Administrator Attitudes Toward Online Teacher Preparation Programs: Are Principals Logging On—or Logging Off?

A Tri-State Study:

Administrator Attitudes Toward Online Teacher Preparation Programs: Are Principals Logging On—or Logging Off?

John A. Huss

ABSTRACT: This study investigated the attitudes of principals toward the legitimacy of pre-service teacher preparation programs conducted wholly or almost wholly online. Random cluster sampling was utilized to select participants in Indiana, Kentucky, and Ohio. A total of 326 principals completed questionnaires. Principals expressed apprehension about teacher dispositions and the "social" aspects of teaching that may be compromised in an online program, as well as the general ethicality surrounding online courses. If principals are to ultimately acknowledge the legitimacy of online teacher preparation, the degree-granting institutions must address these concerns and actively seek the input of administrators in program design.

Statement of the Problem

Online students now represent 17% of all higher education students (Allen and Seaman, 2006). While Web-based courses and degrees in the field of Education have been rather predominant at the Masters level, the motivation to develop online undergraduate teacher preparation programs is ever increasing as universities strive to alleviate classroom capacity constraints, capitalize on emerging market opportunities, and expand access to under-served populations (Volery & Lord, 2000; Eastman & Swift, 2001).

In fall 2001, the U.S. Department of Education awarded a $10 million, five-year Star Schools grant to Western Governors University (WGU), an online consortium of 19 Western states and 45 universities, to develop a competency-based distance learning program for teaching candidates. The WGU Teachers College now offers K-8 licensure programs as either a bachelor's degree or post baccalaureate certificate, as well as an online bachelor's degree with licensure in secondary mathematics or science and a post baccalaureate-licensing program in math and science for uncertified teachers and mid-career professionals. Arizona, Nevada, and Texas have officially accepted WGU programs for licensure; through reciprocity agreements with these states, the WGU degree is now recognized by 43 other states. Similarly, the University of Maryland was awarded a $2 million Department of Education grant to develop its own online teacher certification program. The goal was to produce 300 teachers for a high-need school district over the next five years (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

Should the movement continue to gain momentum, principals may very well face an interesting quandary when they consider potential employees for the classrooms in their buildings. Spurred by state standards and a call for blended learning, the modern P-12 school actively promotes technology at every turn. Case in point, the Michigan State Board of Education has introduced a new graduation requirement that would make every high-school student in the state take at least one online course before receiving a diploma. The aim is to ensure students are prepared for the technology-focused society in which they will become a part (Carnevale, 2005). Despite such vocal support for technology, will principals ultimately express confidence—or incertitude—about new teachers who learned their foundations and teaching methodologies online? The distance learning revolution could be both promising and problematic for most stakeholders who participate in the education arena.

Nearly 3.2 million students were taking at least one online course during fall 2005 (Allen and Seaman, 2006) and the online tuition revenue totaled $7.1 billion in 2005, up from $2.4 billion in 2002 (Rodgers, 2005). This proliferation of online degree programs has created a deluge for consumers who must dodge a bombardment of Internet pop-up advertisements, distinguish diploma mills from reputable institutions, and ultimately evaluate the marketability of a "clicks-and-mortar" graduation. Not surprisingly, the phenomenon has also stirred curiosity within the research community.

A Look at the Literature

Although Allen and Seaman (2006) found that only one-in-four academic leaders (27.6%) believe their faculties accept the value and legitimacy of online education, a study conducted at West Texas A & M University (a Texas

leader in online education that has offered online courses since 1997) surveyed 220 faculty members and found professors were generally favorable to the experience, but expressed unease about the steep learning curve associated with learning to teach online, the amount of time involved in the process, and the overall quality of the courses (Gerlich, 2005). Santilli and Beck (2005) correspondingly report faculty concerns about developing and maintaining quality online courses. They also indicate faculty members believe assessment issues need to be addressed.

Other inquiries have examined whether students themselves embrace online education as a viable alternative to traditional face-to-face classroom learning. Gallagher and Poroy (2005) conducted a national survey of prospective postsecondary education students and analyzed responses from 541 participants. Thirty eight percent of students were unsure about the quality of online education compared to campus-based learning, 29% believed online learning is inferior to campus-based instruction, 30% thought online learning is comparable to traditional learning, and 3% indicated online learning is superior. A large study conducted by the Sloan Consortium drew data from 1,100 colleges and universities and isolated several perceived advantages for students, including convenience, highly interactive discussion, intensive writing, and close sense of community (Allen and Seaman, 2003). Still, there is a conspicuous lack of empirical data on a central, yet seemingly overlooked, question: How do employers and supervisors view the quality and legitimacy of a degree garnered exclusively online? What will it matter when institutions, faculty, and students embrace the online degree programs, but prospective employers and instructional leaders question the value of such degrees?

Seeking an alternative to on-campus classroom instruction is certainly not a new idea. Correspondence schools and television courses have been part of the academic landscape for many decades. The contemporary incarnation of distance learning has indisputably made noteworthy strides and now includes both synchronous and asynchronous discussion boards, video clips, virtual simulations, and numerous opportunities for email interactions with the professor and classmates. The majority of empirical studies have not demonstrated significant differences between online and traditional (or “face-to-face”) performance (Schulman & Sims, 1999; Thirunarayanan & Perez-Prado, 2002). In fact, the online performances have often demonstrated greater gain (Ridley & Sammour, 1996; McCollum, 1997; Thirunarayanan & Perez-Prado, 2002).

