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ABSTRACT

In recent years Institutions of Higher Education have refocused their instructional methods toward online or remote options. This rearrangement has brought challenges to many universities and colleges, the likes of which have not been seen before. Preparing, encouraging, and converting faculty to online instructors has been one of the core issues. Within Higher Education at major colleges and universities a professor whose primary responsibility is teaching strictly online has not been widely accepted. This paper explores the relatively recent changes in Higher Education, types of instruction, the traditional faculty structure, and calls for the addition of an online faculty rank, to include logistics, and recommendations.

Keywords: Higher Education, Faculty, Faculty Ranks, Online Instruction, Online Faculty

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began impacting the United States in March 2020, necessitated adaptations to university teaching, learning, and general operations (Smalley, 2021). Although online programs and class options had been a consistently growing area, within a matter of weeks most universities cancelled in person classes (Smalley, 2021) and became 100% online, at least temporarily. This led to a variety of disruptions for students, faculty, staff, and administrators. DePietro (2020) discussed the complexity of the impact COVID-19 had on higher education (for classes as well as administrative offices), signifying that some of the changes implemented to temporarily respond to the pandemic may become the new normal.

While health and safety demanded these changes, the quality of education, especially as weeks passed without a return to normal campus operations, came into question. This was particularly true because of the rapid change, for individuals (whether they be faculty or students) who had no experience with online teaching or distance learning. While faculty and staff weathered the first few weeks of the online shift, many of the changes were not sustainable (Locke, 2021). Although best practices suggest that designing an online course should be accomplished over a period of 5 months (How long does it take to develop a fully online course? n.d.), the pandemic required shifts to take place within a week or two. Faculty needed training to successfully teach online classes, and students needed training to successfully learn from online classes. As COVID cases dropped and many classes reverted to face to face learning in Fall 2021, some faculty and students welcomed the shift whereas others longed for the geographical and time flexibility of the pandemic arrangements. As Locke (2021) stated, “Similar to telehealth, consumers enjoy the power and

convenience that the online modality has given them and don't want to return to having to be in a set place at a set time dictated by the provider" (para. 5). Although vaccines and treatments are now available, new strains of the virus continue to leave individuals unsure of the future; it may be that a return to online could happen once again. Jaschik's (2022) article "Dealing with COVID-19" the fate of the Spring 2022 semester was particularly relevant as many colleges had previously been encouraging students and faculty to return to normal operations. This exemplifies the constantly changing situation in higher education. Each semester brings new guidelines and recommendations based on case counts, and what data has been gathered regarding student performance and/or preference.

The technology for transforming the college and universities traditional model of teaching from face-to-face to online had been available for quite a while. Events in the last few years have compelled (for better or worse) the need to adopt these tools more rapidly than were originally envisioned, as illustrated by Akram, Yingxiu, Al-Adwan, and Alkhalifah (2021), who wrote that the COVID-19 pandemic "raises the importance of technology integration in education, and teachers are required to update their competencies, respectively" (para. 1). The ramping up of the skill set required to convert courses from face-to-face to online occurred at numerous institutions within weeks. In a lot of cases this hasty expansion could be characterized as a band-aid until training could be developed and scheduled.

The instructors that already had been teaching online were at a distinct advantage. Scaling up the rest of the instructors in some cases was problematic. While the technology had been in use within the education industry, more than a few faculty only had tangential familiarity. These faculty needed significant help and in many cases in-depth training. Since the need to implement these technologies occurred in the middle of the term, training had to be postponed and individuals with adept knowledge, specialized organizations, or a combination of both were marshaled to the forefront to manage this new instructional reality. As a result of this change in circumstances 42.5% of faculty participated in over 40 hours of online teaching training and another 20.8% participated in between 20 to 40 hours of online teaching training prior to the beginning of the Fall 2020 semester (Kelly, 2020).

Not only did institutions of higher learning need to be concerned with the quality of course content, the opportunities for students to engage with their peers and faculty were severely limited. Out of classroom activities such as athletics, clubs, and other social events vital to the college experience were put on hold, as administrators grappled with how to offer these types of involvement in a safe manner. As a result, a number of elite institutions — such as Princeton University, Williams College, Spelman College, and American University — substantially discounted tuition for their fully online experience in an historically unprecedented fashion (Gallagher & Palmer, 2020, para. 3).

