

The Acceptability of a Doctoral Degree Earned Online as a Credential for Obtaining a Faculty Position

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A national survey was used to assess the acceptability of a job applicant's qualifications that included online coursework. The questionnaire, sent to hiring committee chairpersons, described three hypothetical applicants who earned degrees through a "traditional" institution, a "virtual" institution, and "mixed" coursework. The respondents were asked to select one applicant for the position and provide written explanations. The applicant with a traditional degree was preferred in two different hiring scenarios. The respondents' comments revealed five categories of importance: experiences, institutional quality, face-to-face interaction, socialization, and mentoring.

Many debates have aired the advantages, disadvantages, educational qualities, and learning outcomes of online education. However, one important question concerning online education has been all but overlooked: Are distance learning and traditional degrees equal in the eyes of academic gatekeepers? That is, if other candidates' credentials are equal, will those who hold doctoral degrees that have been completed via distance learning have the same chance of being hired as applicants whose degrees were completed in the conventional manner? Thus, the question

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addressed in this article is whether a doctoral degree earned totally, or even partially, online is seen as having the same value as a similar degree earned from a traditional institution by those who assess applicants for faculty employment.

The demand for distance education programs and elective course offerings has spawned an increasing number of online degree programs offered at all levels, including the doctoral level. In recent years, for-profit colleges have added a number of doctoral degree programs completed entirely online in fields such as education, psychology, health services, public health, public policy, administration, business administration, and engineering (ClassesUSA.com 2004). For example, the University of Phoenix offers doctoral programs in business administration, education, management, and health administration. Capella University lists nine doctoral programs in management, education, psychology, and human services. Walden University offers at least seven degree programs at the doctoral level and Kennedy-Western University offers doctoral degree programs in computer science, engineering, and business administration.

Traditional institutions also offer doctoral degrees online. For example, the University of Florida offers a Doctor of Pharmacy degree program (eLearners.com 2004a). Boston University offers the doctoral degree in physical therapy (eLearners.com 2004b). The University of Massachusetts recently awarded several doctorates in physical therapy (University of Massachusetts 2004). Other traditional institutions with online doctoral degree programs include Antioch University, Central Michigan University, Colorado State University, and Nova Southeastern University (J. Bears and Bears 2004). Some institutions use a blended approach, where part of the doctoral-level coursework is taken in traditional classroom settings and the remainder is delivered online. In Pepperdine University's doctoral program in educational technology, for example, 60% of coursework consists of "face-to-face meetings" and 40% is online (Pepperdine University 2003).

The Acceptability of Online Education

Although the popularity of Internet-based college courses and programs cannot be denied, recent debates about the role of online programs in higher education include the credibility, quality, and legitimacy of these programs. For example, although there are some 678 nonresident degree programs available online, only a handful of these are fully accredited or taught from recognized institutions. Although disciplines offer a range of

programs including those in the sciences, humanities, and the arts, the *Bears' Guide* lists only twenty-seven doctoral programs as being fully accredited and approved (J. Bears and Bears 2004).

Although hundreds of studies demonstrate that the quality of online programs matches or exceeds "traditional" instruction in the delivery of content (Russell 1999), arguments against online courses center on shortcomings in credibility and quality (Carnevale 2003). The perceived credibility problems of online universities represent a serious stumbling block for all accredited online degree programs. Many critics point to news articles concerning federal funding scams for online education (Carnevale 2002b), Web sites that sell fake degrees (Carnevale 2002a), and ethical problems associated with using degrees obtained from unaccredited institutions (M. Bears 2004). These popularized news events only add to the general sense of skepticism toward online degrees (Sheeres 2002).

These unfortunate circumstances pose problems for supporters of online education, who may acknowledge that there are some programs that should raise questions about the quality of instruction at those universities. However, proponents may reasonably point out that the programs offered from a recognized and accredited university do not share the same problems as unproven institutions with no track record of accreditation and that the benefits of distance learning far outweigh drawbacks.

More recently, however, a significant question has arisen about which few research findings are currently available. It concerns the acceptability of degrees that have been earned solely or partly online.

