University Administrators' Perceptions of Online and Blended Doctoral Degrees

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Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the perceptions of university administrators regarding prospective faculty candidates with online or blended doctoral degrees from accredited institutions located in Virginia. Administrators in the field of health and education were interviewed to gauge their perceptions and completed a survey adapted from DePriest (2009) who adapted it from Levernier (2005). Data was collected through questionnaires, documents, and individual interviews. Data was analyzed using Creswell's (2007) data analysis spiral. Analyses were conducted using transcription, thematic coding, textural and structural descriptions, and a description of the essence of the experiences. The results indicated that administrators had a positive perception of online and blended education with a preference for faculty candidates with a blended doctoral degree.

Introduction

Distance education has expanded and evolved over the last few decades; each year more students graduate with degrees earned partly or completely online (Allen & Seaman, 2014; Garrett, 2010; Mooney, 2010; Sener, 2010). During 2012, online education exploded and gained greater media attention due to the new education platform termed Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) (Daniel, 2013; Robinson, 2013). Many colleges that offer online degrees advertise it as a great way to get an education due to the lower cost of courses in comparison to traditional courses, flexible scheduling, convenience, and the advantage of earning a degree while still working full time. This trend has resulted in 11,200 college-level programs offered in 2006-2007 by Title IV degree-granting institutions (US Dept of Ed., 2008). Since 2002, Allen and Seaman (2014) have created an annual report on the state of online learning in U.S. higher education. According to Allen and Seaman's (2014):

> The number of students taking at least one online course increased by over 411,000 to a new total of 7.1 million since last year, 2013. The proportion of higher education students at least one online course is at an all-time high of 33.5 % (p.4).

Research indicated by a statistics professor at Babson College stated that in 2003 online learning was nearly unheard of ten years earlier but as of 2003 11%of all students are taking classes online; the rate of students choosing to take online classes is predicated to increase at a rate of 20 % (Roach, 2003, p.44). Based on Allen and Seaman's (2014) the predication was correct.

Online courses are classes delivered over the internet to students who are not located in the same physical location. There are several types of distance education courses such as hybrid

classes, TV broadcasts, and paper modular' s (Tallent-Runnels, Thomas, Lan, & Cooper, 2006, p.93). Distance education has helped meet the intense demand for higher education, cut education costs for both universities and students, and allowed individuals to return to school that otherwise would never have the opportunity to do so. Online education is also helping to meet the growing health professional workforce demand (Mokwena et al, 2007; RHIhub, 2015).

Distance education has not been without growing pains and criticism. "Numerous debates have arisen concerning the credibility, quality, and consequences of these programs in higher education" (Adams & DeFleur, 2006, p.33). However, the educational quality of distance learning and its instruction is not the focus of this research. Instead, the focus of this research is on the perceptions of administrators on hiring faculty members with online and blended doctoral degrees for faculty positions at accredited universities and their general perceptions of online education.

Students graduating with online degrees expect that their degree will help them advance in their career or open doors for a new job. Students spend thousands of dollars on their education and educational cost is rising faster than the cost of health care (Hyman, 2012). As of 2012, student debt passed the one-trillion dollar line (Hyman, 2012). Research, on the other hand, suggests that employers do not think highly of hiring someone with an online degree (Adams & DeFleur, 2006; DePriest, 2009; Redpath, 2012). In fact some "virtual institutions who advertise online education often claim that they are sure routes to employment, career advancement, raises in pay, and other job rewards" (Adams & DeFleur, 2006, p.33). Furthermore, according to the Kelderman (2013) the Obama administration wants to hold schools accountable for student employability and to require states to create more oversight over distance education programs (p.a25). Research is necessary on these claims due to the financial investment students contribute toward their education.

There is a large population of students enrolled in online courses; therefore, research needs to answer the question "how do prospective employers view online degree programs?" In particular, this study examined the perceptions of academic administrators involved in the hiring process of prospective faculty members who have earned online doctoral degrees.

