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The Changing Roles of Online Deans and Department Heads in Small Private Universities

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of best practices and challenges for deans and department heads of online programmes in the ever-changing world of higher education. It concentrates on the challenges for small private universities and tertiary education institutions in the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. Department heads must consider new roles and innovate constantly to offset the impact of global competition in online and distance learning. These changing roles include innovation in managing programme enrolment, retention, marketing, and the creation of innovative offerings to meet student needs to prevent obsolescence. Other topics discussed include potential alternate sources of revenue, partnerships, and how service and research can lead to new opportunities for small tertiary providers.

Keywords: tertiary education; higher education; roles of deans; roles of department heads (programme chair); retention; attrition; small universities; private universities; private training establishments

Introduction

The university systems adopted by the United States, Australia, and New Zealand were all originally based on the philosophy of the British university. Although the philosophies of tertiary education in these countries have evolved separately they remain similar, and these countries are now all facing similar challenges. In the United States, this is a time unlike any other in the history of formal college and university structures. Most large public universities and renowned private universities with large endowments are experiencing stable or increased enrolment. Many small, independent, private, tuition-based, and non-profit universities—with enrolments of fewer than 5,000 students and without large endowments—are struggling to recruit students. Prior to the proliferation of online learning, many small universities increased their enrolments by offering evening and weekend programmes for non-traditional learners. Now student choice is no longer limited by geography and choices are almost infinite.

According to Allen and Seaman (2015), 91.4% of U.S. college and university presidents noted that online learning was critical to their long-term institutional strategy. In the United States over 70% of colleges and universities have online education offerings, and 83.6% of smaller universities (called private training establishments in Australia and New Zealand) with 1000–4999 students have online courses. Almost 21 million students undertook online courses in the United States in 2012–2013.

In Australia there are three designated private universities: Bond (6000 students); University of Notre Dame, Australia (11,000 students); and Torrens University (fewer than 500 students) (Australian Education Network, 2016). However, the differences between public and private

education in Australia are "unstable, ambiguous, and unclear" according to Ryan (as cited in Group of Eight Australia, 2014, p. 4). In 2014, there were 132 providers of post-secondary education in Australia. These included faith-based educational institutions which are owned by churches and serve smaller numbers of students (Group of Eight, 2014). According to the Council of Higher Education, about 10% of Australian students attend private institutions and, in 2015, there were more than 160 private education providers. There are over 500 private tertiary educational institutions in New Zealand; most have low numbers of student enrolments (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2016).

Small private tertiary institutions in New Zealand and Australia, and small private universities in the United States, have difficulty competing with larger institutions because they have limited marketing money and limited numbers of staff. In addition, their tuition fees are often much higher than those of public universities. These small tertiary institutions also have to compete, in their geographic market area, with large for-profit and non-profit universities that spend a great deal of money on marketing to the public. This has led to a change in the role of online department heads (who may also direct residential campus programmes) at small independent universities. In the past, the dean or department head's role was primarily academic in nature. In these smaller universities, their role has expanded from primarily academic and faculty supervisory roles to include administrative functions such as recruiting, marketing, advising, enrolment, and student retention.

Many universities are now offering online courses to meet student demand and to make up the difference from declining residential campus revenues. However, competition in online programmes is global. Small universities must find ways to stand out from the crowd. Department heads and deans can play an important role in these efforts to promote their online programmes.

Challenges

Serving as a department head or dean can be a time-consuming and challenging job—even in an academic and supervisory sense. Department heads may be unprepared to take on the additional roles that are required of them in modern higher education, particularly in terms of online education responsibilities. These changing roles are diverse. Individuals who agree to act as department heads or deans may have expected their job to be the same as it has been for decades; however, this is no longer the case (Wixom et al., 2014). Faculty need to be able to make an educated decision when deciding whether to accept a position, and cannot rely on outdated notions of the role. Furthermore, existing department heads and deans would benefit from guidance about what the new role entails.

