

Identifying Stakeholder Needs within Online Education

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Abstract

Online teaching and online learning has been an invaluable component of education in the past decade. Demand for fully online or hybrid courses has been steadily increasing. Similar to any system or project, online education has stakeholders that have a major say in the direction online education takes. These stakeholders are identified as the faculty, the students, the academic institutions, and the industry. Each of these stakeholders will have different needs. This paper identifies these needs and demands and provides a holistic perspective within the context of online education that is intended to be used as support when looking at issues relating to online education.

Keywords: Online Education, Faculty, Student, Industry, Stakeholder

INTRODUCTION

Online education (OE) has established itself as an independent discipline due to the increasing demand from academia and practice alike. Universities, more and more, offer either blended or fully online courses and fully online degrees. For the purposes of this paper, the following classification will be used, in line with the Sloan-C definitions:

- *Fully Online Course*: 80% or more of content is delivered online, with no face-to-face meetings.
- *Hybrid Course*: Between 30% and 79% of content is delivered online, with some face-to-face meetings.
- *Traditional/Face-to-Face Course*: No content is delivered online, with all content delivered in writing or orally.

The 2008 Sloan Consortium survey of online education reports that more than 20% of all students in U.S. colleges enroll in at least one online class. Academic research on the effectiveness and efficiency of online education is now published in journals solely dedicated to this topic, such as *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, *American Journal of Distance Education*, *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, and *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, among others.

A survey conducted by the *Instructional Technology Council* (2008) on the impact of eLearning at community colleges reports that there has been an 11.3 percent increase in the distance education enrollment between Fall 2006 and Fall 2007. The seventh annual Sloan Survey of Online Learning (2009) states that 73% of the institutions they surveyed (more than 2,500 colleges and universities) reported an increased demand for *existing* online courses and programs, and 66% of institutions reported increased demand for *new* courses and programs. In the same survey, it is reported that the demand for online offering is greater than that for the corresponding face-to-face offerings, and that 1 out of 4 higher education students has, at least, taken one online class.

In order to successfully integrate an online component to any academic degree program, the first step should be to identify stakeholders. In any context, if projects are developed without full understanding of fundamental requirements, failure will be unavoidable. Stakeholders may be the customers and the users of an end product, the people who provide an input, the people who receive an output, or the people who

review and evaluate a system; in general, everyone who has a relation to the system at hand. What needs to be achieved must be clearly understood and articulated beforehand, so that full acceptance and satisfaction of each stakeholder can be guaranteed. Within the context of online education, it may be clear and obvious that faculty members who are teaching the online course and students who are taking it would be two stakeholders that are on opposite ends of the OE dimension. However, a deeper analysis of the literature shows that there are more factors impacting the effectiveness and success of online teaching and learning.

MAJOR STAKEHOLDERS OF ONLINE EDUCATION

When looking at OE literature, four major stakeholders are identified, as shown in Figure 1. The *faculty* is responsible for design, development, and delivery of online courses. The *students* are the end-users of these online courses; therefore, factors affecting motivation and satisfaction of students need to be taken into consideration. *Academic institutions* are colleges and universities that provide online education to students via faculty members. Even though these institutions may seem to be a collection of students and faculty, they also have their own specific requirements and needs which make these academic institutions a separate entity and a major stakeholder within online education. The *industry* is a stakeholder that may be considered to be outside of the three academia-oriented stakeholders, but it can be seen as both the supply and demand component of online education. Expectations and requirements of each of these stakeholders have to be identified clearly in order to have a successful online course (Wilkes, Simon and Brooks, 2006).