Do administrators perceive online and blended doctoral degrees negatively and have perceptions of these programs improved? According to Allen and Seaman (2008), "…academic leaders do not believe that there is a lack of acceptance of online degrees by potential employers" (p.3). However, previous research by Adams and DeFleur (2005, 2006) and DePriest (2009) show that employers do not have a high acceptance of online degrees and employers prefer to hire applicants with a traditional degree. DePriest (2009) research included academic leaders in the employers surveyed. In his research Fischer (2013), provides research on the types of colleges employers prefer; he found that most institutions preferred anything but online degree programs. Academic leaders give conflicting answers about online and blended doctoral degrees. Perceptions of academic leaders require more research related to online and

blended education. Employer perceptions require exploration due to the lack of in-depth qualitative research on the perceptions of online and blended programs.

Rarely is the decision to hire a prospective faculty member made by one administrator alone. Committees tend to make hiring decisions or by agreement in department level group meetings. For that reason, it is important to discover the perceptions of both deans and chairpersons when possible. "Hiring committees are designed to be objective. They are comprised of individuals who possess unique expertise within their fields" (Simplicio, 2007, p.258). Administrators have the final say in hiring decisions but they tend to follow the choice of department chairpersons who lead committees.

Purpose

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover the current perceptions of university administrators regarding prospective faculty candidates with online or blended doctorate degrees from accredited institutions located in Virginia.

Method

This study was conducted using a transcendental phenomenological research method. There have been few quantitative studies on the acceptability of online programs using surveys; however, there has been limited qualitative research on the topic. The transcendental phenomenological approach gave a fresh in-depth perspective on administrators' view of online and blended programs. The study helped discover other factors in addition to the method of degree completion that may influence hiring decisions of administrators. A qualitative method was chosen over a quantitative method to explore the topic deeper and because current perceptions were unknown due to conflicting research. A survey method does not capture the thought process of hiring managers nor does it take into consideration all of the possible factors that influence administrators.

According to Moustakas (1994) phenomenological research requires Epoche, phenomenological reduction, textural description, imaginative variation, structural description, synthesis of meanings and essences of the experience. The purpose of Epoche is to put aside prejudgments and hold interviews with an open mind that encourages the participant to describe the essence fully. By providing the researcher's role in the research and using open ended questions in the interview, the researcher attempt to fully embrace the essence of Epoche. Phenomenological reduction is accomplished by bracketing questions around the topic of online and blended doctorate degrees. The research questions and interview questions are very general and open to discover a fresh perspective on the topic. Imaginative variation was explored by obtaining various perspectives of the phenomenon from different administrators at different types of academic institutions such as private, public, and religious. Possible meanings were grouped together and a list of constructs were created based on experiences. With the comprised

information, structural descriptions will be created. Lastly, information was synthesized though reflection, textural and structural meanings and essences of the experience.

Research Questions

1.What perceptions do academic administrators have of online doctoral degrees?
2.What type of influence does the university from which the prospective faculty member earns their online doctorate degree influence hiring decisions?
3.What type of influence does the university from which the prospective faculty member earns their blended doctorate degree influence hiring decisions?
4.Does the method of doctorate degree completion influence administrative perceptions during the candidate hiring process?

Participants

Using purposive sampling, participants included chairpersons and/or deans at four year accredited institutions from public, private, and private religious institutions within the Commonwealth of Virginia. The sample included different types of institutions, such as private, public, and private religious academic institutions to gain a well-rounded perspective and to determine if the different perceptions over institution type. Participants included at least one dean or chairpersons from both departments/colleges of health sciences and department/college of education. The reason for the purposive sampling was to focus on individuals who had both experience in hiring faculty members and at least a basic knowledge of online and blended doctoral degrees. The schools selected in the sample were based on convenience of location and whether there is a department/college of health sciences and a department/college of education. Due to the nature of qualitative research, pseudonyms were provided for the academic institutions and the individuals interviewed.
The logic behind interviewing chairpersons and/or deans of departments/colleges of health sciences and department/college of education was that in 2008-09 the "greatest number of degrees were conferred at the doctoral level were in the fields of health professions and related clinical sciences (12,100) and education (9,000)" (Aud et al, 2011). Furthermore, according to the US Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (2011), in 2008-09 9.7% of students were completing their entire post baccalaureate degree online in education and 9.1 in health. Given the popularity of these two fields of study, these areas provided an excellent starting point to understand perceptions of administrators regarding online and blended doctoral degrees. Twenty-four interviews were attempted with eight derived from each type of university, divided between the two departments/colleges of health sciences and education.