Financial challenges

Lyken-Segosebe and Shepherd (2013) note the financial health of small universities is at risk—primarily due to falling enrolments. In 2012, Moody's Tuition survey (Moody's Investors Services, 2012) reported that enrolments are decreasing at small U.S., primarily regional, universities and colleges that are tuition-dependent with small endowments. This decrease in enrolments is exacerbated by rapidly increasing capital expenditure for facilities and the associated operating expenses. In 2009, Martin and Samels (2009) compiled the following list of at-risk indicators for small colleges and universities:

- high tuition discount rate (35% or more)
- tuition dependency (85% or more)
- a ratio of less than 1:3 between endowments and operating budgets
- enrolment conversion yield of less than 20%

- no online programmes developed
- academic governance and curriculum development systems require more than 1 year to approve a degree programme.

Clayton Christensen, a business professor at Harvard University, predicted that almost 2000 of the 4000 U.S. institutions may fail within 15 years (McDonald, 2014). In 2012, the credit rating of 22 colleges, including the well-known private Wellesley College, were downgraded (Moody's Investors Services, 2012). Standard and Poor downgraded 13 educational institutions including Amherst College and Tulane University, which are also well-known universities in the United States. Net tuition ratings have been flat or falling at 73% of U.S. colleges and universities (Selingo, 2013), and every private university is competing for the college-ready graduates whose parents have enough money to assist with paying tuition. However, that student pool is rapidly shrinking and is being replaced by students who have been poorly prepared by the secondary educational system which has focused on standardised testing, first-generation college students, and students for whom English is a second language (ESL) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Woodhouse (2015) predicted the number of small college and university closures in the United States would triple; 50% of small colleges are facing a 3-year growth rate of 2% or less. In response, universities have been laying off faculty and closing programmes.

In Australia, college enrolments increased after 2008 when the government removed the cap on the number of government-subsidised students in universities. This change was projected to cost the government AU$38.8 billion by 2016 and was it was hoped that there would be an increase in student diversity in universities and in opportunities for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The government provided an additional AU$41.6 million for student support services as part of this initiative, yet no measures were taken to prepare faculty for the needs of a diverse student body (Gooch, 2012). In 2015, student dropout rates reached the highest level in over 8 years, with an average attrition rate of almost 15%. The highest attrition rates were for online students, particularly adults (age 22+) and non-traditional students (Hare, 2015).

Faculty challenges

In Australia, although the need for an educated workforce has increased, the number of faculty has not kept pace with growth in student enrolment numbers. The government's goal is for 40% of the population to attain a bachelor's degree. However, the faculty-to-student ratios increased from 13:41 in 1989, to 21:67 in 2007—a change that has the potential to affect quality. A large proportion of academics in Australia are nearing retirement age and this is likely to result in a faculty shortage in the near future (Coates et al., 2009). This shortage is also projected in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand.

Overall academic salaries in Australia are also comparable to Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom; salaries for full professors in New Zealand are, on average, $30,000 per year lower than those in Australia (Coates et al., 2009). However, salaries in Australia tend to also be higher in other professions and overall, New Zealand has a lower cost of living than Australia (New Zealand Now, 2016). In a study of professors' job satisfaction in 19 countries (Coates et al., 2009), Australian faculty were at the lower end of countries studied with only the United Kingdom and Portugal below them. The reasons for low job satisfaction included juggling teaching, administrative duties, and research as well as declining numbers of tenured positions. Compared with other countries, Australian faculty were the most likely to have considered changing careers and reported more dissatisfaction with management issues in universities. This dissatisfaction has been exacerbated by the corporatisation of higher education. Australian faculty perception of institutional support was also among the lowest. Australian academics worked the most hours per week (50–60 hours) compared with 39–40 hours per week in other professions in Australia (Coates et al., 2009). This total does not necessarily include hours spent

conducting research, grading papers, and working at home. Working very long hours leaves academics little time to absorb additional duties.

Roles and responsibilities

In the author's experience of the last 10 years, online academic department heads are now expected to fulfil a range of new and diverse roles.