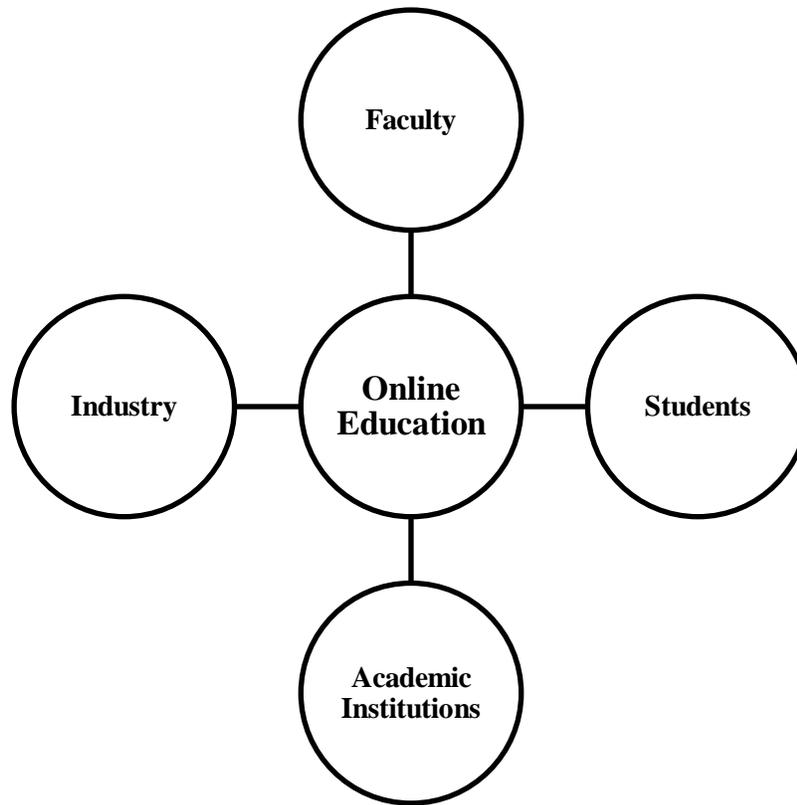


Figure 1. Major Stakeholders of Online Education

STAKEHOLDER 1: THE FACULTY

It is the responsibility of faculty members to continuously sustain and develop the engagement levels of students (Robinson and Hullinger, 2008). From a faculty perspective, it is interesting to note that academic and practical research results do not always support each other. The results from the Sloan Survey (2009) show that, since 2002, there has been little increase in support for online education provided by faculty. This may be because the teaching philosophy and style of some teachers may be more appropriate in a face-to-face delivery medium while others may be more comfortable and skilled in online deliveries. However, research conducted by Wilkes et al (2006) on faculty perception of online courses showed that only around 11% of the faculty members stated that they would not like to teach an online course.

A study conducted by Scagnoli, Buki, and Johnson (2009) suggests that, when instructors have taught the same course both online and face-to-face, they tend to transfer pedagogical strategies from

the online medium to the face-to-face medium. The same study also concluded that, when an instructor teaches an online class, he/she tends to incorporate technological components to traditional classes. This shows that teaching a course in different mediums enhances the teaching effectiveness of faculty members. As Fabry (2009) suggests, the issue of effectively utilizing the features and tools of the design and delivery mediums, such as Blackboard, needs to be addressed by course developers. Once these delivery mediums are utilized to their full capacity, the course delivery will be more effective and efficient. Koenig (2010) conducted a study on determining the effectiveness of different instructional delivery methods, specifically face-to-face, online, and video conference. His research showed that faculty members stated that the more traditional, face-to-face classroom setting was far more effective than online or video conference delivery mediums. When comparing online and video conference delivery, however, the results were not significantly different except on the area of “faculty interaction.” The faculty stated that faculty and students interacted more effectively in online delivery, rather than video conference delivery. The interaction between faculty and students was also studied by Robinson and Hullinger (2008); their survey research on student engagement in online learning suggested that, due to technological advances, faculty-student interaction was very effective in online courses. Figure 2 is a representation of faculty requirements, needs, and expectations when it comes to designing, developing, and delivering online courses.

Stakeholder 1: Faculty Requirements				
Training	Up-to-date technology	Support from administration	Demand Analysis	Compensation for developing online courses

Figure 2. Requirements of Faculty Members

STAKEHOLDER 2: THE STUDENTS

Some students definitely prefer to be in a “real” classroom and interact with the teacher and their classmates, while others prefer the anonymity and flexibility online education provides them. Menchaca and Bekele (2008) conducted a research where students stated that using multiple tools within distance education would motivate them to participate in discussions and meetings. A survey study conducted by Bolliger and Wasilik (2009) shows that faculty satisfaction within an online teaching environment is mainly affected by student success and student satisfaction. Therefore, it is important to identify factors contributing to successful students. In a survey study conducted by Wilkes et al (2006), undergraduate students considered the following five issues as important when deciding to take online classes: timely feedback to questions, accreditation of the institution, access to information, organized and systematic presentation of materials, and flexibility of schedule to accommodate work responsibilities. Furthermore, issues such as electronic submission of assignments and flexibility of schedule to accommodate social activities were also reported to be more characteristic of an online course. Battalio (2009) analyzed student success with respect to different learning styles and concluded that students who are reflective learners –a more introverted learning style where students do not engage or interact with other students and prefer a quieter learning environment- have been more academically successful than active and sequential learners.