Data Collection and Management

Three methods of data collection were used in this study: interviews, documentation, and a survey adapted from DePriest (2009) who adapted it from Levernier (2005). Three methods of data collection were used based on the work of Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993), who wrote that "the interview provides leads for the researcher's observations. Observation

suggests probes for interviews. The interaction of the two sources of data not only enriches them both, but also provides a basis for analysis that would be impossible with only one source" (p.99). Furthermore, using three different methods of data collection to create triangulation strengthens any shortcomings that one method alone may have possessed (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Brewer & Hunter, 1989).

Interviews

Interviewing is an important part of phenomenological study and is typically the primary form of data collection (Moustakas, 1994; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Interviews were held in a semi-structured format with the following open-ended questions listed below presented. Interviews were still conversational and flexible based on Moustakas (1994) who writes that "…phenomenological interview involves an informal, interactive process and utilizes open-ended comments and questions (p.114).

To understand the perceptions of degree completion method there must be some understanding of the faculty candidate search and the hiring process hence the questions regarding the hiring process. Questions related to the perceptions of degree completion method were based on the purpose of the study, which was to discover perceptions of administrators regarding online and blended doctorates. Understanding how the participant defined online and blended education could reveal if he or she had a clear understanding of the education model. This information may be helpful when synthesizing data to discover why participants may hold a certain view concerning online doctoral degrees. This was also true of the experiences he or she had dealing with online and blended programs.

It is important to note as well that the interview questions were piloted prior to the formal interviews. A peer reviewed the questions for possible revisions and refinement, and then two pilot interviews were conducted. Afterwards, changes were made, as needed, and one more peer review and pilot were conducted to finalize the questions.

Documentation

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) write that documentation is an important part of qualitative research and can include many different things. Documents that were collected included:

- list of interview questions typically used to ask candidates if available
- forms used to evaluate candidates if available
- profiles for each institution from their website
- professional development/continuing education policy if available
- equal opportunity or diversity statement

Administrators may not have been able to provide all of the documents, depending on their creation or the institution's policy. However, many of the documents collected were considered public knowledge and were available on the intuitions website.

Surveys/Questionnaires

The purpose of this study was to give in-depth data about participants' perceptions about online and blended doctoral degrees. Surveys provided objective, quantifiable data that could be replicated but did not give in-depth information on participant's feelings and thoughts. However, the survey provided demographic information about the participants', the institution, and the college/school or division/department. Therefore, a modified version of the survey used by DePriest (2009), who adapted it from Levernier (2005), who modified the original survey created by Schmidt, Shelley, Van Wart, Clayton, & Schreck (2000) was used. Survey parts one and three of the survey were used to discover what, if any, online or blended classes and degrees were offered, with the institution, college/school or division/department and demographic information about the participant and institution.

DePreist (2009) validated the instrument using faculty members experienced in research methods and measurement to check both the face and content of the survey.

> In addition, the Deans of Arts and Sciences, Education, and Business at a local community college provided assistance in validating the instrument. These administrators reviewed the questions for content and clarity and then completed a pilot survey in order to suggest any needed changes to the survey instrument and to assist in ascertaining instrument validity (DePreist, 2009, p.69).

Data Analysis

Moustakas (1994) transcendental phenomenological research design was used in this study and Moustakas modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of analysis was used to analyze the phenomenological data. A full description of the reseawrcher's experience with the phenomenon were obtained from the audit trail, memoing, and documentation. A verbatim transcript of the experience of each participant was used to fully describe their experience of the phenomenon. All relevant statements were recorded and a list of non-repetitive statements was created from it. That created mean units of the experience of invariant horizons, which was created into themes. These themes were synthesized into a description of the textures of the experience with verbatim examples. Reflecting on the textural description and using imaginative variation, a description of the structures was constructed. Lastly, a textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of each individual was created. This lead to a "composite textural-structural description of meanings and essences of the experience integrating all the information to describe the experience representing the group as a whole" (Moustakas, 1994, p.122).

Trustworthiness

To establish trustworthiness the following methods were used: triangulation of data, rich descriptive data, peer review, audit trail, member checking, epoche, and clarification of biases from the outset. Guba (1981) describes four general criteria for establishing trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. Using triangulation and peer

examination both credibility and dependability could be shown. Triangulation also shows conformability. Lastly, rich descriptive data allow for the research to be transferable.

