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In Defense of Uniformity: Can We Bridge the Internal DE Divide?

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Abstract

In the ongoing debate about quality standards for higher education, the tension between academic freedom and institutional objectives is well-documented. One specific manifestation of this debate promises to gain visibility in the coming years: the emerging tension created by the growth of distance education programs and the concurrent move toward institutionalized standards for quality. This paper explores the problem and proposes a compromise position in which institutional standards meet instructor autonomy.

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The drive toward greater accountability in education, even higher education, has been well-publicized in recent years. Generally, the term “accountability” refers to a broad range of factors, encompassing everything from academic quality to efficiency and, of course, what would be called ROI (return on investment) in the corporate sector. In other words, institutions of higher learning are being asked to do more than ever, and in these tight budget times, to do so with less – specifically, less money and less autonomy. The growth of online learning has helped to stretch the dollars, at least once the initial technology investments have been made. Institutions can serve literally thousands more students than their physical facilities can accommodate. Still, these virtual students are far from maintenance-free; they must learn not just from texts and electronic resources, but from other human beings, in course-rooms designed and facilitated by human beings. And therein lies the rub, to paraphrase the Bard.

The age-old conflict between institutional control and instructor autonomy has not disappeared in the digital age; it has simply assumed a new form. The battleground is different, but the conflict is the same. Although the question often devolves into a self-serving debate pitting institutional quality against academic freedom, the issue – and resolution – is more complex. Online courses are notoriously labor-intensive in the early stages, no matter what CMS (course management system) is in use or how many e-packs (pre-loaded course content provided by textbook publishers) are available. Something – a learning environment – must be created from little more than nothingness. Thus, it is not surprising that the seminal for-profit sector in online learning (University of Phoenix, Capella University, Walden University) has adopted a high degree of uniformity among courses. Not only does the same course look and feel the same way no matter who teaches it, but even more, *all* courses have the same look and feel, with only

the content differing between courses. In traditional academic settings, however, such uniformity is often met with resistance by faculty who feel strong allegiance to the idea that “academic power should reside within the community of scholars” (Ramsden, 1998, p. 25). In such an environment, the entire concept of institutionally-driven uniformity is anathema, viewed as just another manifestation of unwanted interference (Ramsden, pp. 21-30).

Literature on the subject, like online learning itself, is a work-in-progress. Much of the theoretical discourse concerns itself primarily with delivery modes, accessibility, and other learner-centered considerations. Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, and Zvacek (2000) offer an excellent overview of numerous influential distance learning theories (pp. 36-52). Many of these theories compare distance learning to conventional face-to-face learning, an important perspective but not a complete one. Moore (1993) demonstrates the usefulness of a more specialized – and systemic – approach to understanding distance learning, including online learning environments; the model is team-based, identifying core competencies and creating a system in which “the actual instructor is free to focus on content because the production is left to people who are experts at it” (as cited in Williams, Paprock, & Covington, 1999, p. 31).

The question of uniformity (as opposed to instructor-designed course-rooms) promises to gain significance as the push toward greater quality and more efficient use of resources continues to dominate the political landscape in higher education. Adding even more fuel to the fire is the reality that online learning is growing at an exponential rate, in both virtual and brick-and-mortar institutions. For the first time, we are dealing with increasing numbers of students who have never known a world without PCs. Five years from now, that number will surely constitute a commanding majority, even among “nontraditional” students. A recent DOE survey of the nation’s K-12 schools (as cited in Honawar, 2005) validates this assumption: “students in one-

third of the nation's public school districts took distance education courses in the 2002-03 school year" (para. 1). Simonson, et al. (2003) claim that "interactive, real-time, on-demand, learner-centered, authentic, and learner-constructed events will characterize the educational environment of the future" (p. 22). Statistics seem to bear out that unwieldy summary, for students who are experiencing alternatives to traditional classroom learning are apt to demand the same when they enter college. Thus, one of the strongest indicators of our future as college-level distance-learning educators lies in the K-12 students of today – our students of tomorrow.