In a study investigating how adult students described the learning process through distance learning courses, Makoe et al (2008) concluded that some students described learning as based on critical thinking, and personal development and change. However, other students described it as achieving personal change with no active or critical engagement. In light of these two different groups, they concluded that the way adult students view learning within distance education will be dependent on culture and context. Ogunleye (2010) also conducted a study on students’ perspectives on online courses and studied how online courses increased student competencies in terms of skills associated with new technologies. His findings suggested that gender and age are major variables contributing to successful online learning, and skills in terms of browsing and searching, information gathering, and library reference searching were positively affected during online learning, and this also depended on gender and age. In my experiences of teaching different student profiles, I also see this differentiation between students.

Age, gender, and culture are big factors, among others, that affect the way students see a course. Adult students, who came back to academia to receive another degree, sometimes have more difficulty in adjusting to online delivery mediums. However, these mediums also benefit the adult learners most, since they are mostly full-time working professionals with families. Therefore, it is important to understand that different student populations will have different needs in terms of the way the course is designed and delivered. The needs, requirements, and expectations of students are represented in Figure 3.

Stakeholder 2: Student Requirements				
Flexibility	Ease of use	Accessible technology	Interaction with faculty and fellow students	Use of multiple mediums (slides, video, reading, blogs, etc.)

Figure 3. Requirements of Students

STAKEHOLDER 3: THE ACADEMIC INSTITUTION

From the *university* perspective, the analyses are conducted at a much higher level. The Sloan Survey (2009) reports that the trend for institutions and universities to include online education as part of long-term strategy and goals has been almost a plateau, with 73.6% of public academic institutions agreeing that online education is critical to their long-term strategy. This number drops to 49.5% for private nonprofit institutions. This is interesting, since research also shows that OE proves to have a significant effect on budget issues that favors the university. Betts, Hartman, and Oxholm (2009) have identified several economic factors that drive the enrollments in online and hybrid programs. Tuition, state funding, financial aid, and endowments are among the many factors that impact enrollment in these non-traditional programs. They further state that, in order to provide long-term sustainable programs, the colleges and universities should balance academic quality and accountability with online education. The issue of quality was also discussed by Smith and Mitry (2008) who concluded that, if university administrators do not remain committed to high academic standards, e-learning will never reach its true

potential. With the increasing number of for-profit institutions who offer online degrees with the support of part-time instructors who may not always have the necessary terminal degrees from accredited universities (Smith and Mitry, 2008), it is crucial that truly academic institutions pay extra attention to highlight the strengths of online education while fighting the challenges and limitations of online education.

Without adequate and appropriate people and organizational support, the technological tools and models will not be efficient or may not be applied successfully. Integration of necessary organizational support is crucial when identifying which components are going to be needed when designing, developing, and deploying the system. In order for faculty to design, develop, and deliver effective and efficient online courses, they need to receive some sort of training. The Sloan Survey (2009) states that only 19% of institutions they surveyed stated that they do not have training or mentoring programs for their online teaching faculty. As demand for online courses and online degrees increases, this percentage would no doubt decrease. As part of continuous self-development, faculty members should be open to such training, as well as online teaching certificates like the one provided by Sloan-C Consortium. In addition to receiving training, one of the main expectations of faculty members when developing online courses is to receive compensations or incentives. According to the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU) survey conducted in 2009, faculty for 69 institutions that were part of the survey study gave lowest rankings to their institution's incentives for developing and delivering online courses. The requirements and needs of academic institutions are shown in Figure 4.

Stakeholder 3: Academic Institution Requirements			
High retention rate	Justification of online course with data	Industry collaboration	Alignment with short and long-term goals

Figure 4. Requirements of Academic Institutions

STAKEHOLDER 4: THE INDUSTRY

The industry is usually an ignored stakeholder within online education. A review of journals focusing solely on online education (*Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, *Distance Education*, *American Journal of Distance Education*, and *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*) was conducted. Five hundred eighty-six publications from 2007 to present were reviewed, and there was no mention of “industry” within the articles. Even though online education has now reached to high-school level, the flexibility of online education is specifically appealing to working, professional adult students. Even though the data is scarce on the national profile of online students and their demographics, Mayadas, Bourne, and Bacsich (2009) state that working adults are indeed the target population of online classes. This being the case, it is natural to assume that the industry would also be considered a major stakeholder. Businesses and organizations support online education in both ways, as shown in Figure 5.