Determining the credibility of an online degree is a relatively new expedition that has generally been confined to business and industry. Adams and DeFluer (2006) undertook a national polling of hiring executives (n=269) and found that 75% prefer the applicant with a traditional degree. According to Vogt (2001), a survey conducted by New York City-based employment research Web site (Vault.com) revealed most employers (54%) still favor job applicants with traditional degrees over those with online degrees, but 45% say they would give job candidates with both types of degrees equal consideration. When the focus moves to teacher education, the feedback is less ebullient. The American Federation of Teachers acknowledge the great potential of distance learning, yet expressed apprehension about online degrees for pre-service candidates when they passed a resolution in 2000 calling for face-to-face coursework in teacher preparation programs.

This study investigated the attitudes and reactions of building principals toward online degree programs and the legitimacy of a pre-service teacher preparation program conducted wholly or almost wholly online. If principals who recommend new teachers for classroom positions are receptive to the online degree and view it no differently than a traditional degree, a definite selling point for online education has been established and reinforced for schools and colleges of education. If, however, a substantial number of principals express tentativeness about hiring “online graduates” for the classroom, key areas of concern will be isolated and, perhaps, viable suggestions introduced to alleviate and overcome these undesirable perceptions. Employer reaction to online teaching preparation could likely have international implications for how instruction is delivered in higher education around the world.

Method

This ongoing study involves the states of Indiana, Kentucky, and Ohio where random cluster sampling has been utilized to select participants from a population list of schools/districts in the aforementioned geographic region. After districts are determined, each principal in the chosen districts is provided with a questionnaire. Through two rounds of data collection, 326 principals (100 from Indiana, 112 from Kentucky, 114 from Ohio) have now completed questionnaires out of 500 mailed, a combined return rate of 65% (200/300 first mailing, 126/200 second mailing). The selected schools provided an equitable cross-section of rural, suburban, and urban principals with 31% responding from elementary, 23% from middle, and 46% from secondary. Recognizing that online programs can be quite complex with intricacies often specific to a particular university, the element they would have in common would be the almost exclusive delivery of instruction via the Internet, as opposed to the mere inclusion of Web-enhanced courses (i.e. a hybrid program). On that basis, the principals were asked four key questions:

1) How aware are you of the growing aspiration within Colleges of Education to create full pre-service teacher

preparation programs wholly or almost wholly online leading to certification/licensure?

2) If a teaching candidate came to you for employment in your building and you knew his/her degree had been obtained wholly or almost wholly via the Internet, how would you describe your level of concern?

3) Does an online degree in teaching carry as much credibility with you as a teaching degree attained in a traditional offline manner?

4) You have narrowed your choice of a teaching hire to two candidates. One candidate attended a traditional bricks-and-mortar college or university, and the other candidate completed a Web-based program online. Both interviewed well and have comparable transcripts. Who are you most inclined to hire?

Principals were also asked to contribute their thoughts or comments regarding the credibility and desirability of online degrees for new teachers. Years of service for each participating principal were likewise recorded.

Results

Principal perceptions of an online degree in teacher preparation were overwhelmingly negative. The grade level of the building did not matter, nor did the number of years a principal had served in an administrative role.

Table 1
Number of Years Served as School Administrator

0-3 years	3-6 years	6-10 years	10-15 years	More than 15
39 (.12)	61 (.19)	66 (.20)	53 (.16)	107 (.33)

n=326

Table 2
How aware are you of the growing aspiration within Colleges of Education to create full pre-service teacher preparation programs wholly or almost wholly online leading to certification/licensure?

Not very aware	Somewhat aware	Very aware
90 (.28)	192 (.59)	44 (.13)

n=326

Table 3
If a teaching candidate came to you for employment in your building, and you knew his/her degree had been attained wholly or almost wholly via the Internet, how would you describe your level of concern?

Not concerned at all	I would be somewhat concerned	I would be very concerned
6 (.02)	128 (.39)	192 (.59)

n=326

Table 4
Does an online degree in teaching carry as much credibility with you as a teaching degree obtained in a traditional offline manner?

YES	NO
17 (.05)	309 (.95)

n=326

Table 5

You have narrowed your choice of a teaching hire to two candidates. One candidate attended a traditional bricks-and-mortar college or university, and the other candidate completed a Web-based program online. Both interviewed well and have comparable transcripts. Who are you most inclined to hire?

Online Candidate	Traditional Candidate
3 (.01)	323 (.99)

n=326

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Dr. John A. Huss is an Assistant Professor in the College of Education and Human Services at Northern Kentucky University. Dr. Huss teaches educational foundations courses, including Introduction to Education and Applied Research in Education. His academic background is in curriculum and instruction, middle grades education, and teacher education. His research interests include the middle school model, cooperative learning, gifted education, and the effect of school uniforms in public schools.

Dr. John A. Huss
College of Education and Human Services
Northern Kentucky University
Highland Heights, Kentucky 41099
hussj@nku.edu