The campus community (particularly in traditional universities with a high on campus residency rate), faced additional obstacles to offering out of classroom opportunities, as these interests became sidelined in the hopes of keeping COVID infection rates down. Dormitories were closed and students were encouraged to live with their families. As universities were forced to vacate their campuses "students lost access to campus labs, technology, transportation, athletics, library services, dining halls and more" (Justin & Oxner 2020, para. 16). This reduction of the overall

college experience led many students to switch to more budget friendly universities. Options which may not have been a choice because of location now were within the realm of possibility. Students and their parents asked questions like: Why pay private school tuition if you are taking online classes without a chance for personal interaction? Why pay fees for on campus activities or amenities if they are not being offered? Some examples of these fees would be parking, athletic, and recreation or health center fees. When on campus living was closed, many students needed to relocate hours away to be with family and wouldn't have been able to access services even if they remained open. As indicated by Fishman, Hiler, & Nguyen (2021), the pandemic rise led high school seniors to rethink their college choices; 31% applied to schools closer to their families, and 29% applied to schools with lower costs.

ENROLLMENT

The unpreparedness of many institutions and students to go completely online as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic was evident. A comparison of the top ranked U.S. Institutions (Figure 1) and the ranked top U.S. Liberal Arts Institutions (Figure 2) between Fall 2019 (the last full term before the onset of COVID-19) and Fall 2020 (the first full term following the onset of COVID-19) indicates that many top schools experienced a decrease in enrollment (U.S. News and World Report 2020 & Best Colleges in America). While there were a few clear exceptions (Amherst College, Pomona College, and Columbia University) within the top ranked schools, the rise in enrollment for these 3 institutions suggests that they found a successful strategy to both recruit and retain students.