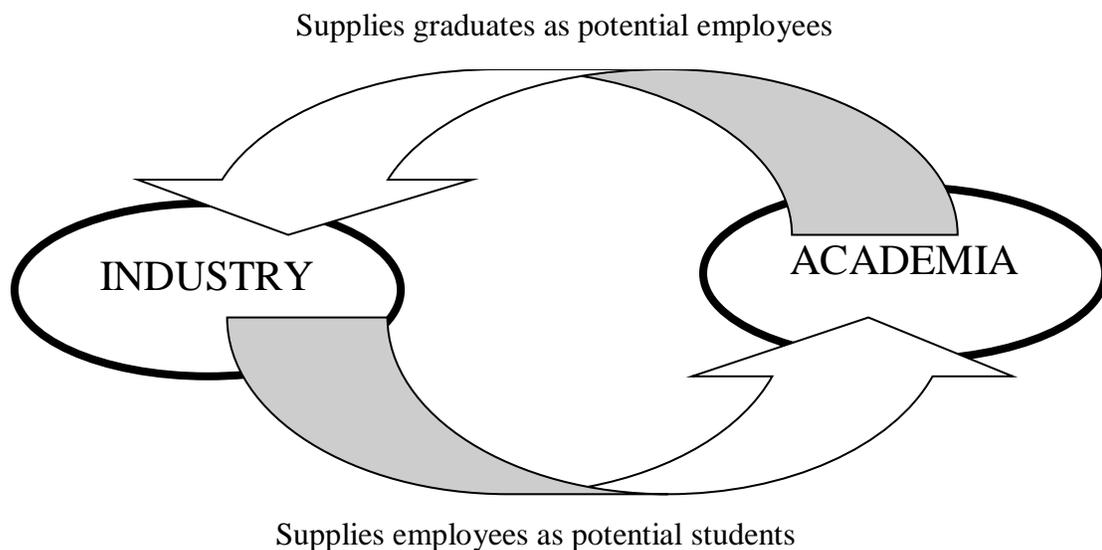


Figure 5. Relationship of Industry with Academia

Working professionals who are employees in organizations and businesses are potential students for academic institutions. Most of the time, businesses want the employees to receive higher degrees (Master’s, Doctor of Engineering, or a Certificate) while they are working, or the employees would like to be more competitive and have more skills, so the organizations support them. This is one of the reasons why practice-oriented programs, such as engineering management and systems engineering, offer

evening and weekend courses. The online courses and online programs completely eliminate scheduling conflicts and offer the required flexibility to working students. The other side of this is that recent graduates become potential employees to businesses in the industry. Academic institutions, when adding new degrees or offering certificate programs, usually conduct a market analysis and survey the industry within the proximities to find out what the businesses require. Therefore, there is a supply/demand loop between the industry and academia. Requirements and expectations of the industry are shown in Figure 6.

Stakeholder 4: Industry Requirements			
Fit with demanded job skills	Flexibility for employees	Graduate-level courses and degrees	Quick turnaround benefits

Figure 6. Requirements of Industry

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, major stakeholders were identified within the context of online education. Similar to any system or project planning conceptual phase, it is crucial to first identify all the stakeholders, then to identify what their requirements and needs are, in order to have a successful project. Online education, with its learning and teaching components, is no different. The major stakeholders identified were faculty members, students, academic institutions, and the industry. Reviewing relevant literature showed that each of these stakeholders has different expectations and different factors contributing to their effectiveness and efficiency. For instance, faculty members require training and support from their institutions. Students require more interaction with their faculty teaching the online course, as well as with their class mates. Academic institutions, taking a more business-like perspective, want the economic implications of online courses to be made explicit and need the online programs to be aligned with their strategic goals and mission. The industry, as the “outsider” stakeholder, will want the students to obtain the skills required for certain job positions and need the students to obtain their degrees in a timely

manner. All of these factors contribute to the development and improvement of more efficient and successful courses and programs.

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