Triangulation

Triangulation is the use of multiple sources of information to establish trustworthiness in research and develop converging lines of inquiry (Yin, 2009). There are four types of triangulation that can be used: triangulation of data sources; investigator triangulation which uses different evaluators, theory triangulation, and methodological triangulation (Yin, 2009, p.116). In this study data triangulation was used by collecting data using interviews, document analysis when available, and survey. Investigator triangulation was used in that interview questions were peer reviewed and the research process monitored by three committee members and a research consultant. Lastly, theory triangulation has been used in that various distance education theories were reviewed until one was found that gives a complete picture of the current state of what has become online education, equivalency theory.

Transferability

Transferability was addressed by using thick descriptive data (Creswell, 2007; Moustakes, 1994; Schwandt, Lincoln & Guba, 2007; Yin, 2009). Both textual and structural descriptions were used to describe the researchers experience, themes, and the underlying dynamics of the experience of the members (Moustakes, 1994). The structural description was based on the textual.

Dependability and Confirmability

Schwandt, Lincoln, and Guba (2007) write that dependability and confirmability need both an audit trail and ongoing external auditing. The audit trail consisted of a chronological narrative of research activities and how the information evolved into the current analysis. Peer review and member checks served as the ongoing external audit, as well as accountability. (Creswell, 2007) In summary, credibility was established by using prolonged engagement though interviews, triangulation of data, peer debriefing, and member checks (Schwandt, Lincoln, & Guba, 2007). Transferability was established using rich and thick descriptions. An audit trail, member checks, and peer review were used for dependability, confirmability, and accountability.

Ethical Considerations

Participants' confidentiality and privacy were protected by keeping all information in locked cabinets within a locked office along with all electronic data being password protected. IRB approval was gained before contacting participants. A pseudonym was used for the participant's institution and for himself or herself that he or she will be able to choose. Participants were asked to sign an informed consent form after reading through the form and asking any questions. Participants were given the opportunity to check assumptions made from the interview and information provided to give feedback on results.

Discussion

Using this study alone it is difficult to make generalizations about the acceptances of online and blended education within the entire state of Virginia or the United States of America. Thirty-one institutions were contacted for permission to interview chairs and deans with only eight college presidents giving permission to approach faculty for interviews. From those eight institutions 25 people were contacted on several occasions from May 2013-October 2013 resulting in ten returned surveys and six interviews. Potential participants were contacted by letter, email, and phone. The interview participation rate was 20%.

Six people were interviewed, three women and three men. Each participant was over the age of forty with over twenty years of experience in education. Participants worked in a department, school, or college of health sciences. Every participant interviewed worked in a health-related discipline. Two participants who worked in a school of education did turn in the survey but did not agree to an interview.

Hiring process

Participants were asked six open ended questions related to their hiring process. The hiring process among the six interviewed participants was consistent. All of the institutions had a standardized application process and equal opportunity statements. One participant from a public institution stated that all government-funded institutions must follow certain guidelines when making hiring decisions. The Human Resources Department played a role in making sure fair hiring practices were followed. One example of the standardization of the application process was that all the applicants had to be asked the same questions. Participants stated that they created open-ended questions so applicants could provide additional information if they wanted to in order to make themselves stand out.

The application process required submission of an application, cover letter, references, original transcripts, teaching philosophy, vita, background check, and a series of interviews if approved. Knowledge of the hiring process was important for this study because applicants are typically vetted well before they reach the stage of background checks and initial interviews. If applicants were sorted based on degree method early in the application process then then separation would have answered the research questions to a degree. Participants also shared typical interview questions they asked which revealed more of a concern about research and teaching experience than degree method. Two participants did state that if the candidate completed an online or blended doctorate degree they would ask why they chose that method. Education is a field that requires public speaking and strong communication skills. If an online doctorate degree were pursed over a residential degree in order to avoid addressing those areas, then the applicant would not be the best candidate for a full-time faculty position.

Defining online and blended education

Online and blended education has change greatly over the last fifty years. Some people do not understand what online and blended education is and how those two areas are currently defined. Understanding how the participant defined online and blended education could reveal if he/she had a clear understanding of that medium of education and what experiences they had with it. According to the latest definitions by the Sloan Consortium online education is a course where 80% or more of the content is delivered online (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Blended, also called hybrid, education was defined as 30-70% of content delivered online (Allen & Seaman, 2013). What was interesting to note was that traditional education was defined as having no online technology used. Based on interviews, none of the participants' institutions had a course that fit the traditional definition. Instead, courses they referred to as "traditional" were web-facilitated, meaning that they used technology to facilitate some information, and used a course management system to post syllabi and grades. A web-facilitated course is any that offers 1-29% of content online (Allen & Seaman, 2013).

