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Online Distance Education: Implications for Faculty and the Curriculum

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In 2012, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks was in good company when he predicted that MOOCs would make higher education all but redundant.¹ Just a few years later, analyst Kevin Carey published *The End of College* in which he argued that higher education may become obsolete in a marketplace of providers where students gather credentials that denote specific skills rather than undertake “bundled” degree-programs.² Neither prediction has materialized and no evidence suggests they will anytime soon. Colleges and universities have been and will almost certainly continue to be the primary provider of postsecondary education in the foreseeable future. Even so, higher education is changing. Information technology plays an increasingly important role in the way colleges and universities provide education and that role will only continue to grow.

Distance education, which includes individual courses and academic programs delivered fully online and in hybrid format, is now an established vehicle for program delivery in higher education. In 2015, approximately six million students took at least one distance education course, of which 2.9 million were enrolled exclusively in distance education.³ And although distance education is often associated with for-profit institutions like the University of Phoenix, that perception does not match reality. Over two-thirds of distance enrollments are located at public colleges and universities.⁴ In short, public institutions have embraced online delivery, but in the rush to respond to student and broader market demands, there has been little contemplation as to how to best organize and administer online education, especially when it concerns graduate education. Indeed, public colleges and universities and their faculties have not often given serious thought to how changing the academic business model affects faculty and students.⁵ As a result, there seem to be two overarching approaches to the administration of online education on U.S. campuses: (1) a centralized approach, where authority over online course work has come to reside not with the faculty, but with a class of educational and informational technology professionals that “offer conceptions of

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pedagogical and technical expertise that they assert are superior to that of a the faculty”⁶ and (2) a decentralized approach, in which faculty members retain control over the content, sequencing, and formatting of the courses, just as they do with face-to-face course work.

Although there are likely some hybrid versions of distance education, this issue brief compares the two approaches named above because they represent the most common approaches to online higher education and because they are anchored in radically different assumptions as to the nature of knowledge, teaching, and learning; the role and value of faculty member voice and oversight; and the distinct purposes of graduate education in contemporary society.

Moreover, the brief is particularly concerned with showing that the case for centralization is often built from unreliable research studies that undermine the seminal value of the faculty, faculty governance, and the role of faculty in bringing their expertise to bear on student teaching and learning experiences, especially with regard to graduate education. With MOOCs failing to revolutionize the way higher education is delivered as initially predicted, educational technology companies have now set their targets on master’s programs delivered at a distance.⁷ Thus, this issue brief focuses only on online graduate education—an appropriate and timely limit because: (1) master’s and doctoral degrees are increasingly offered through distance programs,⁸ (2) many campuses establish separate policies for graduate and undergraduate education, and (3) there is already a robust literature on undergraduate distance education, such as the recent report from George Mason University.⁹

To centralize or not to centralize, that is the question.

Perhaps the most important question that institutions face is whether to centralize provision of graduate education under a single umbrella or adopt a decentralized approach in which distance programs are governed/controlled by the faculty.

The decentralized model handles distance education much the same as traditional on-campus programs. “Program leads and academic deans oversee the design and delivery of online programs, including policies and procedures.”¹⁰ In the decentralized model, faculty retain substantive control over course content and academic programs, establish program objectives and targeted learning outcomes, program requirements, course sequencing, and instructional staffing.

In a centralized model, programs are coordinated by a single office dedicated to distance education. Centralized distance education means that “oversight and policies for the design and delivery of online programs are housed in a single office or department for all online offerings in the institution, and specialized faculty and staff focus on the various aspects of online learning.”¹¹ Centralized provision involves ceding faculty control over courses,

academic college oversight of programs, typically require revenue-sharing agreements, and raise questions about the role of third party vendors.

The educational technology community makes an enthusiastic argument for the centralized model. Purported benefits include an enhanced learner experience resulting from course production by instructional designers, quality assurance, strategic marketing, and efficient coordination across campus.¹² The underlying assumption is that online distance education differs fundamentally from on-campus education, necessitating an entirely new model of academic governance that deemphasizes faculty expertise and professional autonomy.