There is evidence that at least some academic administrators do not view online course work favorably. For example, although distance education and teaching with technology have become more prevalent, researchers have noted that faculty review committees may not take this work seriously (Seminoff and Wepner 1997; Young 2002), meaning that teaching online or having expertise with technology does not necessarily translate as meritorious work. Even with the dynamic growth of technology in education, only 13% of academic institutions had a formal institutional program to recognize and reward the use of information technology as part of the faculty review process (Green 1999).

In a recent national survey, 109 university and college administrators were asked to evaluate performance criteria for awarding promotion and tenure. These criteria included managing an online course as well as excellent teaching evaluations and various categories of scholarly publications and service. The results indicated that managing an online course was not viewed as an important aspect of job performance. It was seen to be of

equal importance to serving on committees—and far less important than presenting papers at an academic conference (Adams 2003).

This perceived lack of importance also presents problems for graduate school applicants whose college credits earned online are not regarded by admissions officers to be as acceptable as traditional coursework. A national survey of graduate deans, associate deans, and program directors in 160 institutions of higher education in the United States was conducted to assess the views of graduate admissions directors. The findings revealed that, even when all other applicant qualifications are equal, those who had earned their bachelor's degree online, or even partially online, are not as likely to be recommended for admission to graduate programs (DeFleur and Adams 2004).

It is important to emphasize that this issue of acceptability is not the same as those concerning the merits of distance learning that have been vigorously debated in the past. The project reported here focuses on a different issue—whether obtaining a doctoral degree totally or even partially online will result in faculty employment opportunities for those who receive them that are completely equal to those provided by a similar advanced degree awarded in the conventional manner by a traditional university. The research question, then, is whether academic administrators assess the merits of a doctoral degree earned online (or even partially online) as being less acceptable than, or equal to, a doctoral degree earned in the conventional way in a traditional university setting as a credential for employment as a university faculty member.

Method

To gain an initial understanding of how those who chair academic search committees assess the different types of doctoral degrees, the first step was to determine how to obtain information about ongoing searches for faculty in colleges and universities. Discussions with colleagues who had chaired a number of search committees revealed that this could be difficult. The reason is the deliberations, preferences, and voting in such committees are totally confidential. Thus, it is understandable that search committee chairs would be reluctant to reveal their preferences. The first step, then, was to identify a potential list of those who would be willing to cooperate. To do that, "position available" announcements by colleges and universities seeking new faculty that appeared in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* during the months of September, October, and November 2002 were reviewed.

The names of chairpersons of search committees that were seeking new colleagues for full-time entry-level positions were identified.

A list of announcements was collected in four categories of academic specialties. These were the humanities, the social sciences, fields in science and technology, and professional fields. From this large pool of more than 2,000 announcements, the job advertisements were screened to ensure that they clearly specified that the committee was searching for persons who had been awarded, or who were about to be awarded, a doctoral degree in the specialty needed by the institution. Those announcements that did not specifically state this information were not considered. However, approximately 300 announcements were found that appeared to fit the criteria needed, and a list of search committee chairs whose institutions were seeking entry-level faculty with doctoral degrees in the four academic areas was assembled.

The next step was to contact each of the chairs to see if they would agree to complete a questionnaire regarding their views of doctoral degrees awarded for work completed totally online or partially online. This proved to be a less than easy task because the views, discussions, and decisions of such chairs and members of their committees are kept confidential. Contacts from outside persons (such as the authors) interested in the nature and outcome of their judgments as to who should or should not be hired are not enthusiastically welcomed.

Numerous attempts to promote participation were made. Some declined outright and others indicated that they did not want to disclose their views as sought in the project. Fortunately, however, a number of search committee administrators did agree to participate under conditions of total anonymity and confidentiality. The result was that 109 questionnaires were completed by these willing search chairs and returned to the authors.

Obviously, this procedure is not the same as the classic manner of selecting a sample by random means from a population list. That simply was not possible in this study, due to the nature of the inquiry and the requirements imposed on those who chair search committees. Therefore, the results obtained cannot be regarded as representative of all searches for new faculty, in all the academic fields considered, in all institutions of higher education. However, because no prior study focusing specifically on the goals of this research could be found, the results obtained provide a starting point for understanding how people view doctorates earned online or partly online and whether these credentials are competitive for gaining an appointment to the faculty of an institution of higher education.