The participants used the terms "blended", "hybrid", and "web-facilitated" interchangeably, unaware of the differences between a traditional course and a web-facilitated course. This observation was very significant because it brought up the question "Are there any traditional courses or degrees being offered at the college level today?" For the six participants interviewed, the answer was no.

Influence of degree method and institution

There did not appear to be any automatic removal from the applicant pile based on degree completion method. There was a slight bias toward blended doctoral degrees by one participant, Steve, due to the experience an applicant would have in both learning formats. The fourth research question asked whether the method of doctorate degree completion influenced administrative perceptions during the candidate hiring process. Based on the results of the interviews and the surveys, administrators who were somewhat familiar with online and blended education did not have a bias against it. Some who had blended degrees might even be more likely to hire someone with a familiar degree method. Based on research by Rivera (2012) hiring is more than an issue of skills; people tend to hire employees who are culturally similar to themselves, which would include experiences such as education. As more candidates flood the job market with online and blended doctoral degrees and gain employment in positions of authority, the issue of degree method will fade away. As the participant referred to as David said in his interview, there will come a time when people will wonder why the question of the acceptability of online degrees was ever asked. Online and blended education is quickly becoming the norm with a new method of learning on the horizon: MOOCs.

Some participants stated that where applicants went to school did influence their hiring decision. An institutions academic reputation and for-profit status mattered. Another issue related to the institution was whether it was considered a teaching focused or research-focused

institution. This was only expressed by one participant, David, who was the administrator at a research focused institution. Three participants mentioned that school reputation was an influencing factor. The survey results also showed that when hiring for a faculty position, administrators would choose a candidate with an online doctorate completed at a known traditional school over an online only university. Stenstrom, Curtis, and Iyer (2013) found in their research that university and, in particular, department ranking, was the strongest predictor of employment after completing a doctorate degree. Their research supports the findings here that institution reputation does matter. Between the results from this study and the study by Stenstrom et al (2013) people considering a doctoral program should be more concerned about picking an institution with a positive reputation for their department of study than fearful of pursing an online or blended degree.

Strengths of online and blended education

The strengths addressed by the participants can be divided into two different categories: benefits for students and benefits for faculty. Benefits for students included, convenience, also referred to as flexible; affordable; superior to lecture courses; holds students more accountable for participation; helps introvert students find a voice; and the consistent format of online content. The strengths of online education from the faculty side were that participants stated they were able to reach more students than they would just teaching in the traditional classroom.

There is quite a bit of research on the benefits of online and blended education from both the student and faculty perspective that support the results from the interviews. Brown (2012) found in survey results given over a four-year period that students preferred online education because it was a way to work their education into their lives while still maintaining time at work and with family. Even instructor's responded to the survey as finding online education more flexible, even though it required daily, reliable internet access to stay connected to students.

Participants stated that online education was more affordable for students. Taking online classes makes the cost of living on campus a nonissue and allows students to make an income while working on a degree. However, research on the topic states that the "optimism about online learning reducing the price of college is premature" (Casement, 2013, p.18). Many universities charge more for online classes or include technology fees for online classes (Casement, 2013; Post, 2010; Parker, 2012; Poulin, 2012). In a survey by the Adult College Completion Network and the Campus Computing Project, the results indicated that 63 % of all institutions charged the same amount for online classes with 29 % charging more for online classes, and only about seven percent charging less (Poulin, 2012). The perception is that online education saves students money, but the reality appears to be different.

There have been numerous research studies comparing online and blended education to traditional courses. An entire book series could be dedicated to the topic. Some of the research was addressed in chapter two herein. Based on the results of the current research, it can be

concluded that online students perform modestly better or equal to their traditional student counterparts (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Brown, 2012; Means et al, 2010; Mgutshini, 2013; Redpath, 2012). Mgutshini (2013) found, "a multifactorial comparison shows online students to have comparable educational success and that, in terms of student satisfaction, online learners reported more satisfaction with their learning experience than their campus-based counterparts" (p.1). All of the participants have years of experience teaching online and in the classroom. Their conclusions that online courses are superior to lecture courses fit with the results of current research. They also bring a new element to the table by pointing out how the online environment makes it easier to hold students accountable for participation and helps introverted students find a voice.