These diverse roles include:

- curricula roles (curriculum mapping, curricula evaluation)
- new programme development
- *developing innovative revenue streams for the future
- *institutional effectiveness (attainment of student outcomes)
- *evaluating faculty performance in online courses
- hiring adjunct and contract faculty
- tenure assessment
- budgeting and finance
- *enrolment and recruitment activities
- *community, corporate, and organisational outreach
- *collaborative partnership agreements for degree programmes or corporate training (alternate revenue sources)
- fundraising
- grant writing
- assessing student satisfaction
- *improving student retention
- *designing processes for student remediation
- *marketing
- *technology innovation.

*New or markedly changed processes

In addition to these roles, many (or most) department heads and deans also still teach, research, and serve the university through committees and other functions. The sheer number of potential tasks can be overwhelming for department heads who have not had to perform these roles in the past.

Ernst and Young (2015) noted that the current educational model in Australia primarily comprises:

> [a] broad-based teaching and research institution [which is] supported by a large asset base and a large, predominantly in-house back office—will prove unviable in all but a few cases over the next 10–15 years. At a minimum, incumbent universities will need to significantly streamline their operations and asset base, at the same time as incorporating new teaching and learning delivery mechanisms, a diffusion of channels to market, and stakeholder expectations for increased impact. (p. 4)

Ernst and Young note these changes will be driven by (a) free availability of knowledge for all through the internet (the universities are no longer the "keepers" of knowledge), (b) budget constraints, (c) instructional technology and proliferation of online learning, (d) globalisation of education, and (e) industry partnerships. They also hypothesise three categories of institutions will emerge: (a) status quo universities that will remain essentially the same with streamlined

processes, (b) niche universities that provide tailored education, and (c) transformer universities that will provide education in new and different ways.

Department heads and deans will be tasked with leading this organisational change.

To understand how deans and department heads can respond to these changes, it is crucial to further examine the challenges they will face. The roles and responsibilities listed above are grouped and discussed in the next section.

Cost control

According to Allen and Seaman (2015), three-quarters of the academic officers surveyed listed education cost/student indebtedness as one of the top three issues faced by educational institutions. One way to manage costs is to manage class size and prevent low enrolment classes, This, in turn, increases revenue because fixed costs remain the same. Department heads can do this by creating schedules that enhance class size (optimal size is 10–20 students). Directors must ensure their programmes have an adequate number of elective offerings for student satisfaction and flexibility. However, having too many choices results in dispersal of students throughout multiple offerings and small class size.

Deans and department heads must also be aware that, particularly today, the cost of an education is important to students. Students want value for their money. Repetition, and classes that do not deliver a great deal of information, can be eliminated by curriculum mapping and design to ensure all relevant material that a student needs in a programme has been covered. In addition, department heads and deans now need to be cognisant of the cost of additional items (such as textbooks) required for student education. Students do not like to purchase textbooks they really do not use. Students who choose to not buy textbooks because of the cost can negatively impact their academic performance (Nelson, n.d; Parry, 2013).

One way to reduce the cost for students is through the use of open educational resources (OER). Although the use of OER is still in its infancy, Allen and Seaman (2015) found two-thirds of academics noted OER have the potential to reduce costs for colleges and universities (however, only 5% of faculty were aware of OERs). In Australia, the ADAPT project, [1] led by the University of Tasmania, is creating an OER repository. Partners in this initiative include Monash University, The University of Queensland, the University of Western Australia, and the Australian Government Office for Teaching and Learning. The ALTC project[2] in Australia is also addressing issues regarding OER by evaluating potential resources. In New Zealand, the OER Foundation sponsors the OER University which provides resources worldwide and includes university partners throughout the world (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2012). It is important for deans and department heads to understand and consider the advantages and challenges of OERs and their impact on students, intellectual property, and teaching.

Need for additional funds

The pursuit of grants is an additional way to obtain needed funds. However, grant writing and reporting is very time consuming, and so these funds may come at a significant price. Because public funding has been decreasing in higher education, competition for grants has increased exponentially. This can decrease the chance of success, particularly for small universities with limited resources.