A Predictable Collision Course

TQM vs. the Academy

To some extent, the debate concerning uniformity in online learning has its roots in a related quality issue: Total Quality Management (TQM). To understand the connection, it is helpful to review the historical basis and the predictable conflict TQM has generated in the academy. W. Edwards Deming, a statistician-turned-quality-guru, is widely credited with helping Japan recover from the devastation of World War II by building a world-class industrial infrastructure that came to dominate global commerce during the 1960s and 1970s. Based on the premise that quality is quantifiable, Deming conceived a system by which corporations could measure their performance and strive for greater efficiency, productivity, and quality. This system is often referred to by its acronym, TQM, or Total Quality Management. Statements such as this one provide insight into the source of the conflict between TQM and the academy: "The same kind of control charts used to determine whether a process is in statistical control can be used to chart a worker's performance" (Deming, as cited in Walton, 1986, p. 68). Obviously, in a traditional academic culture characterized by almost unparalleled autonomy, few academics

would describe themselves as “workers” whose “performance” can – or should – be measured so methodically from on high.

Insights into the Debate

Franklin University’s “Guiding Principles” provide a clear illustration of the TQM approach to customer service in an academic setting. Faculty and staff alike are admonished to remember that “We are a customer-centered institution recognizing that students are our primary customer” (Franklin University, 2001). Then, in what has become a standard disclaimer, the university goes on to say that “The student may not always be right but the student is always the customer.” Emery, et al. (2001) point out that achieving the balance between customer service and student learning is tricky in actual practice, for if we create “an environment in which the student is not required to learn, only to pay tuition, we have failed to meet the expectations of our stakeholders: public and private corporations that demand well-educated, well-rounded employees” (para. 10). The reference to “stakeholders” offers a reminder that students are not the only customers; they are simply the most immediate ones. Shelley (2005) identifies taxpayers and legislators as the most powerful customers of education, based upon the fact that they are the primary source of its funding – a relationship with which institutions are necessarily and increasingly concerned.

The Faculty Senate at George Mason University felt strongly enough to pass a resolution condemning the TQM model as one that “devalues faculty, lowers academic standards, and harms both students and the institution itself” (as cited in Denning, 2002, para. 2). Interestingly, students there agreed that a customer-driven approach was inferior to other alternatives (Denning, 2002), a sentiment echoed in a recent survey conducted at Trident Technical College in Charleston, SC (Figure 1), where over 60 percent of students preferred to be thought of as

partners. We can reasonably conclude that while students want to feel empowered in the learning process, they do not reject academic authority and institutional leadership; rather, they look to the institution to provide a structured environment in which the institution and its agents partner with the student to achieve learning outcomes.

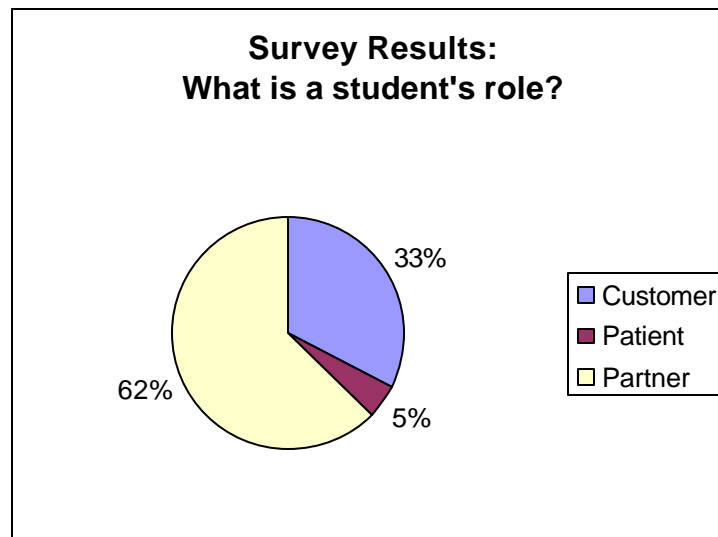


Figure 1. Trident Technical College student survey conducted June 8-10, 2005.
Sample size: 256 students.

Survey question: Which of the following roles best describes the way colleges *should* view students: customer, patient, or partner?