Will centralizing graduate distance education programs enhance quality and improve learner experiences and outcomes?

The case for centralization rests on the prospects of improved educational quality and enhanced student outcomes. A recent and influential report prepared by the Boston Consulting Group for Quality Matters (QM) and Arizona State University advances a form of centralization described as “The Strategic Portfolio Approach.”¹³ The report asserts that quality distance education is the result of placing the “student first”— an approach to teaching that is neither new nor unique to online education. For the past few decades, teaching and learning researchers have often advocated for a “learner centered” approach to andragogy.¹⁴

The QM report states there is no one-size-fits-all solution to delivering distance education. But the approach advocated by QM largely belies that assertion. According to QM, the implied best way to achieve high-quality student-centered distance education programs is through a centralized portfolio approach that empowers educational technology administrators and course designers to oversee virtually all aspects of distance programs, including course formatting, teaching and learning activities, assessment practices, and so on.

While the QM report was greeted with fanfare from much of the educational technology community, the reception is not universally positive. Critics of the report argue that it fails to acknowledge the needs of learners of different ages, life experiences, and preferences, does not fully consider the missions and circumstances of individual higher education institutions, and offers thin evidence to support its sweeping claims.¹⁵ Indeed, most of the report’s conclusions are based on case studies from a handful of institutions, all of which are located in high-growth metropolitan regions in “Sunbelt” states, and descriptive statistics from institutional and federal data.

The report implies a causal link between centralized online delivery and a host of positive student outcomes based on campus anecdotes and summary statistics rather than rigorously controlled studies. Of course, experimental research is difficult to conduct in any educational

domain, but rigorous observational studies paint a mixed picture about the learning outcomes in distance education. The George Mason report found that the most important aspect to ensuring educational rigor and to safeguarding educational value is to ensure faculty–student interaction: “The greatest risk is that the rush to transform higher education will widen the gulf between the college education available to those who arrive at the door with ample resources and strong academic preparation and those who depend on postsecondary education to open the doors to productive lives.”¹⁶ The George Mason report primarily considers undergraduates but there is no reason to believe that faculty interaction is not important for graduate students. While centralized program provision does not necessarily reduce faculty–student interaction, it certainly could, and reduced contact between students and instructors is one way that education technology companies plan to cut the costs of delivery.¹⁷ Currently, there are no rigorous studies that provide a strong evidence that centrally designed programs yield better outcomes. A responsible appraisal of the evidence demands modesty and acknowledgement of uncertainty. The QM report is emblematic of much of educational technology literature, characterized by strident claims and thin evidence.

Can graduate education be standardized, and, if so, what does it mean for higher education?

The purpose of graduate education is not simply to transmit information, but also to prepare students for work in a particular field through mentorship and professional socialization.¹⁸ Students in master’s programs learn state-of-the-art knowledge in their fields, and are trained in established and emerging professional practices. Students in doctoral programs are prepared to advance the frontiers of knowledge through cutting-edge research and scholarship. Hallmarks of quality graduate education have been faculty–student interaction that leverages faculty expertise, the ability to adapt learning outcomes based on field-developments and student interests, exposure to the most up-to-date knowledge in a field, and access to professional networks.¹⁹ In graduate education, faculty share their expertise with students and co-construct knowledge. Ideal learning conditions in graduate education include expert faculty designed, directed, and delivered curricula that reflect the intellectual work of individual faculty members and the collective wisdom of academic fields. Quality in graduate education has traditionally been established by peer-review and adherence to professional and disciplinary norms. There is no reason why distance education should deviate from providing these learning conditions for students.

