

TECHNOLOGY

Controversy at George Washington U. Highlights Challenges of Diving Deeply Into Online Education

By Beth McMurtrie | OCTOBER 23, 2017

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At George Washington U., enrollment in online programs has grown from about 600 students to about 4,800 since 2014.

Last year George Washington University was hit by a lawsuit from graduates of an online master's program who argued that their education was inferior to what was offered in the same degree program on campus. Instructors were unresponsive and ill-informed, the four graduates said, and the course materials included "nonsensical" PowerPoint slides and poorly scanned pages of books.

The lawsuit worried faculty members at the elite university, some of whom had been watching the rapid growth of George Washington's online programs with concern. While the development of online education has been part of the university's strategy to expand enrollments and access, it was happening, some feared, with little oversight and few quality controls.

This month the university's Faculty Senate released a report that suggests some of those concerns are warranted. A task force

reviewed the university's online, hybrid, and off-campus programs to determine if they are, in fact equivalent to the same courses on campus. The answer: We're not sure.

"Various schools and units were doing what they thought was in their best interest," say Kurt J. Darr, who chaired the task force. "There was no planned approach to how nontraditional education would be developed."

Online-education experts say George Washington is far from alone. As traditional bricks-and-mortar campuses waded more deeply into online education, they often do so in an unstructured and decentralized way, leaving it up to individual schools, departments, and professors to ensure that they are producing high-quality courses.

"This is the norm everywhere," says Thomas J. Tobin, a distance-education and technology consultant who provides online professional-development training. "Nobody has this figured out except for 5 to 10 percent of colleges."

A Separate Infrastructure

The lack of a unified approach is understandable. After all, faculty members have historically been the sole creators of their courses. Professors' accountability is to their department chairs and deans. Why should online programs be different? But distance-education experts say that online coursework is different enough in how instructors communicate with students, what tools they use, and how learning is assessed that it needs additional expertise, the kind that many professors and administrators do not have.

"If you try to use exactly the same processes in terms of governance and management of that set of activities you're likely to have problems," says Deb Adair, executive director of Quality Matters, an organization that offers guidance and conducts peer reviews of online courses to ensure their quality.

That has been slowly changing, though. More than half of chief online officers at private four-year institutions say they use a centralized system to manage and budget their online courses, a survey by Quality Matters and Eduventures found. (Public colleges, however, are much less likely to have a centralized process.)

While much depends on the mission, resources, and culture of an institution, Ms. Adair says, the most advanced colleges have created separate units, staffed with instructional designers, academic technology specialists, and others who work side-by-side with faculty members to design courses. Some require faculty members who want to develop online coursework to go through special training.

That's the case at Oregon State University, which serves more than 20,000 students through its Ecampus. A faculty member who wants to create an online version of an existing course must complete a six-week training program to learn about online pedagogy, course design, and learning assessment. The professor's department is given funding to buy out his or her time. Once he or she completes the program, the faculty member works with an instructional designer to complete the creation of the course.

Shannon Riggs, director of course development and training at Oregon State Ecampus, says people are often surprised by how much work is involved in designing an effective online course. "Not every faculty member comes with that knowledge."

Indeterminate Quality?

At George Washington, online education is a growing enterprise. Since 2014, the Faculty Senate found, enrollment in online programs has grown from about 600 students to about 4,800. The university now offers about 70 online degree programs at the baccalaureate level and above, plus 31 certificate, specialist, or associate-degree programs.

The faculty task force determined that some online programs rely on outside vendors for administrative or platform support, "large numbers" of adjuncts and part-timers teach online courses, and the extent of faculty oversight of some programs is unclear. More fundamentally, the task force found no universitywide guidelines for establishing and monitoring these programs. A faculty member can create an online version of an existing course, it concluded, without additional review.

The task force offered a series of recommendations to make course approval, oversight, and review more centralized and consistent. Programs should have identical degree requirements, whether they are online or in-person, it said. Staffing guidelines and policies should be equivalent. One of the more controversial recommendations was to identify on transcripts and diplomas the mode of a course: on campus, off campus, or online/hybrid.

Mr. Darr, the task-force chair and a professor emeritus of hospital administration, said the group's main concern was that it was unable to determine whether these nontraditional programs are of the same quality of those offered on campus. Yet, he says, the university promotes them as being essentially the same as on-campus ones. That pledge, he notes, was at the heart of the lawsuit, filed by graduates of a master's program in security and safety leadership. (The suit was dismissed this year for technical reasons.)

While the task force did not have the resources to dig into course syllabi, Mr. Darr says, it found instances in which program requirements were different. And there were concerns about staffing, especially at the doctoral level. In the School of Engineering and Applied Science, for example, only two full-time faculty members and 20 part-timers or adjuncts advise more than 200 doctoral students. Such differences, he says, spurred the request to note course formats on diplomas and transcripts: "It wasn't clear to us they were comparable" to on-campus courses.

Some at the university have pushed back against what they see as the report's overly critical tone. In addition to the proposed transcript notation, for example, the task force reported that some on-campus programs could see enrollments drop because they are "cannibalized" by the online version of the program.

Forrest Maltzman, GW's provost and executive vice president for academic affairs, rejected that view, noting that the student populations are quite different. Online education provides access to people who might otherwise not be able to come to campus, he noted. And if on-campus students prefer to take an online course, that's OK too. "As long as it gets them where they need to be," he said, "I don't have a huge concern with that."

Mr. Maltzman, who said he will review the recommendations and gather further information, said the university already uses a number of the processes recommended by the task force to ensure academic quality of its online programs. "All of our courses, regardless of platform, have to meet our learning objectives," he said. "The teaching methodologies can vary, but course objectives cannot vary."

And, he said, the university has resources, including instructional designers, to help faculty members design online courses.

Cynthia Nitz Ris, an English professor at the University of Cincinnati, noted that her campus went through a similar period of introspection back in 2013, when a faculty survey showed that many people felt they needed more support for online course development. The task force that she chaired came up with recommendations to clarify roles, training, and oversight of online education. The result, she says, has been better communication between the academic and technology sides of campus, and the creation of a vice provost position for online learning. The George Washington task force included some of the University of Cincinnati Faculty Senate's ideas in its report.

Charles A. Garris Jr., a professor of mechanical and aerospace engineering who chaired the George Washington Faculty Senate's executive committee when the task force was created, says the point of the investigation wasn't to denigrate online education. "None of us are against online programs," he said. "We see it as the future, but we want to make sure that we at GW do it right."

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Correction (10/24/2017, 2:55 p.m.): This article originally referred to a survey by Quality Matters. That survey was in fact a joint effort with Eduventures. The text has been corrected.