Figure 1 *Top U.S. Institutions*

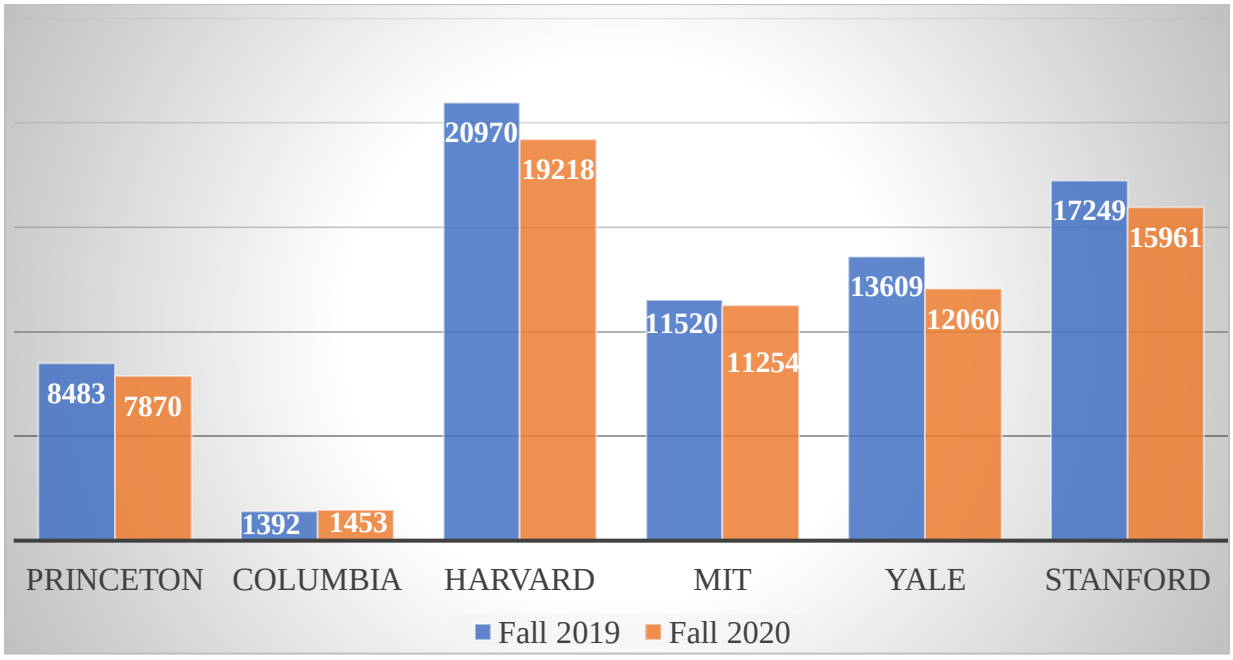
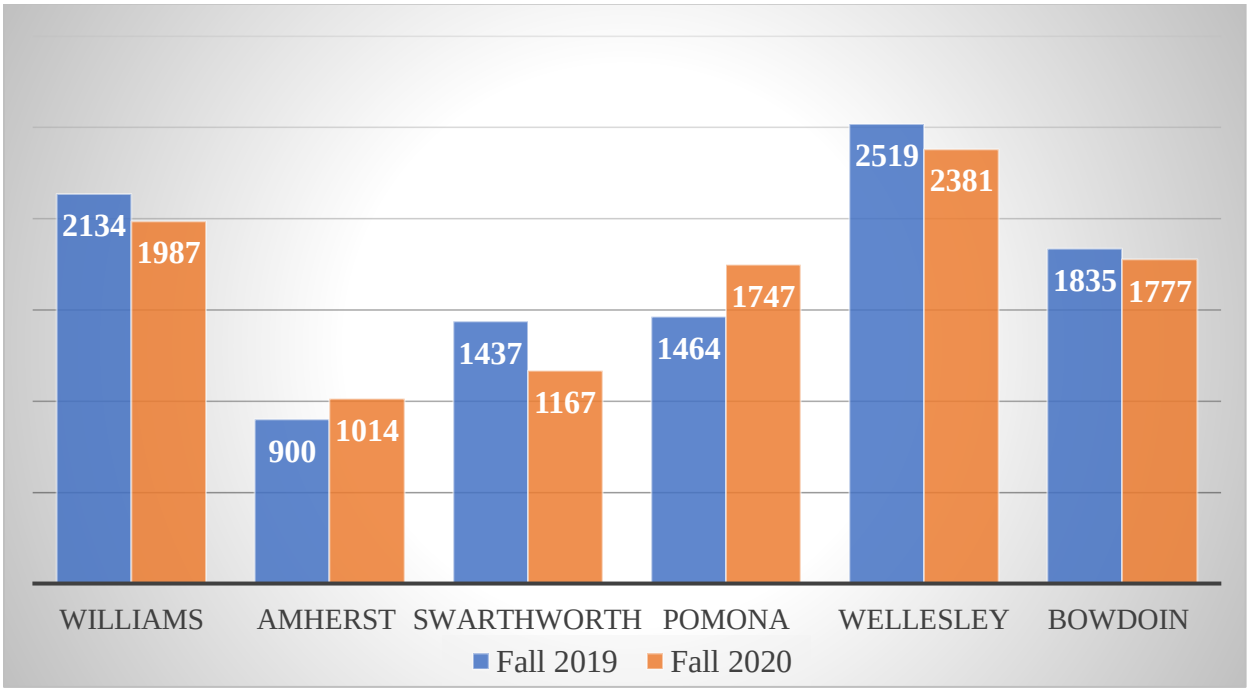


Figure 2 *Top Liberal Arts Colleges*



There could be a lot of reasons to account for why some enrollments increased and some decreased in the above referenced institutions. Since most institutions went completely online in the middle of the spring 2020 term and stayed online for the next year, it follows that students were already locked into whatever particular school they were already attending. The subsequent term is a different story. There is a myriad of reasons students may not have returned as alluded to throughout the paper. Certainly, the loss of the college experience is chief among them. Another main reason seems to point to instruction. Whether it is the format or the quality of instruction, a better trained online work force could have made a difference. Clearly the drop in enrollment at the very least signifies that there is room for improvement concerning online classes, expectations, and offerings.

INSTRUCTION TYPES

In reality, course delivery exists along a continuum of interaction type, as can be seen in Table 1 adapted from Allen & Seaman (2010). Courses may be traditional and completely in person with no technology, or fully online with no face-to-face interaction. In between those extremes, faculty may use technology and the internet to facilitate learning, or as the main modality of learning. In some cases, the term "remote learning" has been used in place of "online learning". However, a remote learning model could be seen as more dependent on real time instruction and interaction, through an online platform. For many faculty new to the online teaching world, this has been the go-to method for the initial shift in course delivery. Presenting the same content through video lectures in real time would arguably be the quickest and most straightforward way of transitioning to an online course; but most likely it would be better categorized as a remote course. This paper utilizes the learning classifications from Allen and Seaman, the BABSON Survey Research Group, and The Sloan Consortium, previously published by Goralski & Falk, 2017.