Standardized course production—an assumed strength realized through centralizing distance education—may not be consistent with the demands of all graduate programs. Take for example QM’s processes for standardizing course quality:

“During the process of course development, for example, instructional designers benchmark courses against a rubric [designed by QM] ... This establishes a threshold

of quality that every course must meet, with multiple checkpoints along the way to ensure fulfillment of the rubric.”

The QM process differs from academically rigorous graduate education in a number of ways. First, standards are set not by the discipline or field but by a third party with no relevant academic standing. Second, instructional designers rather than faculty members are designated as reviewers. Finally, quality is ultimately certified by adherence to a rubric rather than to field-specific academic standards. It is further worth noting that inserting a team of non-academic professional staff, who are often compensated at levels equal to or above the faculty,²⁰ into the program delivery process does not alone control costs.

Third party vendors and resource stewardship.

Centralizing distance education frequently involves entering into partnerships with online program managers (OPMs)—private corporations whose services are designed to expand program offerings and grow market share. In exchange, universities pay a fee, often committing a share of tuition revenue to the OPM. In some arrangements OPMs essentially design and deliver programs marketed under the banner of a non-profit or public university.²¹

A Twitter exchange among OPM advocates and tech-investors was recently published by *Inside Higher Education*. The exchange made plain the educational technology industry position.²² For-profit OPMs are necessary to innovate higher education, the conversation participants argued, because higher education institutions are not willing to risk capital on new ventures, do not understand the digital education landscape, and are too slow to respond to market demand. The first of these claims—that public and non-profit institutions never risk capital on new ventures—is patently incorrect. From six and even seven-figure laboratory start-up packages, to new degree programs, expanded student support services, and so on, institutions *not* seeking a profit routinely make substantial capital investments in new ventures that hold great potential but high uncertainty. The second claim—that universities do not understand the digital landscape—is incomplete. Even if universities do not have relevant expertise—a claim that is dubious given that they host business, information, and communications schools—such expertise can be acquired through consulting without handing over production of degree programs to an OPM. Universities must do a better job responding to student needs, but given the sector’s history of expanding access it is difficult to accept the premise that higher education is market-unresponsive.

Universities may be tempted to enter into partnership with OPMs because they have technical capacity unavailable locally or promise marketing and sales expertise. Both public and non-profit private universities are increasingly dependent on tuition payments, which imposes great pressure to expand enrollments to maximize earned revenue.²³ Under such conditions, the potential upside of OPM partnerships are likely attractive to campus leaders

seeking institutional advancement. Even when intentions are good, partnering with an OPM may be a devil's bargain.

A report from The Century Foundation analyzed dozens of OPM contracts with public universities and identified significant risks for institutions and their students. Unlike universities, profit is the *raison d'être* for OPMs. The need to make a profit provides a powerful incentive to lower production costs and provide education on the cheap. Since contracts typically give OPMs considerable control over course production and design, institutions may have little ability to ensure educational standards are maintained, or that institutional reputation and academic values are protected. Similarly, agreements often allow OPMs to access sensitive student data for marketing purposes, compromising student privacy. According to Margaret Matts of the Century Foundation: "More so than other contracting arrangements, OPMs represent the outsourcing of the core educational mission of public institutions of higher education, threatening the consumer-minded focus that results from the public control of schools." If the Century Foundation's outlook is too skeptical, an executive at Noodle, an OPM, offers a more nuanced view. According to him, "I firmly believe that for-profit partnerships can drive innovation and positive student outcomes in higher education, but like my colleagues in academia, I am cautious about the extent to which these partnerships infringe on faculty freedoms."²⁴ The bottom line is that any partnership with an OPM should be critically scrutinized for its consequences for the academic profession and the curriculum.

Does market-position improve with centralization?

An additional argument for centralization is that the marketplace for graduate distance education programs is extraordinarily competitive and that failure to adopt an enterprise-wide strategy, potentially including partnerships with OPMs, condemns institutions to irrelevance in this domain. Addressing the question of whether market-position improves relative to competitors as a result of centralization is difficult to answer definitively. Generating robust estimates would require comparing performance measures—such as enrollment figures—before and after centralization within institutions relative to the performance of all competitors and those competitors that did not centralize. Absent this sort of rigorous empirical evidence, case studies may provide some limited information. The example of Michigan State University (MSU) is considered.

