

BY GEORGE P. SCHELL

UNIVERSITIES MARGINALIZE ONLINE COURSES

Why should faculty members develop online courses if the effort may be detrimental to their promotion or tenure?

Online courses at U.S. universities require great effort from faculty members for development and delivery. The long-term viability of online courses also requires the faculty involved to achieve promotion and tenure. Research, teaching, and service are the mantra for achieving promotion and tenure, but faculty at most traditional U.S. universities find that research is critical while other factors play a supporting role. If faculty members feel the value of developing and teaching online courses is marginal, they will be reluctant to pursue online courses.

Promotion and tenure in a university can be viewed as a sequence of decisions that must all be affirmative. In many universities, the process of promotion and tenure decision begins with the faculty

member's colleagues and continues through the chief academic officer of the university administration. Frequently, the promotion process can be stopped at any of the steps/decisions in the process. For example, the chief academic officer may be a proponent of online classes but someone earlier in the decision process, such as the department chair, may feel the effort devoted to development of online course materials is of little value. If the department chair finds the faculty member's record insufficient to be passed along for promotion and tenure then the chief academic officer will not have an opportunity to champion the faculty member's case.

Traditional U.S. universities marginalize the value of developing and delivering online courses. The result is that most faculty members are disin-

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terested in online courses. Service to the university, writing textbooks, advising students, and similar activities are all seen as positive activities, but academics realize they have little impact on the promotion and tenure decision. Activities that are marginalized by the university in the promotion and tenure decision will not have widespread support among faculty.

Why Offer Online Courses?

Here, we refer to an “online course” as one where the majority of instruction and interaction is accomplished via online resources, that is, readily accessible via the Internet. Online courses present materials but also provide interaction between instructor and student as well as among students. Such courses are generally distinct from earlier distance-learning courses in that online courses utilize asynchronous learning for the majority of course content. Indeed, for online courses, distance is not measured in miles but rather in the lack of face-to-face contact.

Online courses were originally developed because they have the potential to change the education process, impact one-on-one communication, and to weave experiential learning into the education process [4, 11]. “While education is continually beset by fads, the Internet is not one of them” [12]. Some believe the Internet may actually detract from learning [6] or be a threat to traditional teaching pedagogy [5]. Views about courses taught via email [9] meet with a chorus of responses. Igbaria [8] makes strong arguments that global economies, politics, enlightened populations, and technology are the forces driving society to a virtual workplace and it would be a shame if universities did not embrace this change. Universities had no choice but to explore the potential of this new paradigm.

Have online courses been shown to provide better education? Researchers who study the educational outcomes of online and distance-learning courses have found they produce grades and other quantitative measures of success virtually the same as traditionally delivered courses [1–3, 7]. Even while online course delivery is found to be effective, some researchers raise questions about its efficiency [10]. Students frequently report a perception of learning more than in traditional courses, but quantitative measures do not confirm the perception.

The university can dictate the development of online courses as part of its mission, or it may compel some faculty members to deliver online courses; Coppola et al. [5] might refer to these faculty members as “coerced conscripts.” Yet coercing a faculty member to develop online courses can actually diminish his or her chances for promotion and tenure.

Survey Findings

An anonymous survey was developed to gauge the acceptance of online courses and learning materials as a valuable academic endeavor. Responses were analyzed from 232 teaching faculty members (not administrators) holding doctorates who are on tenure track in a four-year, U.S. school. The survey respondents were all faculty that had developed online courses and/or online materials to be used in class and had not been denied promotion.

Respondents came from a variety of disciplines in arts and sciences, business, education, engineering, nursing, and medicine. Of the respondents, 62% were male and 67% were tenured; 31% were assistant professors, 31% associate professors, and 38% were full professors. Some 48% responded their school offered a doctorate degree.

Overall, the respondents generally feel teaching is slightly more important than research in the promo-

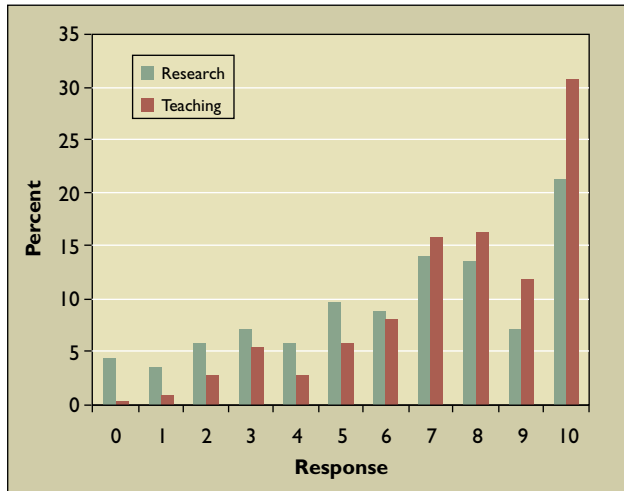


Figure 1. Importance of research and teaching to promotion and tenure for schools without a doctoral program (0 = no importance; 10 = critical).

tion and tenure process. Yet the relative importance of teaching and research is strongly affected by the existence of a doctoral degree at the school (see Figures 1 and 2). The respondents feel the importance of research has grown significantly during the last five years regardless of the existence of a school doctoral program.