[1] See www.adapt.net.au

[2] See http://wikiresearcher.org/OER_in_Australia

Deans and department heads are now also being tasked with additional roles in university fundraising. Blanchard (2013) outlined the crucial fundraising roles deans and department heads play (particularly in the United States) by courting donors for months—or even years—at dinners and other events. Hodson (2010) notes it is very difficult for deans to find time for fundraising even though it is a crucial need in higher education today. Deans and department heads play a large role in the strategic planning of a college or university, particularly with the paradigm shift that is occurring in education. It is at this mid-management level that innovations and ideas for creative and niche programmes are likely to occur. An important part of this strategic planning strategy is marketing, recruitment, and retention.

Marketing, recruitment and retention

In their recruitment funnel benchmarks for 4-year private institutions (institutions that offer 4-year qualifications) in the United States, Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2014) reported that only 9% of inquiries resulted in applications. The yield rate from admission to enrolment decreased by 7%—from 33% in 2007 to 26% in 2014. This decrease indicates it is very challenging to translate a student's inquiries—or even the offer of a place in a university programme—into an enrolment.

In today's education environment, it is very difficult for marketing and enrolment departments to obtain sufficient students to make a course financially viable, particularly in online programmes where competition is global and immense. Deans and department heads can assist with this in several ways.

First, deans must be able to determine the actual cost of offering an online programme. This analysis must include both direct costs (e.g., faculty, marketing) and indirect costs (e.g., using the learning management system, the cost of running the admissions department) for each programme to ensure the programme is self-sustaining. If it is not self-sustaining, the programme might need to be changed, updated, or discontinued.

Second, before contemplating offering a new or revised online programme, the university must undertake a detailed market analysis to look at the current environment—including job and labour statistics, and competing programmes of a similar type. If the university cannot afford a complete market analysis (small universities often cannot), the dean or department head will probably be tasked with this evaluation because they are likely to know something about these factors. Even the best enrolment department, with a large marketing budget, cannot sell a programme that is not needed or wanted by students. Deans and department heads should evaluate the costs of their programmes annually (so changes can be planned and implemented) and partner with the admissions and enrolment departments (to assist in meeting enrolment goals). It is crucial for deans and department heads to consider feedback from these departments about what they can and cannot "sell" to students in today's higher education environment.

Third, deans and department heads are often tasked with attending recruiting and marketing events and encouraging their faculty to participate in such events. Particularly in online programmes, a personal touch can provide a needed edge against schools that have large online programmes. Academic leaders can reach out to students directly, encouraging them to enrol and to establish a relationship with the faculty. This approach can alleviate some of the challenges of transactional distance in online learning.

In addition to recruiting students, deans and department heads also play an important role in student retention. There are numerous strategies for retention of students, particularly in online programmes. The first is a robust "at-risk" data-mining (preferable) or reporting system so students who are not engaging with coursework can be identified and given support. A second critical component is a system of preparation and/or remediation for students who are not necessarily ready for college. According to the American College Testing (ACT) organisation, in

2006 nearly one-third of U.S. college students were required to take remedial college courses because they lacked the basic skills to succeed in standard credit courses (ACT, 2006). In 2010 the National Center for Public Policy and Education (2010) reported the gap between secondary education and post-secondary education had grown, and nearly 60% of U.S. students had to take remedial courses. Many who enrolled in these courses did not complete them; the Center estimated these figures were artificially low because many students were not tested to see if they needed to be placed in remedial courses, and had entered directly into credit courses.

In 2013, in a report authored by Sparks and Malkus (2013), the National Center for Educational Statistics reported that approximately 20% of private-school students took remedial courses, yet acknowledged this data was self-reported by students. No matter what the true percentage (20% up to 60%) the number of students requiring remedial classes is significant. In fact, the number of students in online programmes that require remediation outside formal remedial classes is likely to be much higher (Sparks & Malkus, 2013). Many students in online programmes might not have attended school within the last few years, might not have prerequisite maths or writing skills, and might not be familiar with APA or MLA format. These students face a steep learning curve and, if additional resources are not available, they have an increased chance of attrition. International students may also need additional assistance. In the United States, more than one-third of students between 5 and 17 were first-generation students and were more likely to need remediation and drop out of college (Balemian & Feng, 2013). About one-quarter of Australian students are international students (Australian Government, 2015) who may need additional assistance. Deans and department heads can partner with tutoring centres and writing labs to develop robust materials to meet these students' needs regardless of where the university is located.