Table 1 *Learning Course Classifications*

Type of Course	Typical Description
Traditional	Course with no online technology used – content is delivered in writing or orally.
Web Facilitated	Course that uses web-based technology to facilitate what is essentially a face-to-face course. May use a course management system (CMS) or web pages to post the syllabus and assignments.
Blended/Hybrid	Course that blends online and face-to-face delivery. Substantial proportion of the content is delivered online, typically uses online discussion, and typically has a reduced number of face-to-face meetings.
Online	A course where most or all of the content is delivered online. Typically have no face-to-face meetings.

(Allen & Seaman, 2010, p. 5)

FACULTY STRUCTURE

Faculty are organized and structured in various ways worldwide, but the United States system has remained consistent across time. Variations do exist at different universities, but in general categories take into account whether faculty are full or part time (full time presumes it is the individual's primary place of employment). Full time faculty are often given duties such as teaching, service & research. Whereas part time faculty teach specific courses and typically do not have obligations outside of the classroom.

Faculty can be on a tenure track or a non-tenure track line. Tenure indicates more stable employment and is usually awarded (typically after 6 years of tenure track work). Non-tenure track faculty need to be renewed fairly frequently to remain employed.

The 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure was released by the American Association of University Professors and updated in 1970. The purpose of the document is to describe why there is a time limit for tenure track positions. It also illustrates the importance of tenure in terms of academic freedom and the freedom to pursue knowledge. The benefits of tenured professors go hand in hand with their obligations of the pursuit of truth for society. Specifically, the document states, "Academic freedom in its teaching aspect is fundamental for the protection of the rights of the teacher in teaching and of the student to freedom in learning. It carries with it duties correlative with rights" (p. 14).

Although tenure and promotion to associate professor often go together, tenure is not always tied to faculty rank. The normal order of tenure track faculty ranks are assistant professor, associate professor, and full professor. An emeritus status may be granted to extraordinary faculty after retirement. Subsequently, non-tenure track faculty are usually referred to as lecturers or instructors.

Full time faculty appointments, with some variations due to rank, typically include different levels of teaching, service, and research or professional achievement. Service may be to the student body, department, college, university, community, or profession. Falk & Lemanski (2020) listed and summarized the responsibilities of the most common university faculty ranks.

ADJUNCT PROFESSORS/LECTURERS

Adjunct professors or lecturers are part-time employees who may teach a few courses each semester at a university. The adjunct's responsibility is to provide instruction for the specified courses, communicate with students, grade papers, projects, assignments, and report final grades. They do not have research or service obligations.

LECTURERS

Full-time lecturers teach approximately 4-5 courses per semester and have contracts of typically one to five years, which are renewable. Their work efforts are usually concentrated on teaching students.

ASSISTANT PROFESSORS

Assistant Professors are the starting rank of a position which usually holds a terminal degree in field. Assistant professors typically are held to higher research expectations than other ranks, as they need to establish themselves in a research area in order to be awarded tenure after a period of around 6 years.

ASSOCIATE PROFESSORS

Associate professors are typically tenured faculty, although they may be newly hired faculty with experience who will have a tenure evaluation sooner than they would if hired as an assistant professor.

FULL PROFESSORS

Full professors are usually tenured faculty. They have had significant accomplishments in teaching, research, and service which have allowed them promotion from the associate rank to the full professor rank (p. 194).

PROPOSAL OF A NEW FACULTY MEMBER CLASSIFICATION

As established previously, there are 5 general classifications for faculty at higher education institutions within the United States. These are: Adjunct, Lecturer, Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, and Full Professor. A separate classification for a fully online/remote faculty position has not been common practice at most universities. As of July 2020, around 95% of faculty positions advertised on the HigherEdJobs website categorized as online/remote were for online only institutions, and/or for adjunct faculty. This statistic remains consistent as of January 2022.

Higher education has been altered since the widespread COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. As infections rates and cases of the virus fluctuate, flexibility in conducting university business online remains a priority.

> As Jaschik (2022) wrote - some colleges were holding a few weeks of classes online, and a portion of those colleges were discouraging students from returning to campus. Other colleges have delayed the start of their semesters. And still others were switching the start of the semester to online only (para. 3).