Phase I: Changing Our Perspective

The debate surrounding uniformity in online course-rooms is largely an ego-driven one, a power play pitting faculty autonomy against administrative control, to the detriment of all involved – none more so than the students. Developing a spectral view, rather than the prevailing either/or polarity now so prominent, seems an important first step toward resolution. In other words, instead of assuming a scenario in which there are only two possibilities (total instructor freedom vs. total administrative control), we do well to envision a spectrum of

possibilities, each of which may prove the key to breaking what has become a nearly deadlocked argument.

The literature bears out this need to change our perception of online learning as it impacts our understanding of traditional faculty, administrative, and student roles. Yi and Cornelious (2005) note that in online learning, “the academic role of instructor should be shifted from intellect-on-stage and mentor toward a learning catalyst” (para. 10). Katz (2003) agrees, observing that “the traditional hierarchies of the guild and craft may not withstand the democratizing influences” of online learning (p. 58). Change is afoot, but the underlying rationale is not new. A century ago, French intellectual Marcel Proust famously remarked that “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.” Leaders in higher education are well-advised to take Proust’s words to heart. In today’s information-saturated academic climate, we do not need more information or new information; what we need is the wisdom and insight to use what we know to change first perceptions and then outcomes, for we act based on what we perceive to be true. Expressed differently, “It isn’t ‘the old ways of doing things’ that block renewal; it is the people whose shared assumptions and habits hold the old ways in place” (Gardner, 1990, p. 132).

More than a decade ago, Tierney and Rhoads (1994) advised that “faculty socialization must be seen as a continuous process where even the most senior faculty must learn and relearn their roles within academic institutions” (para. 4). Ten years later, we are still “coming to terms with faculty socialization” (Tierney & Rhoads, para. 7). Successful administrators in higher education are aware of the need to make renewed perceptions a priority. For example, when asked to summarize his leadership role relative to his senior colleagues, UCF President John C. Hitt emphasized that “you have to let people know that it’s fine to talk about the way things were

years ago, but we're not the same institution we were years ago" (as quoted in Barone, 2005, para. 2). Why? We are not serving the same type of students that were served years ago. Oblinger (2003) provides an excellent overview of the so-called "Millenials," successors of the infamous GenXers. Born in or after 1982, the Millenials like to learn in environments consistent with their fondness for structure, their parents' values, teamwork, and new technologies, among other things (Oblinger, 2003, p. 38). Katz (2003) describes a similar sea change underway in American higher education. Noting that "the University of Phoenix [an online university] has achieved nearly unprecedented scale by breaking with a number of traditions," Katz provides several examples, including UoP's policies of "standardizing and centralizing curriculum" and "unbundling core instructional activities" (p. 53). The proof of the wisdom of this approach is in the pudding, so to speak: a consistent 20 percent annual growth rate (Katz, 2003, p. 53), with full accreditation (and ample financial resources) firmly intact.

Phase II: Changing Our Orientation

Can we seek and implement an effective compromise? When it comes to the question of uniformity in online learning, there is a notable absence of agreement, as illustrated in the near-even split between proponents and opponents in a recent survey at Trident Technical College (Figure 2). It is the task of leaders to find and forge a workable consensus, as the patchwork approach so prevalent in many online learning programs wastes valuable human, financial, and technological resources, at a time when few colleges can afford any waste at all. Given the impending and well-documented leadership crisis unfolding – especially at the community college level – as baby-boom-era college leaders retire in record numbers, the most successful leaders of tomorrow may be those who succeed in the art of achieving change through mediated

consensus. A 2001 survey commissioned by the American Association of Community Colleges found that four skills would be critical to the next generation of leaders in higher education: “the ability to bring a college together in the governing process, the ability to mediate, a good command of technology, and the ability to build coalitions” (Shults, p. 1). It is worth noting that three of the four skills involve consensus-building and/or conflict resolution in the pursuit of larger, common goals. The current conundrum surrounding uniformity in online learning thus provides an ideal proving ground for leaders eager to gain and demonstrate mastery in critical leadership skills. To succeed, of course, these leaders of the future will have to first succeed in selling a new orientation.