MSU offers several distance education graduate programs, including highly ranked programs in Education and Nursing.²⁵ Graduate distance education programs at MSU are housed, produced, and controlled by academic units; in other words, MSU has taken a decentralized approach to provision. Has this approach hurt MSU's market-position?

According to data from the U.S. Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS),²⁶ approximately 2,000 students are enrolled exclusively in distance education programs at the graduate level at MSU each year. The share of exclusively distance enrollments among all graduate enrollments has held steady at 17% from 2015–2017. The number of students enrolled in graduate programs online declined nominally, by 47 students, or less than 1%, between 2015 and 2017. Graduate enrollments in distance education programs are flat at MSU.

MSU is a leader in online delivery when compared against conventional peer groups (AAU public universities, Big10 universities, and University Innovation Alliance [UIA] universities), but as the below data show, that leadership position is ebbing:

- MSU rank among AAU publics: 2015 (5/34), 2016 (4/34), 2017 (7/34).
- MSU rank among Big10: 2015 (2/14), 2016 (2/14), 2017, (4/14).
- MSU rank among UIA: 2015 (1/11), 2016 (2/11), 2017 (3/11).

In recent years, MSU has not experienced growth in graduate distance programs. Nonetheless, one cannot credibly link stagnation in graduate-level distance programs to the decentralized model of provision. Graduate distance education enrollments have declined less than the overall drop in graduate enrollments at MSU between 2015 and 2017. Per MSU's Planning Profile Summary,²⁷ between 2015 and 2017, total graduate enrollment declined by 3.4%, with master's enrolment declining by 6.2%. Given that MSU does not offer doctoral degrees exclusively through distance delivery (according to IPEDS), master's enrollment is the best reference group. Taking these figures at face value, exclusively distance enrollments have fared better than both overall graduate enrollment and master's enrollment. Master's graduate enrollment continued to decline into 2018. To put it directly, MSU data do not support a claim that the market-position of graduate distance education programs at MSU has been harmed by the university's decentralized approach.

Some market analysts use IPEDS data to benchmark distance education completions. Such analyses are not creditable. Careful review of IPEDS surveys show it is impossible to produce a reliable ranking of distance education completions. IPEDS does report the number of degree programs delivered at a distance by Classification of Instructional Program code (CIP) and level. IPEDS also reports the number of program completions by CIP and level. The analytical challenge is that one cannot cross-tabulate these data to derive the number of distance completions. Institutions may offer degree programs in both online and traditional delivery formats at the same CIP and level. For example, many campuses offer an MBA through both delivery modes. In such cases, it is impossible to disaggregate completions by delivery method using IPEDS data.

Without better data and rigorous studies, it is all but impossible to isolate the effects of delivery strategy (centralized versus decentralized) on market performance. One rigorous study found that increasing distance enrollments increases tuition revenue, but does not shed light on delivery strategy and enrollment performance. What is more, the study does raise concerns about quality declines when distance enrollments are quickly expanded.²⁸ As suggested by MSU's experience, establishing market leadership is possible without centralization and ongoing performance may be attributed to several factors and not credibly isolated to delivery strategy alone.

The tradition of faculty control over the curriculum is worth preserving.