A distinctly online university faculty pathway would contribute to the flexibility required during widely uncertain times. To offer stability for students and faculty, the online professor should be a tenure track line, focusing on teaching with a secondary role of service or research. Individuals hired would need to have the organizational and technical skills for online course delivery, and a terminal degree in their field.

CONSIDERATIONS

Many different variables influence how to organize an online only faculty line. Some of the student characteristics that need to be considered are the percent of students who are commuter versus resident, and student experience with online learning. Faculty knowledge of online teaching and learning theory and practice, as well as the degrees being offered by the university must also be taken into account. This paper proposes some guidelines and considerations, but with so many different situations, a rigid prescription of how universities should proceed in this endeavor would be ill advised.

One possible starting point could be converting tenured faculty nearing retirement who have both in person and online teaching experience. These faculty members would have the experience necessary in teaching, service, and research, as well as a firm grasp on institutional goals and practices. These pioneers of the online only teaching role could mentor newer faculty.

Alternatively, as new programs are developed (and as faculty are hired for new programs), these hires could be brought into the institution as fully online faculty. This would lessen the demands of change within the program, as materials and methods would be optimized for online delivery from the start. Faculty who start in these roles could branch out and help traditional programs in their transition to online teaching/learning, if it befits the institution, students, faculty, subject matter, etc.

There are other monetary aspects which could make the creation of an online category of faculty an intriguing option for universities. Once the initial outlay is made for the needed infrastructure (training, equipment, salaries, and related benefits) “the return on investment, as opposed to the traditional associated costs of brick and mortar, can be tremendous” (Goralski & Falk, 2017, p. 274). One of the greatest expenses that institutions face is related to the purchase/construction, restoration/maintenance, and the monthly operation costs for classroom and office space at their education sites. It is estimated by the Nation Center for Education Statistics (n.d.) that during the 2018-2019 academic year institutions of higher education spent between 4% and 9% of the total budget on auxiliary enterprises, no small amount when you consider that these same institutions

had an operating budget of over $632 billion dollars. These expenses were greatly reduced during the crux of the COVID-19 pandemic as the bulk of educational efforts were moved online and the need for physical resources like water, power, and sanitation supplies decreased after an initial spike related to health protection measures (Korn, 2020).

As institutions begin to slowly return toward more traditional face-to-face instruction models, those expenses will continue to rise, but they don't necessarily need to reach the same levels as previously seen. If institutions consider the growing prevalence and success of online instruction, combined with the potential for reduced operational costs, it seems reasonable that the creation of an online faculty classification is a logical next step in securing greater financial stability.

ONLINE FACULTY EXPECTATION SCENARIOS

A typical full-time faculty member's duty involves the three areas - teaching, research, and service. While the COVID-19 Pandemic has demonstrated that many service obligations can be performed remotely through Zoom or file collaboration applications, the role of teaching remains the largest challenge for transitioning online. Research, the other main responsibility can be and has been routinely conducted over long distances sometimes with colleagues at other institutions as well as individually. Thus, scenarios for what is expected from strictly online faculty members are wide open.

Although most emphasis for this new type of faculty member is on teaching, research is an integral part of many faculty members' teaching experiences. Universities could still continue the trend of connecting scholarship with classroom experiences for an online faculty member. The removal of service from their roles would allow for more online classes taught, which would offer flexibility to students during uncertain times like the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as allow for students in remote areas or with challenging schedules to earn a degree. Highlighting teaching and research would also (as with other faculty lines) most likely necessitate a support mechanism (to include a budget for travel and/or research expenses). Furthermore, an internal office dedicated to faculty for research design guidance and the specific requirements defining research expectations (how many and if publications or presentations are needed) may also be helpful. In this setting, service to the department, college, university, etc. would not be emphasized.

Another scenario might be to continue to have faculty concentrate primarily on teaching and secondarily on service. The emergence of COVID-19 has led to more widespread use of developed technology helping to ease interaction from a distance. As a direct result, faculty members from a far could lead the efforts on substantial time-consuming committees like curriculum development, assessment, and internal department policy development. In this instance the research component would be eliminated. For this situation a terminal degree might not be necessary, as the training needed to conduct meaningful research may not be apparent in this level faculty member. As the online only faculty track becomes more solidified and used, newer professors could also join at either the assistant professor level or the lecturer level, with their responsibilities being spread between the three traditional spheres, teaching, research, and service.