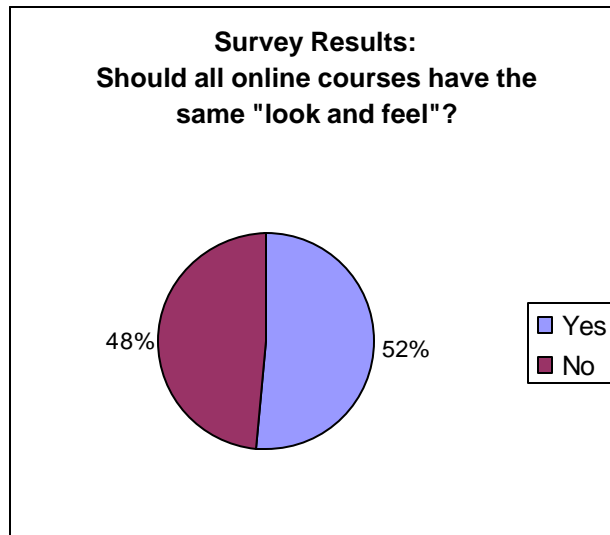


Figure 2. Trident Technical College student and faculty survey conducted June 8-10, 2005. Sample size: 214 faculty and students, all of whom have personal experience with online learning. Survey question: Should all online courses have the same “look and feel,” or should each instructor be free to create the “look and feel” he or she prefers?

One of the most promising collegiate models to emerge in recent years is O'Banion's concept of "learning colleges," a deceptively complex concept that describes an institutional culture characterized by "two distinct goals: 1) to place learning first in every policy, program, and practice in higher education, and 2) to overhaul the traditional architecture of the college" (1999, *Launching*, p. 2). The key advantage of this orientation lies in its bullet-proof exterior – i.e., what educator is going to suggest that learning is not the most important work in which any college can engage? O'Banion acknowledges that some educators may be "offended" by the term initially (p. 2), but his claim that "the current system is time-bound, place-bound, efficiency-bound, and role-bound" (p. 3) is still a compelling one, even six years after the report's publication. The new paradigm calls for a completely renewed commitment to the business of learning, a total overhaul of our comfortable conceptions and understanding of the faculty-student relationship. All of this newness suits a collegiate world already rocked by the distance learning revolution. The time for change is ripe.

There is strong historical precedent for O'Banion's position, perhaps stronger (and more ancient) than even the academic freedom into which some faculty have been known to retreat when confronted with an initiative that does not suit them. John Henry Newman, a leading theologian and philosopher of the nineteenth century, drew upon ancient Greek and Roman ideals to define a university as "a place for the communication and circulation of thought, by means of personal intercourse, through a wide extent of country" (para. 1). How democratic, how collaborative and forward-thinking and open to adaptation, Newman's model sounds compared to distance learning programs now designed "for the convenience of institutions and their staffs" (O'Banion, 1999, *Launching*, p. 5). The infancy of online learning has passed. Mature models and success stories abound. Skilled faculty and designers exist. It is time to set

aside infatuation with the technology and focus on learning – or, as O’Banion puts it, to “define the roles of learning facilitators in response to the needs of the learners” (p. 5).

To do that, institutions will need every bit of talent their faculty and staff can muster, for students’ needs are diverse and ever-changing in a world now truly global in scope. From a student’s perspective, it is needlessly disorienting to encounter an entirely new interface and set of tools for each online course – a patchwork whole that accurately describes the overall landscape of many online learning programs. Given a uniform look and feel, students orient themselves only once to the interface; thereafter, they are free to focus on what really matters: the content and interaction with their fellow learners. From the institution’s perspective, as the for-profit sector has shown, such standardization reduces overhead and allows instructors to focus on teaching and facilitating learning rather than re-inventing the virtual wheel.