Outreach and innovation

As noted previously, competition in online programmes is high due to their global nature. Small universities that started evening adult programmes in the 1980s and 1990s served students in their local geographic areas. In the United States these programmes provided a good source of revenue for universities. In the late 1990s and beyond, most of these programmes transitioned to the online format. Initially, this change was to the benefit of the universities because it allowed them to expand outside their geographical area. However, as more universities began offering online courses and programmes, competition increased and many of the smaller universities began to lose enrolments. This phenomenon did not just affect online programmes; it also affected campus-based programmes as students became more cautious about going into debt for education due to the state of the United States' economy. In countries such as Australia, the increased attrition rates also negatively affected the universities' bottom line (Hare, 2015).

Economic pressures have led to universities looking for alternate revenue streams. One option is community outreach. Although community outreach may not initially net the universities additional revenue, it is done with the intent of increasing potential revenue sources in the long term by increasing the positive view and reputation of the university in the community. In marketing terms, these initiatives can be viewed as loss leaders. Some of these initiatives may include offering free educational conferences for the community at large, offering teacher education symposiums, joining community groups, and offering dual credit courses for high-school students in the hope these students will matriculate at the university. These types of initiatives are now usually driven by the relevant dean or department head because they have the necessary expertise and resources. This is another role that was not traditionally filled by deans and department heads. Although necessary, it can take a great deal of time and effort and can put an additional burden on academic staff.

However, such challenges can allow people in leadership roles to stretch themselves professionally and become involved in activities they might not have been involved with in the past. In addition, pursuing new opportunities can expand the pool of professional contacts for deans and department heads..

Some outreach initiatives, such as offering workforce or targeted education programmes, can have direct financial consequences. Although, in the past, workforce education was primarily the responsibility of community and technical colleges, some 4-year universities are also now creating partnerships with businesses to meet higher level workforce needs. For example, California State University offers this service, and partners with businesses to meet their needs.[3] Another example is the Rocky Mountain Public Health Education Consortium, which includes the University of Arizona and partners. The consortium provides education for public health professionals in their region (Taren et al., 2011). The University of Alaska has also partnered with businesses to provide professional training in geology and engineering (University of Alaska, n.d.). The National Fund for Workforce Solutions provides a guide for establishing relationships of this type in the United States.

Long (2013) reported only about 18% of universities in Mexico partner with businesses to provide services. The University of South Australia offers corporate education through community and strategic partnerships. Online education can be very beneficial in these partnerships since the targeted businesses do not have to be in the university's geographical area. Because this is a market that has not been fully tapped, small and private universities are now working to establish such partnerships. Deans and department heads are leading these initiatives for their academic areas.

International partnerships have also gained considerable importance. Online education has opened up learning opportunities in areas of the globe that previously had limited options. The University of Canterbury has robust international partnerships with universities all over the world.[4] Several other New Zealand universities have a rich history in creating international partnerships. Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand has established international partnerships in Japan, and has provided training programmes for the Japanese government.[5] New Zealand universities also participated in a trial to increase enrolment by streamlining the process for offshore visa applicants. This trial included 20 colleges and universities (Immigration New Zealand, 2014). All in all, deans and department heads need to be cognisant of any new ideas that may provide revenue for their schools and programmes and must carefully evaluate each idea for risk and benefit.

Curricular issues and faculty management

Lachiver and Tardif (2002) note that "to engage and lead educators in a curriculum change process is not done easily. The road is difficult, sinuous and sometimes chaotic" (p. 7). Department heads who lead curriculum change must be prepared for philosophical differences, fear, and even open resistance to change. Most faculty are experts in their field of study, but many have not received formal education in pedagogy, andragogy, and heutagogy; in essence, they have not learned how to teach. Instead, their teaching is based on their own personal experiences, and the practices of their own teachers and peers. However, these practices are often faculty-centred rather than student-centred.