Last, faculty found being able to reach more students globally as beneficial to online education. Traditional courses require students to be physically present for long periods of time in a classroom. These classrooms tend to be located within universities or at satellite locations. Online education can reach any student who has access to the internet. Colleges, such as Pennsylvania State University and Liberty University connected outreach programs with their online education programs, reaching thousands of students worldwide.

Concerns of online and blended education

Concerns about online and blended education are well documented in the research literature. It is significant to note that some of the original concerns about online and blended education when it was in its infancy were not mentioned as a concern during the interviews. Such concerns included whether or not students learned equally well online as their residential counterparts. Another issue used to be the quality of online degrees versus residential degrees. These concerns are still present in research but the question is being asked less frequently. Instead, participants were concerned about accreditation, lack of career advice, replication of residential learning outcomes, development of social and professional development skills, and consumption of faculty time. Participants also voiced concerns about the amount of time faculty spend teaching online courses.

In the annual Sloan Consortium online education report, 2,800 colleges and university chief academic officers were surveyed (Allen & Seaman, 2013). In the report, some of the concerns about online education were addressed such as "does it take more faculty time and effort to teach online and are learning outcomes in online comparable to face-to-face?" (Allen & Seaman, 2013, p.5). According to the current concerns sited "academic leaders believe it takes more faculty time and effort to teach online" a concern that has increased from 41.4 % in 2006 to 44.6 % in 2013 (Allen & Seaman, 2013, p.5). As supported by the interviews there is concern that online teaching is taking more time. This leads to the need for faculty to have strong time management skills and know when to let the steady stream of student requests wait until the following day.

The second area the Sloan Consortium report addressed was the question of online instruction being comparable to face-to-face instruction. The participants interviewed stated that they had no doubt those online students learned and earned their degrees, which were comparable to residential degrees. Their concerns were that learning outcomes were replicated in the online and blended courses. Allen and Seaman (2013) found that an overwhelming number, 77 % thought "learning outcomes in online education are the same or superior to those in face-to-face" settings (p.5). That is a 20 % jump over the last ten years.

The concerns over the lack of career advice students receive and the development of social and professional skills though graduate professional development were concerns that did not appear in other research. The Distance Education Advising Commission of NACADA is committed to helping people learn how to respond to learner needs as it relates to academic advising. Accrediting bodies such as the Council of Education for Public Health and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools ask the question how and who advices students. However, there does appear to be a concern on how and if this advising is reaching the online students.

Last, there was a concern of how faculty candidates with online degrees have pursed professional development in their field. This appears to be a new concern with no research on the topic. In the academic field where conference presentations, publication, and new discoveries are highly prized activities, the results of this research would suggest all faculty candidates pursue these activities whether or not they are encouraged in the online learning environment. Administrators of online and blended programs should also consider how to encourage the same professional development of their online students that they do with their residential students.

Future role of online and blended education

The future of online and blended education appears bright with more room for growth. Joyce said it well when she stated that the traditional degree would never be the same. Online education is here to stay. Allen and Seaman (2014) found that out of 2,800 colleges surveyed only one percent stated it was not likely that a student would be taking at least one online course in the next five years (p.20).

One participant, David, brought up the topic of MOOC's. The effect MOOC's will have on education remains to be seen. Long (2013) reviewed how MOOC's were changing education and throughout the article, referred to MOOCs as simply online education. There is a fear that MOOC's will put higher education programs out of business along with how to make it self-sustaining. Five years ago, the world did not know what a MOOC was but now it is hard to talk about online education without addressing the new delivery method. MOOC's have the potential to change education the same way that online, blended, hybrid, and WebEx has changed education. Since the fall of 2013 there have been almost weekly articles in the Chronicle of Higher Education related to MOOC's and if it is here to stay.