The questionnaire was designed to determine what type of doctoral degree was likely to be accepted as an appropriate credential for those seek-

ing to be hired. Each of the participating search committee chairs responded to several items that described three different candidates for a faculty position with three different types of doctoral degrees. Those three distinct degrees were described to them in the following terms:

- Candidate A has a doctorate in the appropriate academic specialty. The degree was earned by completing all work commonly required in doctoral granting institutions in the traditional way—that is, in the usual classroom and lab course settings, in direct face-to-face contact with mentors and other students.
- Candidate B also completed his or her doctorate in a traditional institution—but one for which 50% of the required course work for the degree was completed online.
- Candidate C received the doctorate from a “virtual” university—that is, one having no classrooms, labs, or libraries and where all instruction and interaction with others is offered by computer over the Internet, without direct face-to-face contact with mentors and other students.

The questionnaire explained that these candidates were equal in all other respects: that is, each was said to have (1) solid evidence of scholarly research; (2) relevant publications, if needed; (3) prior teaching experience with positive student evaluations; (4) a record of significant service; (5) strong letters of recommendation from respected persons; and (6) personal and social characteristics that would make him or her a good colleague within the hiring department. In short, the respondents understood that the central issue at stake concerning these applicants was the nature of their doctoral degree.

The questionnaire presented these three applicants in a “forced-choice” format: the respondent was asked to indicate which one applicant in a given pair (Candidate A or B; Candidate A or C; or Candidate B or C) he or she “would be most likely to recommend” (to be hired). The reason for using this format was the probability that the choices were made just by chance could be assessed for each pair. If only chance determined the pattern of responses, each of these choices has an equal probability of being selected (as in a coin flip). This format permits the use of a binomial test with a (theoretically) expected outcome of 50% of the respondents recommending each applicant in a pair if only chance (and not the nature of the degree) dictates the outcome. If the actual percentages differ greatly, the explanation that the choices made represent a chance distribution must be rejected (Siegal 1956).

Next, after selecting one applicant in each of the pairs, the respondent was asked to choose one of three categories listed in the questionnaire that best expressed his or her main reason for selecting that applicant. Specifically, these were (a) that he or she has reservations about recommending an applicant whose doctoral degree was awarded in part or entirely online; (b) that an applicant's doctoral degree, whether awarded by a traditional or an online virtual university, would not be an issue; and (c) another consideration. Each of these categories was followed by adequate space for written comments that could be used to further explain the basis for the respondents' selections.

Limitations to the Study

There were limitations to this study that should be addressed in future studies. For example, the respondents were asked only to choose between the type of degree without any information regarding the specific method, instructional design, or name of the institution offering the degree program. Obviously, this information may influence how people react to an online degree. The findings from this study, then, can be regarded as providing only preliminary results to a significant, but as yet unstudied, problem.

Results

The 109 completed questionnaires were received from search committee chairs in fifty-nine public and forty-three private institutions located in thirty-seven states with institutional enrollments ranging between 5,000 and 35,000 students. The proportion of completed questionnaires received from chairs in each of the four academic areas was similar (humanities, 23%; social sciences, 28%; science/technology, 20%; professional fields, 22%).¹ The number of applicants received by the chairs for each position varied from 5 to 300. Overwhelmingly, the applicants were reported to hold traditional degrees, with only twelve of those seeking employment having received an online degree.

Most of the respondents (93%) offered a considerable number of detailed comments concerning their views of the different types of degrees. These provided a basis for a qualitative analysis that extended the understanding of the views of these gatekeepers.

Quantitative Findings

The basic quantitative findings regarding the three types of doctoral degrees (traditional, combination, and online only) were straightforward. When a respondent was asked to choose between recommending an applicant with a traditional degree and one with an online degree, 98% chose the candidate with the traditional degree. (Stated in another way, only one of the respondents selected the online degree.) When asked to select an applicant with a traditional degree versus one with half of the coursework completed online, only fifteen respondents (11%) selected the applicant with the combination degree.

When the respondents were asked to choose their main reason for selecting an applicant, 85% indicated they had reservations with doctoral degrees earned online, and only 4% indicated that the type of institution where the degree was earned was of no importance. When considering an applicant with 50% of their coursework earned online, 15% indicated that the type of institution was of no importance, 53% had reservations, and 32% had "other considerations," which were provided as qualitative explanations.

