The Missing Link: Evaluating Faculty Workload in the Online Modality

Scott Hovater and Michael J. Coplan

Grand Canyon University

Abstract

Financial viability, effective marketing and a strong curriculum are seen as indicators of success in distance learning programs. An often overlooked indicator of success is faculty workload. This study examines the weekly workload of more than 100 full-time online instructors. Recommendations for online administrators, faculty, and curriculum designers are provided.

Introduction

Successful distance learning programs require financial viability, effective marketing strategies, and a strong curriculum integrated within an online learning management system (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006). These three pillars of success are codependent on each other. While temporary success can be achieved with these three pillars, continual long-term success requires the inclusion of a fourth pillar. This pillar is the role played by the online instructor.

Financial sustainability, effective marketing strategies, and a well-designed curriculum can all be affected by the perceptions of those providing instruction (Tabata & Johnsrud, 2008). While higher education administrators have recognized the bottom line value of quality instruction in an online modality (Allen & Seaman, 2006), research is limited in the area of faculty workload. What is the optimal faculty workload for a fulltime online instructor? Is it possible that an analysis of faculty workload may help maximize financial benefits while maintaining academic integrity and avoiding faculty burnout?

In an attempt to answer these questions, 140 fulltime online faculty at a southwestern university participated in a self-reported workload study. All of the faculty participating taught general education courses at the freshmen level. Results showed that the type of assignments within a course had a major impact on faculty workload. Other key factors included the amount of assignments requiring a grade per week, the type of course, faculty engagement, and non-course commitments. Recommendations include more cooperation between curriculum designers and faculty, increased student-intensive/faculty limited assignments and an examination of course equity.

Methodology

Most of the available literature on faculty workload focuses on traditional ground instruction (Seaberg, 1998; Menachemi, Morrisey, Au & Ginter, 2009; Bentley & Kyvik, 2012) with only a few studies examining the time spent on tasks for fulltime online instructors (Spector, 2005; Tomei, 2006). This quantitative study helps to alleviate the gap in the literature by examining the weekly activities of 140 fulltime online faculty at a southwestern university.

A self-reported "time diary" was created by the authors to allow online instructors to monitor their own activities. Use of a self-reported time diary has proven to be an effective evaluative tool when examining faculty workload (Robinson & Bostrom, 1994). Throughout the week instructors entered their activities into the time diary at two hour intervals. Space was provided on the time diary for non-course activities which included attending meetings, performing research, answering emails, collaborating with colleagues, etc. Course activities included the grading of various types of assignments (essay, journals/worksheets, discussion questions, etc.) posting, communicating with students, and some administrative items. On the Monday of the following week, instructors entered the time they spent over the weekend and then submitted their completed time diary to an electronic folder where their names were deleted and an anonymous number assigned. This process was repeated one month later. SPSS was used as the statistical software to analyze the results.

The participants of the study worked in an office setting forty hours a week. Each instructor taught three to four online courses with one or two different preparations. Courses covered within this data included a University Success course, College Composition, Critical Thinking, English, Psychology, Basic Algebra and a Religion course. All courses are required general education courses for students.

Results

As shown in table #1, 140 out of 167 fulltime online instructors participated in at least one week of the study (an 83.8% response rate) with 82 instructors participating both weeks.

Table #1: Participatory Data

Month	2 Month Participation	1 Month Participation	Total Participation	All Online Instructors	Participation Rate
July	82	39	121	167	72.5%
September	82	19	101	167	60.5%
Total	82	58	82+58=140	167	83.8%

There were a total of 728 courses included over the two week period which is an average of 3.3 courses per instructor. Each of the seven general education courses had a minimum of 20 courses included in the data set. Table #2 lists all seven courses and the average amount of time spent on each course and the amount of time spent per student. The table also calculates the amount time it would be expected to teach each course if the instructor had 80 students or 100 students.

Table #2: Time on Course Per Student

Course	Time on Course[1]	Average Student Count	Course	Avg. per Student[2]	If Workload = 80 students	If Workload = 100 students
Religion	10.63	22.84	English	0.56	44.8 hours	56 hours
English	9.81	17.58	Religion	0.47	37.6	47
Critical Thinking	7.89	23.16	Basic Algebra	0.43	34.4	43
Composition	7.58	23.14	Critical Thinking	0.34	27.2	34
University Success	7.21	24.27	Composition	0.33	26.4	33
Basic Algebra	6.57	15.29	University Success	0.30	24.0	30
Psychology	5.57	19.27	Psychology	0.29	23.2	29

(1) Time is calculated in hours. For example the Religion courses took an average of 10.63 hours or 10 hours and 38 minutes (60 minutes * 0.63 = 37.8).
(2) Average per student was calculated by dividing Time on Course by Student Count.

Of course instructors do more than just teach courses. Table #3 adds in an average non-course workload which was 7.2 hours per week. Results show there was no statistical differences across courses when it came to non-course hours. The table then shows the number of students an instructor could teach per course. The results clearly show that not all courses are created equal when it comes to faculty workload.

Table #3: Estimated Student Count Per Course

Course	Average Time / Student	Average Non-Course Hours	40 Hour Work Week	Estimated Student Count
English	0.56	7.2	40	59
Religion	0.47	7.2	40	70
Basic Algebra	0.43	7.2	40	76
Critical Thinking	0.34	7.2	40	97
Composition	0.33	7.2	40	100
University Success	0.30	7.2	40	110
Psychology	0.29	7.2	40	114

Further investigation demonstrated why a major discrepancy existed across courses in terms of faculty workload. The Psychology course had automated quizzes each week which the faculty did not need to grade. The other assignments in this course were journals and worksheets that were clearly defined and easy to grade. There were no essays. Results showed that essays took almost twice the time to grade than journals/worksheets so it is not surprising that the two most time sensitive courses, English and Religion, had numerous essays. A further result showed that courses that had multiple small assignments due during a given week also was time intensive for the faculty. The small assignments were not difficult to grade but required more time posting feedback and assigning grades. Finally faculty engagement in the discussion forums was higher in the top three courses in table #3.

Recommendations

Based on the results, it is recommended that more cooperation between curriculum designers and faculty should take place. The creation of a course should take into consideration the amount of time it will take an average faculty to teach and facilitate. For example, the creation of a well written quiz requires much more time on the front end than the creation of a worksheet or essay. However, faculty benefit from an automated quiz because it frees them up to spend more time providing feedback on essays or engaging students in the discussion forum. In general it is prudent to create several student intensive assignments that do not require as much time for faculty to grade. Finally, administrators might consider examining course equity. Perhaps faculty teaching courses requiring less of a workload could cover more classes (or students) thus providing a financial gain.

Conclusion

Further research on online faculty workload is needed. It is anticipated that more and more institutions will hire online fulltime faculty. Finding ways to "create time" for faculty to teach enough to make their positions financially viable is necessary. College administrators should consider faculty workload alongside financial viability, marketing strategies and a strong curriculum. The addition of this missing link as the fourth pillar will help to balance the table.

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