American higher education has a long history of experimentation and innovation. Unplanned, and sometimes unwieldy, the system transformed from a showdown of its European predecessors in the mid-19th century to the world leader by the mid-20th century.²⁹ The sector must address challenges, including the need to ensure affordability and that all students' basic needs are met. The sector must provide the conditions for success to all students, and to maintain relevance in a fast-changing world. But the crisis narrative that higher education faces imminent obsolescence unless it radically transforms is overblown.³⁰ Predictions of the technology-driven demise of institutional higher education date back at least to the mid-1970s and early work on the knowledge society by Daniel Bell.³¹ Clark Kerr, President of the University of California in the 1960s, knew that the brilliance of American higher education—and the source of its staying power—was the ability to do many things at once. Institutions, for example, can provide broad access and elite education, while also engaging in cutting-edge research and public service.³²

Today, Steven Brint, professor and former administrator at the University of California, Riverside, tells a similar celebratory story about American higher education. At the same time, he acknowledges that the picture is not all rosy. One challenge is the de-professionalization of the faculty. As he explains, “administrators have regained control (if they ever lost it!) and their budgetary decisions have led to spectacular growth of their own ranks . . . and the creation of a huge proletariat of part-time instructors.”³³ Brint is not alone in his concern about the expanding faculty under-class. In fact, trepidation about de-professionalization of the faculty is one of the few topics about which higher education researchers of all stripes largely agree. After all, what is the university without professors?

One of the bulwarks against de-professionalization in higher education has been faculty control of the curriculum. In American higher education, things change fast and the university of one generation is much different from the university of the next. Throughout times of expansion, innovation, and transformation, faculty authority over matters of the curriculum and academic unit (colleges and departments) “ownership” of programs has been a

stabilizing influence. Rather than thwarting innovation, the faculty's professional oversight of the curriculum has provided a steady hand that has lent legitimacy to the entire enterprise. The faculty governed curriculum has ensured students have access to the most up-to-date knowledge in their fields and has protected the independence and integrity of higher education.³⁴

Advocates of centralized distance education understand the role of the faculty differently. Faculty are presented as “content experts,” potential “collaborators,” and one of many constituencies whose “buy-in” ought to be sought. There is nothing objectionable about these terms in the abstract, but their use in context reveals ignorance or disinterest in the venerable tradition of faculty authority over the curriculum. The default assumption of the educational technology community seems to be that the faculty are simply one part of an assembly-line process for course and program design, rather than the stewards of established knowledge.

A well-known adage in the tech world is to “move fast and break things.” Sometimes this approach can impose high costs; the risk of dismantling the foundational pillars of higher education is too big to accept. Higher education must adapt to emerging demands but it cannot lose its core values of shared governance, professional independence, and the integrity of established knowledge. Replacing the faculty with modular programs run by tech-savvy entrepreneurs is not higher education, but rather what the sociologist Tressie Cottom McMillan calls “LowerEd”—education-like services sold for a profit to students who often learn little and enjoy limited exchange value from their credential.

A decentralized approach with coordinated communication could preserve the academic profession and promote experimentation.

One of the most influential and durable organizational concepts applied in the study of higher education is Karl Weick's³⁵ theory of loosely coupled systems. The idea is that a strength of the organization is that its components—or sub-systems—operate semi-autonomously. In loosely coupled systems units are partially sheltered from the failure of others, and do not have unfettered access to the resources other units generate, but are linked just closely enough to learn from one another's successes and failures. This is the theory of “don't put all your eggs in one basket.”

Robert Birnbaum, a higher education theorist and a former university president, argues that loose coupling is the key to academic innovation.³⁶ Just so, a decentralized approach to distance education with communication between programs has the potential for cross-unit collaboration. Decentralization protects successful programs from failing ones, while permitting the know-how of the successful programs to be shared with poorer-performers. Such an approach also maintains the norms of academic governance and avoids exposing

the academic profession—and the basic values of higher education—to the serious risk of irreparable de-professionalization of the faculty.

Thus far, predictions of massive disruption to higher education have failed to materialize. Rather than potentially undoing a foundational tenet of higher education and the academic profession through pre-emptive strategy, colleges and universities can do what they do best: leverage the expertise of the faculty to carefully evaluate rigorous evidence, engage in serious deliberation through the participatory channels of faculty governance, and maintain the time-tested approach of honoring the faculty's collective authority over the curriculum.

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