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Search Committee Perceptions of Faculty Employment Applicants
with Nontraditional Doctoral Degrees

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Abstract

Nontraditional (online or part-time professional) doctoral programs are becoming increasingly prevalent; however graduates of these programs often report a struggle to find work in areas that require a doctoral credential – primarily academe and research. This study presents qualitative findings from six personal interviews conducted with faculty members who served on search committees for tenure-track faculty positions during the 2005-2006 academic year. The opinions of these committee members are summarized and compared to an analysis of 55 recent tenure-track job listings from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and to a side-by-side comparison of eight doctoral program descriptions – four traditional and four online or nontraditional programs. This summary and analysis exposes some of the concerns and obstacles which graduates of nontraditional doctoral programs must overcome when seeking a tenure-track faculty position.

Keywords: Online learning, nontraditional doctorates, higher education, faculty applicants, online doctoral programs.

Introduction

Prospective college students today enjoy a much wider range of options for higher

education than they have ever seen before (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright & Zvacek, 2003). In

addition to traditional colleges, universities, and various correspondence schools that have been

available for years, students can choose from a growing list of professional schools and a vast

array of online institutions; some of which lack any legitimate academic rigor while others carry

fully accepted accreditation with recognized faculty members and strong academic programs

(Van Dusen, 2000). Traditional schools have even begun to compete with these online schools,

offering Internet-based academic programs of their own. As online programs have achieved

greater recognition and acceptance, their offerings have expanded. Whereas early programs

generally offered certificates or two-year degrees, today many programs exist across myriad

disciplines offering Master's degrees and Doctorates (Dabbaugh & Bannan-Ritland, 2005).

These online programs come with their own set of pros and cons, including financial, familial,

and professional considerations each student must face. The purpose of this research is to

identify and examine the key elements of online doctoral programs which will impact a

graduate's ability to secure tenure-track employment in academe.

Statement of Problem

As mentioned, nontraditional graduate degree granting programs are beginning to

proliferate. As an increasing number of graduate students choose nontraditional programs, the

historical approach to hiring employees (in this study, faculty) with graduate degrees must adapt

(Schrum & Berenfeld, 1997). Graduates of online doctoral programs must understand some of

the stigmas – concerns and hesitations – that prospective employers may have with their

academic credentials. Whether these stigmas are fair is irrelevant, because they are real to those

who will make hiring decisions. Likewise, search committee members at colleges and

universities must begin to challenge their own frames of reference, to consider the overall value

and potential contribution of a prospective colleague whose academic credentials may have been

issued by a school without classrooms, grassy quads, or periodical stacks in a monolithic library.

As online doctoral programs expand their reach, graduates will face these hurdles, and search

committees will face these graduates.

<div align="center">Scope and Approach</div>

This research is intentionally limited to the examination of the tenure-track

applicant/search committee relationship at colleges and universities in the United States. By

limiting the scope of the study to the issues surrounding tenure-track applicants and the search

committees who select them, we can take a holistic view of this specific experience and

determine how the applicant's credentials affect their candidacy. The data for this study were

gathered at institutions of higher education in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States, and

this geographic area is recognized as a limitation to the study, as differing opinions on

nontraditional doctorates may exist in other places, particularly in Europe or Asia.

In addition to this review, six tenure-track faculty members who served as members of

This study is qualitative in nature and data for this study were collected from four

sources. The first source is a brief review of relevant literature. This literature review is not

exhaustive, but the articles included do serve to illustrate key issues which will be discussed.

In addition to this review, six tenure-track faculty members who served as members of

search committees during the 2005-2006 academic year were interviewed using a standard,

scripted protocol. This script ensured consistency in gathering data from the six search

committee participants. None of the six participated in the same searches or served on the same

committees. These search committee members were selected at random from various

disciplines. No bias was introduced based on gender, field of expertise, or years of experience.

To supplement findings from these interviews, the program descriptions of eight doctoral

programs in the field of Information Systems were compared in order to make assessments

regarding the comparative academic rigor of the programs. The first four programs assessed are

doctoral programs at traditional universities; the latter four are nontraditional doctoral programs.

The field of Information Systems was selected because it is one of the fields offering the greatest

number of nontraditional doctoral programs (Maughan, 2001), and because it is the field of

expertise of the author of this paper.

Finally, 55 tenure-track position announcements were collected from *The Chronicle of

Higher Education* during the fall of 2006. These postings were selected at random without

regard to academic discipline, job requirements, or hiring institution. Each of these job ads was

entered into a database and reviewed for content relevant to this study. The findings of these

four research activities are compared and contrasted to locate common themes, which are then

triangulated to determine which themes appear to most completely explain the obstacles faced by

graduates of nontraditional doctoral programs.

