculty perspectives and experience with higher education. The NSSE identified the domains of student-faculty interaction and effective teaching practices that are directly related to learner experience with faculty in addition to other domains that assess the learner's experience with the higher education institution as a whole. There are several indicators identified for each of these domains. The student-faculty interaction domain includes indicators of interaction with faculty about career plans, course topics, course related ideas and concepts, and academic performance. The effective teaching practice domain includes indicators related to course

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