Naming of this new type of faculty member is also a consideration. As types of faculty labels differ among institutions, this should be left up to each university, but the name must signify that this

professor is an online faculty member and does not typically meet with students in person or attend campus events in person. Removing the in-person requirement can help universities attract the most qualified candidates without the concern of relocation.

SALARY RECOMMENDATIONS

As consideration is given to the responsibilities of these new online faculty classifications, establishing appropriate salary and compensation ranges needs to be addressed. Currently, traditional faculty salary ranges are based upon their specific job requirements. Within the existing faculty classifications, the main differentiator is whether the individual is expected to conduct research (tenured and tenure-track faculty) or whether no research expectation exists (instructor/lecturer). It would therefore make sense to follow a similar path based on assigned responsibilities for online faculty.

For the purpose of identifying appropriate compensation ranges a strong starting point can be found in recent data from the Faculty in Higher Education Survey conducted by The College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR).

Table 2 *Salary Data 2019-2020*

Physical Sciences

Job Title	All Institutions	Research Doctoral	Other Doctoral	Master's	Baccalaureate	Associate's
Professor	$92,243	$121,141	$94,119	$87,381	$82,694	$73,209
Associate Professor	$73,446	$88,577	$72,982	$69,840	$67,474	$63,593
Assistant Professor (Excl. New)	$64,692	$78,960	$63,317	$61,127	$60,641	$56,118
Assistant Professor (Incl. New)	$64,696	$79,030	$63,428	$60,918	$60,017	$56,118
New Assistant Professor	$68,000	$81,000	$63,000	$63,000	$58,000	*
Instructor	$59,177	$60,740	*	$55,836	*	$57,917

(HigherEdJobs 2019-20 Salary Data, para. 32)

These figures provide detailed breakdowns based upon institutional designation (Doctoral Research, Doctoral Granting, Master's Granting, etc.) as well as breakdowns based upon existing academic ranks (Tenured Full Professor through Instructor/Lecturer). From these basic salary ranges, institutions could align online focused faculty with the existing pay structures so that faculty who have "similar" job responsibilities (ex: online teaching faculty with research responsibilities vs. online teaching faculty with service responsibilities) are compensated in a similar manner as their traditional instructional model colleagues (tenure and tenure track vs instructor/lecture).

Along with base pay considerations is a need to also identify appropriate classification ranks to distribute compensation commensurate to experience and education attainment. This would be especially important when attempting to identify the appropriate rate for terminally degreed faculty with multiple years' experience in online instruction in comparison to faculty that had been newly conferred with a graduate degree and are entering their initial online teaching opportunity.

The authors of this paper suggest that the compensation for a strictly online professor with a terminal degree and the teaching/research expectation fall toward the lower range of an associate professor. For an online professor without a terminal degree and a teaching/service expectation, it is suggested that the salary to be in the same range as an instructor/lecturer.

HOW TO EVALUATE ONLINE FACULTY

Customarily, faculty evaluations are weighted toward their job responsibilities and contributions. Most universities and colleges have the policies and procedures in place on how to evaluate traditional faculty. With the new online faculty classification, the evaluation process should be tweaked with an eye toward which track (teaching/research or teaching/service) the member is placed on. Since the primary responsibility for both online faculty tracks is teaching, the workload percentage needs to be skewed toward instruction with the research and service roles less emphasized. An appropriate workload ought to be 60 percent teaching and 40 percent in the subsequent area.

Evaluating the teaching portion for this faculty member at most institutions is pretty standard – student evaluations, peer evaluations, and perhaps course materials. In this circumstance (since the faculty member is strictly online) in addition to the common benchmarks, an incorporation of the certification associated with an educational organization that focuses meticulously on online instruction could also be warranted - an organization such as Quality Matters.

For the teaching/research faculty member a certain number of presentations and publications could be used as the basis of the scholarship section of the evaluation. Perhaps something a little above the usual guidelines. For instance, a school accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business' (AACSB) might have a policy of 6 intellectual contributions within a 5-year period. Two of those contributions need to be articles published in scholarly journals. Since the responsibilities are limited to teaching and research, raising the scholarly publication count to 3 does not seem out of line. Of course, the quality and level of the journal should be consistent with the existing scholarship policy at the home institution.

In the teaching/service track, the service part of the evaluation could be calculated based upon the value of the service. The more substantial committees such as accreditation, assessment, and curriculum development should be assigned (more or less) on a permanent basis. These types of committees seem to make more sense for the online faculty as they are area specific and can be completed without setting foot on campus.