<div align="center">Review of Literature</div>

The catalyst for this study originated from an article published in *The Chronicle of

Higher Education* in August of 2003 titled "Battling the Stigma of Nontraditional Credentials".

In this article, author Gabriela Montell addresses the issue using a largely anecdotal approach,

discussing the experiences of various nontraditional program graduates as they pursued faculty

openings in their respective fields. The article includes a number of quotations from faculty

search committee members in both traditional and nontraditional programs, with each side

offering their justification for either supporting or opposing online doctoral study (Montell, 2003).

After relating the personal experiences and opinions of several individuals, the author summarizes by stating that candidates who hold nontraditional degrees frequently feel that they have to defend their doctoral credentials – that the credentials were often viewed with disdain. When successful in their defense of their credentials, many were able to find their way onto the tenure-track.

In trying to understand the reasons for the disdain of nontraditional doctorates, other related research serves to illustrate some common places where search committees' reluctance begins. In 2004, Kohun, Ali, and DeLorenzo published a study in the journal *Issues in Information Systems* examining a nontraditional "professional doctorate" program. The program is conducted largely at a distance with short, intense periods of face-to-face cohort meetings which serve as a residency requirement. The article is authored by two members of the program's faculty, one of whom is also a graduate of the program, and another graduate of the program who is a faculty member at a nearby community college. The authors' stated objective is to demonstrate how the design of the program contributes to a three year student completion rate of 89%, and contrasts this success with the national completion rate in traditional doctoral programs, which is listed at approximately 40% (Kohun, et. al., 2004). Much of the text of the paper is dedicated to explaining why the program is so successful while traditional programs frequently fail their students. The general explanation is that traditional doctoral programs lack structure and focus too much on theory. In contrast, the program addressed in the Kohun study provides a highly structured cohort program which ushers students from inception to completion. The tone and content of the paper, coupled with concerns over the objectivity of the researchers,

serves to illustrate one possible reason why some search committee members at other institutions may become immediately hesitant to consider graduates of such programs.

Another paper, published in the Association for Computing Machinery's (ACM) *eLearn Magazine*, discusses the experiential learning of Laurie P. Dringus, a graduate of an online doctoral program and a professor and program director for online graduate programs at Nova Southeastern University. Dringus describes some key tools and technologies that she believes bridge the gap between traditional and nontraditional graduate programs. Although clearly a proponent of online graduate programs, Dr. Dringus does not fall into the trap of using her research to promote or legitimize her own credentials. She concludes her paper by stating: "There is much to be accomplished in online graduate level education. Many perspectives will change based on innovations and advancements in online learning, [however] some of the heartfelt perspectives may indefinitely remain the same" (emphasis added) (Dringus, 2002).

The message conveyed in this and similar literature indicates that much work remains in order to realize a fuller acceptance of nontraditional doctoral credentials. This theme is further supported by Van Dusen (2000), Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, and Turoff, (1998), and O'Lawrence (2007). The text of each of these authors discusses, to varying degrees, the difficulty in separating perception and reality of online learning programs. Although a nontraditional educational program may be very rigorous, resulting in a quality graduate, the stigma of the online delivery is nonetheless attached, especially at the doctoral level.

<div align="center">Research Methodology</div>

This study has been formulated to determine what search committee members think about nontraditional doctoral credentials and why. Six interviews were conducted for this study, the structure of which was designed to ask faculty "searchers" about their opinions of online and

other nontraditional doctoral programs. This qualitative measure adds an understanding to the *necessarily human component* of the academic job search, namely: What is important to the hiring committee? What concerns them most? What attributes do they look for in candidates and can those attributes be taught or cultured in a nontraditional learning environment?

The six interviews were conducted in November of 2006, with faculty search committee members on two college campuses. This should be recognized as one limitation to the scope of this study—opinions may vary from one campus to another, and/or from one type of school (i.e. Research I—Extensive University) to another (i.e. Community College). The degree of variation from one institution the next does not however affect the underlying questions that must be answered during the hiring process:

1) Is the applicant properly educated for the open position?

2) Is the applicant professionally prepared to succeed at the institution?

3) Is the applicant mentally and physically capable of meeting the demands of the job?

Whether the search committee's objective is to hire an effective and dynamic teacher who can also research, or a gifted researcher who may also need to teach, the committee will still be seeking to answer these three basic questions.