Summary

The results of the present study revealed implications that might be useful to future doctoral students, faculty pursing tenure or promotion, and administrators deciding on doctoral degree offering methods. The most profound implication from this study is that administrator's perception of online and blended degrees do appear to be improving. Previous research has shown employers to have negative attitudes toward online degrees and an overwhelming preference for traditional degrees (Adams, 2008; Adams & Defleur, 2005, 2006; Adams, Lee, Cortese, 2012; Kinneer, 2013; Richardson, McLeod, Dikekers, 2011; Kohlmeyer, Seese, & Sincich, 2011). Yet, according to recent research, employer perceptions of online degrees are growing more positive (Chant, 2013; Linardopouos, 2012; Wecker, 2012; Wellen, 2006). But as Chant (2013) pointed out the perception of online programs has not kept pace with its prevalence. However, the continued growth of online education makes it difficult for employers to dismiss candidates with online degrees.

The second implication is that participants appear to have a slight preference for faculty candidates with a blended or hybrid degree. The blended degree gives candidates experience in both online educational methods and residential educational methods. In Public Agenda's (2013) survey of attitudes of students and employer toward online education 82% of employers felt "hybrid programs gave students a better education than online-only programs" (p.5). Given the choice, administrators who are considering offering a program online, should consider requiring a residential component or at least providing the option of a residential component.

The third implication circles back to equivalency theory. As stated in the literature review, equivalency theory is the concept that online education should strive for equivalency with residential education to the pint that regardless of how information is presented or in what format or location the learning outcomes and experiences are equivalent. Research has shown that students are learning just as well in the online environment as the residential environment (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Brown, 2012; LaMeres & Plumb, 2013; Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2010). If this is the case then employment opportunities should also be the equivalent no matter the degree method. Attitudes and perceptions should also be equivalent regarding online, blended, and residential education. If there is not equivalency then there is a bias that doctoral seeking students should be aware of before choosing a format of study.

Conclusion

Many of the findings in this study were consistent with and confirmed previous quantitative and qualitative research, such as the growth of online and blended education and the growing acceptances of online and blended doctorate degrees (Allen, Seaman, & Sloan, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2014; Garrett, 2010; Mooney, 2010; Sener, 2010). Despite the small sample size there was consistency among the participants regarding their perceptions of online and blended education. There was even a slight preference of candidates with a blended

doctorate degree due to their experience with both online education and residential course work. However, there were still lingering concerns about candidates with online-only doctoral degrees.

Existing research was used to validate the need for this study and to compare the findings of this phenomenological study to those within the review of literature. The textural and structural descriptions of the perceptions of university administrators were unique. These descriptions gave this researcher a complete view of the participants' understanding of online and blended education, along with how it affects their hiring decisions for full time doctorate level faculty positions. Specifically, the current research differs from others in the methods and procedures, allowing for understanding of the essences that described the administrators' perceptions and experience with online and blended education. The current study did not merely use a survey to judge opinions of online and blended education. Instead, the phenomenological method allowed for understanding of why participants would hire a candidate with a blended degree over an online or traditional degree. It gave a picture of educational administrators past and current thoughts regarding online and blended education as well as their predictions for the future.

The results of this research can help guide students who are considering which method of educational study pursue. If an individual has career goals that include a full time faculty position it may be beneficial to seek out a blended doctoral program. Despite overwhelming research, that shows online students have comparable educational success to their traditional counterparts there are still concerns. These concerns could result in candidates with a blended or traditional degree having better chances of achieving full time faculty employment. Furthermore, participants in this study preferred someone from a blended degree because it gave the candidate experience in both worlds. Educators are reaching a point in education where new professors are required to be a skilled classroom professor as well as a skilled online professor. Educators still value other skills, such as ongoing professional development, research, and publications.

Colleges that are considering expanding their current educational programs should consider the advantages and disadvantages that various degree methods would have on student employment. The conveniences of a completely online degree are great for students however, long-term negative career impacts should be considered. The more graduates who find successful employment the more attractive a college will appear to degree seeking students.

Recommendations

The current study should be expanded to include other academic areas to see if the findings are consistent across disciplines. Further studies could also benefit from tracking people seeking faculty employment who have completed doctorate degrees online or in a blended format. Due

to the lack of generalization to the whole population, future research should expand to a national or regional level.

Due to the low number of participants in this study, this study can be used as a pilot study to create a survey based on the themes revealed. That survey could then be sent out to a variety of academic administrators that could provide a sample large enough to make generalizations related to the whole population. It would also provide quantitative data on the topic.

Technology changes quickly and it has been changing and influencing education for generations. Some of the participants mentioned Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC's) as the wave of the future. Others stated that online and blended education would become the norm. It would be beneficial research to see if other administrators shared these views and what they see for the future of education.

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