The survey asked respondents to rate the academic value of developing online course materials as it related to promotion and tenure decisions. Rating values were from 0 to 10 (no importance to critical importance) and respondents rated the views of their colleagues, department chair, school promotion and tenure committee, dean, and the university administration views. The results are bleak for faculty hoping their involvement in online courses will bestow promotion and tenure.

Faculty members are promoted and tenured at most traditional U.S. universities if each stage of the decision process is affirmative. For this example, colleagues must affirm the decision, then the department chair, then the school's promotion and tenure committee, followed by the dean, and finally the university administration. This may not be the exact process at all universities but it is sufficiently representative to judge the promotion and tenure outcome. For our purposes, a negative decision at any step results in the denial of promotion and/or tenure.

The development of online materials and teaching online courses is only one dimension of a complex promotion and tenure decision process. Faculty mem-

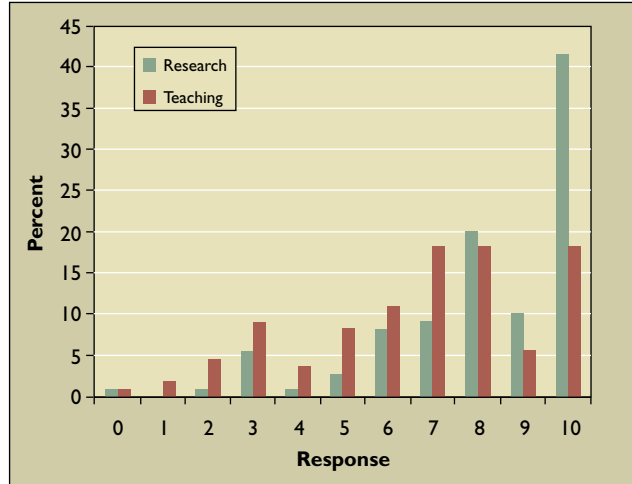


Figure 2. Importance of research and teaching to promotion and tenure for schools with a doctoral program (0 = no importance; 10 = critical).

bers are also judged by their research, traditional teaching activities, and service. Readers can use the analysis here to make their own conclusions about the promotion and tenure benefits associated with developing online courses versus the effort required and how that effort could have been applied to research and traditional teaching activities. For readers who are focusing their promotion and tenure efforts on the development of online courses, this sequence analysis is particularly important.

| | Academic value of at least 5, 3, or 1 given to the development of online course materials | | | | | |
|---------------------------|---|----------|--------|----------|--------|----------|
| | 5 | | 3 | | 1 | |
| Decision Maker | Passed | Rejected | Passed | Rejected | Passed | Rejected |
| Colleagues | 437 | 563 | 661 | 339 | 937 | 63 |
| Department Chair | 258 | 179 | 512 | 149 | 888 | 49 |
| School Committee | 112 | 146 | 342 | 170 | 807 | 81 |
| Dean | 56 | 56 | 257 | 85 | 759 | 48 |
| University Administration | 28 | 28 | 189 | 68 | 707 | 52 |

Candidates out of 1,000 that would be passed or rejected at each stage of the promotion or tenure process.

Assume a faculty member believes his or her development of online course materials will be a deciding element in the promotion and tenure process. At every decision stage in the promotion and tenure process, survey responses averaged less than 5. This table illustrates the promotion and tenure decision outcome based upon value rankings of at least 5, 3, or 1, which represent three likely values a faculty member might expect as the promotion and tenure process progresses. Probabilities for passing and rejecting the faculty candidate were calculated from survey responses at each stage in the decision process. The columns under the label "5" represent how many candidates would be passed or rejected if a value of 5 or higher was required to be passed along the promotion and tenure process.

For example, if the faculty member believes a value of 5 or greater is required of department colleagues to pass with a favorable decision, then only 437 out of

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1,000 candidates would move forward to the department chair to be considered for promotion and tenure. Of the 437 candidates recommended to the department chair, 258 would be passed along the process while 179 would be rejected. Only 28 candidates would ultimately get a favorable decision. The table clearly illustrates that faculty members depending upon their development of online course materials to achieve promotion and tenure will be disappointed. If the values needed were 7 or higher (the most frequent responses for the value of teaching and research), virtually no candidate would receive promotion and tenure based on development of online materials.

Some 47% of respondents reported the increased effort required to use IT in a course as 8, 9, or 10 on a scale of 0 to 10. Online courses are the most intense IT users. Faculty developing online course materials are dedicating a significant amount of their academic effort toward those courses and away from research and traditional teaching efforts. The respondents clearly don't believe these efforts will attain promotion and tenure.

So why should faculty continue to develop online courses when it is detrimental to their goal of promotion and tenure? The answer may be the faculty members who are "coerced conscripts." Universities offer incentives other than promotion and tenure. Reduced class loads, monetary stipends, and other benefits may be provided to faculty. Yet faculty members are dismissed from the university if they cannot attain tenure. This mixed message works to undermine widespread implementation of online course development required to implement a major or program at a university.

The long-term viability of online courses in the U.S. is in serious doubt if the viability is tied to the perceived academic value of developing them. Survey

respondents contend colleagues, department chairs, school committees, deans, and the university administration marginalize the academic value of developing online course materials. Unless universities take significant, positive steps to academically reward the efforts to develop online courses they will only experience a small number of unrelated courses, developed by faculty who have a personal interest in technology and teaching. ■

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