In order to provide comparative data, four traditional and four nontraditional doctoral programs were evaluated as part of this study. All eight doctoral programs are in the field of Information Systems and Technology. As previously mentioned, this is because there are a comparatively large number of nontraditional programs in this discipline; and because visualization of common themes is clearer when all of the programs used as exemplars are in the same field. In examining these eight doctoral programs, key factors that commonly affect the program selection process for prospective doctoral students were examined: Number of credits

required, residency requirements, dissertation requirements, and cost. Quality of the graduate

faculty in each program was not examined but is considered important. A comparative review of

credentials among traditional and nontraditional program faculty would be enlightening and

represents an opportunity for further research.

To complement the data gathered in interviews and from the program evaulation, 55

tenure-track faculty job listings were reviewed with an eye toward discovering the publicly

available expectations of search committees. This data was collected at random from four issues

of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. The only criterion for selection was that the posting had

to be for a tenure-track faculty position. The institution's name and the job discipline were

recorded along with several specific data points from each job ad, including whether or not the

hiring school specified accreditation requirements for the applicant's doctorate, and whether or

not the position required research, distance education experience, etc. These data are compared

against the interview data to determine whether or not search committees are clear in the

expectations set forth to prospective applicants.

<div align="center">Research Findings</div>

The overall research findings support the assertion from the aforementioned *Chronicle*

article (Montrell, 2003), in that search committee members do in fact automatically question the

academic credentials of graduates of nontraditional programs. Beyond anecdotal comments

however, the research reveals some reasons why these reservations may be justified, and in some

instances, wise.

Search Committee Interview Data

Several interview quotes illustrate the reasons for hesitancy on the committee's part:

One participant stated: "I would want to know how they were assessed. For me, after 20 classes, I still had written and oral comprehensive exams; then a prospectus presentation and defense. And finally, the dissertation defense itself. If these applicants don't understand what it's like to go through that, then I couldn't consider them."

Another responded: "The applicant pool in my discipline is so rich with candidates from top [traditional] schools. I wouldn't waste my time trying to evaluate a graduate from a program I've never heard of."

A third participant followed on this theme by claiming that if the applicant pool were not that rich, he "would rather reopen the search."

Virtually all of the participants did concede that if they knew the applicant well, and were confident in the person's other credentials, the source of the doctorate would be of less concern and that candidate could be considered.

Comparative Program Evaluation

According to the data collected in this study, the average number of days a nontraditional doctoral student can expect to spend in in-classroom residency is approximately 35, while traditional programs all require over 100 days in class, on campus, with the average being 154 days. Most programs reviewed require a dissertation: all of the traditional programs required one while three of four nontraditional programs did. Only half of the nontraditional programs required comprehensive exams; all of the traditional programs required them. Tuition represented a wide gap as well, with the average tuition rate in nontraditional programs at $581 per credit hour (median = $499), while traditional programs averaged $250 per credit hour (median = $264). All four nontraditional programs required management training classes, while only two of the four traditional programs required such coursework. Conversely, all traditional

programs required research methodology classes, but only two of the four nontraditional programs dictated such a requirement. These findings will be discussed in more detail in the next section of this paper.

Job Listing Analysis

The *Chronicle of Higher Education* also yielded interesting results. Job listings showed that only six of 55 mentioned any type of accreditation required of applicants, with the majority of those being positions in business schools accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). The others were positions in the field of Education, where the successful candidates would need to teach in a teacher certification program. Only two position announcements mentioned distance education, and in both instances the job required the successful candidate to teach distance courses. Of the 55 listings reviewed, 35 mentioned research as a required component of the job.

Analysis of Findings

"Every time I've served on a search committee, we've had excellent applicants. I can't imagine why we'd consider a graduate of one of these [nontraditional] programs, when the pool of applicants we have from recognized schools is so rich. If it were not that rich, I would reopen the search." This statement, voiced by one of the six interviewees in this study, illustrates a common theme that all participants mentioned in some fashion. Before worrying about whether or not nontraditional programs are "good enough", search committee members agree that there are usually enough applicants from schools with immediately recognizable names and programs that there is little motivation to consider applicants from "schools I've never heard of." As one person put it: "Branding is as important in the academic market as it is in the private sector—maybe more when it comes to the importance of where the applicant's degree came from."

While most of the participants in this study were able to think of at least one school that offered an online doctorate, none knew anything about the programs they'd heard of. Another person stated: "I know what the programs in [my field] at Michigan and Wisconsin look like. If I had applicants from programs I know, I would be less likely to bother researching a [nontraditional] program that I'm unfamiliar with." From these quotes, it becomes apparent that even if a nontraditional program prepares highly qualified and talented graduates, these applicants may still not be considered, simply because their doctoral program lack name recognition.