The preferences and assessments of the respondents appear to be very clear and were supported by the binomial analysis. If only chance had brought about the results shown in Table 1, then the proportion indicating "yes" for each of the three possible pairings would be approximately 50%. The differences shown are obviously very different from such an outcome. The traditional degree is valued overwhelmingly compared to one earned partially online (94% compared to 16%). The degree earned completely online fared very poorly indeed. Only one of the search committee chairs (representing 1%) was willing to recommend an applicant with a degree earned totally online for a position within his or her institution. In the binomial test, differences could have occurred by chance less than .001 of the time.²

Table 1. Percentage of Respondents Who Replied Yes to "I Would Be Most Likely to Recommend Hiring This Applicant"

	Private Institution	Public Institution	All Institutions
Traditional coursework only	100	96	98
Mix of coursework	19	14	16
Online coursework only	0	2	1

The fact that questionnaires were received from search committee chairs in both public and private institutions permitted an analysis based on these categories. Table 1 is a summary of the responses from public, private, and all institutions.

Overall, from the quantitative results, it seems clear that those applying for a faculty position in the institutions included in this analysis would have virtually no prospect of gaining employment if they had earned their doctorate solely online. Moreover, their chances would be very slim if a sizable part of their course work had been completed online—even though they had a doctorate awarded by a traditional institution.

Qualitative Findings

The written comments of the respondents were analyzed for patterns and thematic statements representing reasons for the choices. To accomplish this analysis, CATPAC, a qualitative research tool that is capable of creating displays of complex text associations, was used to perform an analysis of the comments (Woelfel and Stoyanoff 1993). Key word frequencies created by the software were used to draw out categories, evaluate patterns, and reliably identify recurring themes (Gay 1992). Thus, the computer-assisted qualitative analysis provided an additional level of understanding of the choices the participants made—insights that go beyond the check mark made among the categorical selections provided in the questionnaire (Schumacher and McMillan 1993).

The comments were analyzed by creating computer-generated key word lists for each of the forced-choice questions. Key word frequencies were used to guide the interpretation of the written comments in two ways: to provide a robust technique for comparing the comments for similarities or differences and to provide an unbiased method to contextualize the written answers. Remarkably, the key words *experience*, *quality*, and *interaction* appeared separately in the same order of importance for both of the forced-choice questions.

As the importance of other key words was more difficult to distinguish clearly from the computer-generated lists, two additional categories (socialization, mentoring) were developed by examining the combined context of less frequently used key words. The comments fell into several categories and are noted as follows:

Experience was the most frequently mentioned key word in the written comments. Many respondents indicated the importance for doctoral students of “hands-on experience” in labs, clinics, library work, and mentored

teaching. Many of the comments also related to “interaction”—characterized as exchanges with other students and with outside speakers. Respondents expressed concern about students being able to engage faculty and discuss ideas with peers through classroom discussions and in study groups. Typical of such comments were these:

While I am not wed to traditional teaching approaches, there can be no substitute for face-to-face interaction and experiential learning.

Recommendations are an important gauge to intellectual promise and collegiality. If there were no interactions of depth how could such a judgment be measured?

I think the close work with a research advisor on the dissertation is very important, probably as or more important to the students’ development than coursework, regardless of where the courses take place. I don’t feel comfortable with this being done “on-line”—even with direct correspondence it seems there is too much potential for dishonesty on both sides.

There was a tendency for the search committee chairs to be more receptive toward the notion of some classes being taken online, in the second hiring scenario (traditional vs. combination degree), but there were still many reservations. A number of respondents expressed concern about the quality of the education received in this format. These concerns ranged from whether the degree-granting institution was accredited to whether the instructors were qualified. Two issues that came up frequently were the potential for dishonesty and cheating. This was seen as increasing greatly in an online environment. A number indicated that even 50% of course work online toward an advanced degree was “too much.”

The analysis of comments seemed to suggest that, for at least some of the search committee chairs, a degree earned by completing courses online was not of sufficient rigor and would be regarded as suspect. Typical of such comments are these:

A degree obtained via the Internet is akin to one ordered from a catalog.

A completely online degree is not very different than a correspondence course, in my view. The quality of faculty is a major problem because the for-profit virtual university will be looking for the cheapest way to deliver the product. ... My concern is that in a world of technology we could have people who have a lot of information but not much learning.