DISCUSSION

The age of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about changes in higher education and leaves many questions for its future. Instruction became almost 100% remote for Spring and Fall 2020, followed by a return to some in person classes after vaccinations became available. However, as of January 2022, universities are once again transitioning classes to online formats, at least for the first weeks of the semester (Jaschik, 2022). Time will tell how long this will continue. Universities, faculty, and students showed what is possible with remote and online learning. Thus, unlocking the possibilities of keeping these new methods. In fact, many students are now demanding the flexibility of taking classes online, and as Douglas-Gabriel (2020) pointed out, "college faculty members are demanding the right to teach remotely" (para. 1). Universities that have online courses scheduled, or have the ability to quickly shift courses online, are at a distinct advantage in the current environment. The unknowns and week by week count of COVID infections indicate a need for flexibility and quick transitions.

As campuses begin to consider a return to the traditional standardization of face-to-face education the developments brought on by the COVID era may lead to an upheaval of these plans. When the bulk of educational institutions moved to fully online teaching models, it opened a veritable pandora's box where students learned that not only could they complete important educational benchmarks remotely, but they could do so without an apparent significant change in perceived educational quality. Furthermore, faculty that took the time to revamp and restructure their curriculum may similarly choose not to return to their past teaching models. This transformation might not be so easily undone, as students may not consider coming back to an institution that requires face-to-face instruction. The educational innovations that were embraced, coupled with the flexibility inherent within the online learning environment is not something that should be lost.

It might also be reasonable to consider that a full transition back to face-to-face instruction will not ever be truly attained.

> Richards (2021) in her piece for USA today entitled "When will education in America return to normal? Probably never" points a statement from Paul Reville of the Education Redesign Lab at Harvard University about the risk of returning to "normal" teaching. "Normal shouldn't be what we used to have, because what we used to have is inadequate". (para. 3)

If universities and colleges are looking to embrace revised education models as the new normal, the institutional, regulatory, and pedagogical changes will need be addressed in a system that makes standardized distance and hybrid teaching models a permanent reality.

The Online Professor rank affords flexibility and benefits to students and faculty alike. Faculty members who have interest in and wish to focus solely on online teaching will be able to get extra training and practice; students will benefit from online teaching expertise and tried and true methods. Faculty and students will not be geographically limited in their choice of an institution, but can select a university based on specialization, research interest, or other relevant variables.

Providing a stable, attractive option to faculty in order to recruit and retain the most qualified for these online programs is of utmost importance. Quality online programs require dedicated, trained faculty who feel passionate about connecting with students in a non-traditional sense. As circumstances continue to shift regarding the contagion, geographical and accessibility concerns, online course delivery will continue to be prominent in discussions. There may also be other considerations not yet identified that universities would need flexibility to face.

For institutions with decreasing enrollments during the COVID-19 pandemic an opportunity exists to both expand and further develop their distance learning capabilities. Smaller class sizes could allow more experimentation and acceptance of newer digital learning techniques for both the students and the faculty. This perspective would not only directly increase the quality of the instruction but could also make their offerings appealing.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has outlined the benefits of and need for a new class of faculty at traditionally brick and mortar universities. The need for faculty who specialize in online instruction would be beneficial for students, the institution, and for the faculty themselves. A commitment of resources for supporting online instruction for faculty and students, and a planning process of advancing the online programs over time is required to adopt an online faculty classification.

In addition, to better serve the institution and the students it would be helpful if an in-depth analysis is conducted by the schools that are considering implementing an online faculty rank as to which programs / degrees would benefit most from strictly online faculty. Obviously not all courses lend themselves to online instruction. While just about any course can be taught online, the skills gleaned in some may not be as robust as in a more traditional setting.

Another consideration (before enacting and online instructor rank) might be to screen the student population for online readiness. To do well in an online environment students need be willing to login, check email consistently, and complete course assignments without regular instructor contact. In other words, take responsibility for their own learning. These students also need to have the technological background / skills and equipment. If a student population does not possess these traits an online instructor rank may not be in their best interest.

The catalyst to call for an online faculty rank is the instructional shift created by the recent pandemic. If the pandemic has taught higher education anything, it is the need to be flexible and to be able to adjust almost immediately. While the future for the most part can't be predicted, the current instructional technology allows institutions to hedge their bets by embracing an online component.

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