Examining the issue deeper however, there is evidence to support the hesitations shown by these search committee members. As illustrated in the comparative document analysis of doctoral program descriptions, there are wide gaps between traditional and nontraditional programs. Five of six study participants made statements that agreed with the following theme: "What happens to the experience of continuing the conversation after class, maybe at the local watering hole? Some of the most formative discussions I had during my doctoral studies occurred like that – when we'd all go get some dinner or a drink and sit around and talk some more." Another stated: "It's been nearly 20 years, and I can still smell the scent of my advisor's pipe smoke. I still see him every year at [a national conference], we've become old friends, and whenever I see him I remember sitting in his office, with him smoking that pipe as we talked."

These interviewees nearly unanimously agreed that the personal, informal interaction with faculty and other students was a critical part of doctoral studies, and that it could not be adequately replaced using technology. Even when discussing nontraditional programs with some residency requirements, search committee members felt that "those residencies seem to lend themselves to an almost workshop-like environment. That's hardly the same as arguing Manifest

Destiny until 1 a.m. simply because you find it intellectually stimulating." With most nontraditional programs requiring only a few weekend meetings to complete residency requirements, most graduates would likely miss out on this experience that search committee members feel is very important.

In terms of how these programs prepare graduates to become faculty members at traditional schools, one person said: "Let's face it—most doctoral programs don't do a very good job of preparing their graduates to teach anyway. Doc programs are set up to make you a subject matter expert, but if you want to go into academics, you have to pick up the teaching skills through grading or teaching assistantships." Another participant added: "Whether assistantships are available to online doc students or not, I wouldn't know, but I would guess that since they're part-time students anyway, they wouldn't have the time to do those things." Again we see this as a concern of search committee members, worrying that some of the key aspects of doctoral preparation are lost in the nontraditional experience. Even the examination in this study of traditional and nontraditional programs reveals gaps in academic preparation. Search committee members who were interviewed repeatedly voiced concerns over the requirements and rigor of the doctoral dissertation in nontraditional programs: "Some don't even require one, while I'm not convinced the ones that do require a dissertation take the process seriously or examine the end result thoroughly."

At this point, some may question why a person might consider nontraditional doctoral study at all. As mentioned previously, one limitation of this study is that we are not examining the value of nontraditional doctorates in other fields (e.g. professional research and development). One person explained, "Since completing my doctorate, I've worked in both research and academe. If I were hiring a person to work with me on a research project, I

wouldn't worry as much about where they got their degree. I'd be much more concerned with their publications, and what type of field experience they've got – where did they get it and how?"

Even within the academic setting, one place that perhaps nontraditional doctorates may be useful would be in jobs where the doctorate is considered a plus, rather than a requirement. Of the 55 job listings reviewed, 48 required a doctorate, but 7 did not. In the ranks of two-year college faculty or non tenure-track lecturers and instructors where perhaps only a master's degree is required, a nontraditional doctorate may add to a person's curriculum vitae. Even with the hesitations shown by those interviewed for this research, one participant mentioned, "Over time, as the classroom and research experience increases, where the person graduated from becomes less important." Another conceded, "If the applicant showed excellent experience, out there in previous schools, and I could tell they were good from what they'd accomplished, I would consider them. And I wouldn't have said that five years ago." Still another said, "My doctorate is not from an Ivy League school, so even with a traditional doctorate, I've had to prove myself a qualified applicant by adding publications, service, and experience to go along with my education."

Conclusions

This research clearly supports the content presented in the *Chronicle* article "Battling the Stigma of Nontraditional Credentials". One participant in this study offered the following as a closing statement: "It could just be an unfair stigma that's been attached to it [the nontraditional doctorate]. And a stigma can be removed you know. We would just need to get the stigma out in the open and dealt with." So there is some evidence to show that a nontraditional doctorate could potentially serve as an adequate academic credential, and that acceptance of such a degree

may be slowly growing. Ultimately however, graduates of nontraditional programs must understand that they will face, and must address, the concerns and reservations of search committees as outlined in this paper if they are to pursue an academic career at a college or university in the United States. Whether the hesitations of search committees are fair or not is irrelevant, because they are real in the minds of the committee members; and hiring decisions are made based upon committee members' beliefs and feelings. Success for nontraditional graduates in the tenure-track job market depends largely on the candidate's ability to convince committees to accept their credentials—perhaps by adding publications, teaching experience, and service to their CV. A final interview quote illustrates this point: "Much of it depends on the cover letter. Can the applicant convince [us] to put their application on the "phone interview" pile during initial screening? We don't just look at education, although it's an easy way to start narrowing the search."

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