I don't believe graduate courses can be taught online. University life is part of personal education which is needed to be a social individual. Online education is misused by individuals who don't understand the difference between an educated human being and a barbarian with skills.

References to (face-to-face) interaction with faculty and fellow students, a known shortcoming of online courses, were among the most frequent comments. Concerns appeared to center on specific interactions related to the other students, instructors, and mentors. Some respondents emphasized that these interactions are part of the more general process of socialization within the professional culture of university environment. These comments tended to be much broader and were primarily centered on a contextual association with peers, university "climate," mentoring from professors, and associating with visiting scholars as reasons for not considering a candidate with either a virtual degree or a combination of courses for the position. Examples are

I believe mentoring is critical to developing research skills and I am skeptical that adequate mentoring can occur at a "virtual university."

A major part of a university education is building a community of scholars and interests. That is very different online as compared to the traditional classroom where you have to deal with the whole person and not just a narrow interest. I think there is a difference between education as learning and critical thinking and learning as information transfer.

Although most of the comments were unfavorable toward virtual degrees, there were a few comments that were positive. For the most part, these came from respondents who had some exposure to online education, or who held the belief that online education was progressing and an integral part of our future educational system. However, these comments surfaced only in the second hiring scenario (traditional vs. combination) where 50% of the coursework was completed online. For example,

Computer technology has become an essential part of instruction and secondary activities. This may put candidate B (50% online coursework) in an advantaged position, which is my consideration for candidate B.

Although, as Table 1 shows, committee chairs did not regard a virtual degree as an acceptable qualification in the hiring process, many did believe that using technology is an important aspect of a faculty position. When asked whether technical ability or having experience teaching an online course was important, 31% ($n = 34$) of the respondents indicated that they believed this kind of skill was a plus in a hiring situation. This is not completely surprising, as 33% ($n = 36$) of the respondents indicated that their department offers online courses.

Discussion

The findings suggest that, at the present time, doctoral students may need to consider carefully before investing time and effort to earn an advanced degree—whether fully or partially—online. Tentatively, the findings indicate that such degrees are not accepted as the equivalent of those earned in the traditional manner for those seeking academic employment. Finally, although the results of this study appear to cast a negative light on online education, further research addressing the complex factors in this study, as well as other influences, should be conducted.

Perhaps what is needed at this point in the development of online education is a body of carefully researched findings that provides an understanding of the level of acceptability of the online degree in all of those arenas where these accomplishments are seen as important credentials. This includes the comparative standing of both types of degrees in nonacademic employment as well as in teaching. For example, will American employers regard the MBA taken solely online as equivalent to one earned from a traditional graduate school of business? Will an online nursing degree, one in clinical psychology, or even an MD, have the same standing and door-opening value to a person seeking a job in such fields as one from a traditional source? These are important questions that are not being currently addressed by the complex debates about distance learning.

An Ethical Dilemma

An important question has been generated concerning whether a doctorate degree, completed entirely or even partially via the distance learning format, will be accepted as the equivalent of an advanced degree earned in the traditional manner. The notion that the distance learning degree is not regarded as completely equivalent to that earned in the traditional manner

poses an ethical question. By extension, it may also pose a legal question. Anyone pursuing any kind of degree within the distance learning format expends significant levels of time, funds, and energy to complete the requirements of the provider. But, will that effort result in the benefits claimed by that provider?

In addition, many institutions do not indicate which courses were completed online or whether the entire degree was earned through online coursework. If the nature of how the degree was earned is an important consideration for administrators, the question of full disclosure becomes a focal point for legal and ethical challenges to these degrees.

Some distance learning institutions advertise their merits on television, the Internet, and elsewhere, openly implying that their degree will be accepted. Yet, administrators reviewing an applicant's qualifications may view those candidates as "the ones that get thrown out right away" (Oppenheimer 2004).

Notes

1. As it turned out, an additional 7% of the respondents were seeking to hire in positions not readily classifiable within these four categories.
2. Actually, the binomial test showed that the selection differences were attributable to random chance much less frequently. For example, the likelihood of a virtual degree being selected over a traditional degree by chance is less than .001⁻¹⁶.

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