The single greatest challenge thus lies in winning over those faculty who are accustomed to greater latitude in traditional course design, many of whom have little if any experience in online learning (and even less in course-room design). To disarm this predictable opposition to what will be perceived by many academics as just another manifestation of TQM and institutional control, leaders do well to create new avenues for faculty input, creativity, and empowerment in the online learning program. O’Banion (1999) suggests beginning with “conversations,” opportunities for faculty to brainstorm about “the kinds of learning they value and the kinds of learning they will provide their students” (*Inventory*, p. 8). The goal should be to eventually identify key learning methods and outcomes, information that can be used to assess current online learning courses and courses-in-progress. In addition to providing a much-needed avenue for pedagogical interaction, such discussions also open a new avenue for innovation and reorientation in the whole learning process. By bringing assumptions, principles, and firmly-

held beliefs into a more public domain, individual faculty will necessarily revisit those notions, which is the first step toward productive, transformative change – and it will take a transformative leader, a leader whose motives have the unmistakable ring of truth and integrity, to envision and nurture such change.

Based upon these dialogues and the consensual conclusions that arise from them, the institution – or perhaps more liberally, each academic department – can begin the process of standardizing the online interface accordingly. Numerous models exist to aid in optimizing the online learning environment. Simonson, et al. (1999) present a highly digestible overview of the characteristics and considerations associated with quality online learning. Weigel (2005) anticipates key characteristics of the “next generation” in e-learning, expressing hope that we will at last abandon our “uncritical acceptance of the traditional features of the classroom model” (para. 2). He identifies four “learner-centered capabilities” that should typify online learning of the future: critical thinking, self-confidence, peer-learning, and knowledge management (para. 5). Arguably, critical thinking has always been central to the educational mission, as has self-confidence. Knowledge management (grappling with information overload by condensing data into useful knowledge) and peer learning are newer emphases. Weigel advocates the latter vigorously: “Given the importance of peer learning for a student’s eventual success in the workplace [...] one would think that developing a peer-learning capability should be a chief goal of any 21st century curriculum” (para. 13). In this sense, peer learning is more than the ubiquitous “group work” so prevalent in many classrooms; it is deep, inquiry-based sharing of knowledge and insights, both formally (in group projects) and informally (in the exchange of ideas that characterizes a learner-centered environment). If an institution – or an academic department – succeeds in creating a uniform set of tools and a uniform interface, individual

instructors are freed to focus themselves on the job of facilitating learning, exercising creativity in the content, topics, and even projects of their choice.

As we begin the process of freeing ourselves from the traditional notions of faculty-student interaction and traditional faculty autonomy in course design, so we must work to free ourselves from ego and anything else that might prevent a true learning orientation in our online learning programs. It is not an entirely benevolent perspective, for as already discussed, the face of higher education is changing, as are the expectations of employers who will put our graduates to work one day. At the risk of sounding a bit like Chicken Little, the leading institutions of the future will be those who have invested wisely in distance learning, maximizing not just their financial and technological resources, but their systemic and creative resources as well. That is, the best colleges tomorrow will be those who have renewed and reoriented themselves today; they will offer online learning that reflects the best that the *team* – not the individual – can offer.

Conclusions

In many institutions, consensus seems a long way off, bogged down by any number of factors, from poor leadership to excessive ego to limited understanding of online learning pedagogy. Yet a workable consensus is probably mandatory if institutions are to remain both economically and academically viable. The greatest promise seems to lie in the metaphor of partnership advocated by D'Eon and Harris (2000). Since the very nature of partnership implies a shared responsibility between participants, it behooves all partners to seek the greatest quality and the best learning environment. Moreover, the concept seems well-suited to this age of globalization and diversification. The underlying idea is that colleges, students, taxpayers, and employers are strategically allied and mutually answerable for the learning outcome, despite the

diversity of their roles in the process. If we can change first our perception of traditional faculty-student interaction and then our orientation (from an institutional to a learner-centered one), the wisdom of uniformity in online learning course-rooms becomes far more apparent. The key question is this: Do we want our students to spend the first week of every term mastering the art of navigating a dizzying array of course-room designs, or do we want our students to delve into our course content and the many learning opportunities that arise from it? If we are truly learner-centered and view our role as partners in the learning process, the answer is self-evident.

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