[3] See https://www.calstate.edu/extension/partnerships/documents/workforce_brochure.pdf

[4] See http://www.canterbury.ac.nz/international/partnerships/

[5] See http://www.aut.ac.nz/study-at-aut/study-areas/language-culture/international-partners

Faculty knowledge of technology often lags behind that of the students they teach (CDW-G, n.d.). Although, particularly in the United States, academic freedom is sacred, pressures from third-party agencies (such as accrediting bodies and even the federal government), have led to a movement away from complete faculty autonomy to a quality curriculum model that ensures a student gets what they need in a programme of study no matter which faculty member teaches the course. For faculty who have been used to having complete autonomy, this "reining in" of faculty freedom can be controversial.

The use of adjunct faculty is increasing, particularly in online programmes. The American Association of University Professors (2014) reported 51% of faculty were part time or adjunct. Lane and Hare (2015) report similar percentages at Australian universities, and Bryson (2013) reported the use of over 50% sessional faculty at U.K. universities. Use of causal or adjunct faculty has been reported as being as high as 60%–80% in some Australian universities (May, 2011; Lazarsfeld-Jensen & Morgan, 2009). The academic workforce in New Zealand is ageing, with 75% of faculty in New Zealand now 45 or older (Nana, Stokes, & Lynn, 2010) and global competition for doctoral-prepared faculty means that recruiting quality faculty will become even more difficult.

The use of a large number of adjunct faculty can be necessary, particularly in online programmes; however, this approach also results in more faculty for a dean or department head to manage. Adjunct faculty must be found, recruited, and vetted. As well as completing annual formal written evaluations, deans and department heads must evaluate the teaching of all additional faculty. Since most universities do not fund continuing education for causal faculty, internal education and training must be provided for online pedagogy, andragogy, and heutagogy in addition to training on policies and procedures. These duties fall to the dean and/or programme director if the university does not have a specific department to train online faculty.

Deans also face the fact that online education is still not fully accepted by faculty, many of whom still believe it is not as effective as face-to-face education. Allen and Seaman (2015) reported faculty's acceptance of online education as being as good as face-to-face education has remained stagnant over the last decade. In 2007, faculty acceptance of online instruction reached 33%; in 2015 it had dropped to 28%. However, Allen and Seaman did note that the stronger the online presence at a university, the more likely it is that faculty would accept it. The responsibility for increasing faculty acceptance rests largely with deans and department directors as role models. One way to ensure online programmes are of high quality is to be knowledgeable about online curriculum design (or knowing how to access experts who are) and being aware of online best practices through organisations such as the Online Learning Consortium (formerly Sloan Learning Consortium) and Quality Matters. Department heads and deans must also be familiar with regional, governmental, and programmatic accreditation and institutional effectiveness standards.

Recommendations

This review of new roles of mid-level leaders in tertiary education institutions leads to some specific recommendations. Deans and department heads need to be aware of the roles they may be asked to fill since they may differ significantly from past academic roles. These include roles such as marketing, retention, and enrolment. Universities also have a responsibility to educate their deans and programme chairs on these new and evolving roles since most of these are outside the usual purview of academic expertise. Without education, it is much more difficult for deans and department heads to be successful in these new roles; this ultimately affects the academic and financial health of a university. There is a paucity of research on how academicians are adapting to these new roles. More research is needed on how small universities and tertiary training centres can remain viable. In addition, more research is needed on viable

solutions for the issues and challenges identified in this paper. This research needs to be conducted on an international level since academic roles and institutions differ in scope and structure across the globe.

Conclusion

The purpose of this review has been to serve as a comprehensive yet concise guide for the additional roles that online department heads may be required to undertake at small independent and private universities and private training establishments. It is the author's intention that this paper provides general guidance to new and existing department heads and deans in small tertiary institutions to help them navigate this paradigm shift in higher education.

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