

Dodging Judgments: The Plight of Online Graduates

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Abstract

Although employer perceptions of online degrees are changing slowly for the better, graduates of online doctoral programs still often face challenges when attempting to obtain a position at a brick-and-mortar institution. Strategies to overcome these challenges as suggested by previous scholars are offered. In addition, personal reflections regarding the extent to which what is described in the literature fits the author's experience are presented.

Keywords: Online degree; doctoral programs; perceptions; job market

Despite the myriad of renowned institutions that recently have presented online learning opportunities for students as a means of competing for funding, the stigma associated with online learning still is palpable when graduates attempt to procure positions at these institutions (Good & Peca, 2007). This judgment extends beyond academia to include university medical centers and research facilities (Columbaro & Monaghan, 2009). Although employer perceptions in general appear to be improving slowly (Grossman & Johnson, 2016), it is important for graduates of online programs, including online doctoral programs, to be prepared for the job market into which they plan to enter.

Type of Online Experience Matters

Given the growing demand for online courses and programs, various academic institutions have adapted by offering three predominant types of online experiences: the

strictly online program, the online program that is associated with a brick-and-mortar institution, and the hybrid program that integrates both online and in-person learning (Mandelbaum, 2014). This differentiation of program types is critical in considering hiring attitudes, as hiring personnel have been biased toward programs associated with brick-and-mortar institutions (Adams & Defleur, 2005). Specifically, employers often evaluate an online program by the prominence of the instructors and the existence of a link to a brick-and-mortar institution (Haynie, 2015).

Type of Career Field Matters

Results of recent research have suggested that opinions of online degrees are changing, although they appear to differ by industry (Fogle & Elliot, 2013; Venable, 2016). Grossman and Johnson (2016) found that the perceptions of future accounting employees who earned strictly online

degrees are changing progressively. Kaupins, Wanek, and Coco (2014) reported that 51% of human resources professionals indicated that they viewed online degrees as favorably as degrees from traditional institutions, with 69% believing that their company treated both types of degrees equally when considering promotions. However, there are still considerable differences in opinions regarding degree type, most notably in academia (Good & Peca, 2007). Individuals who earn a degree from a strictly online university can face considerable discrimination if they are even considered at all for available tenure-track positions (Good & Peca, 2007).

Good and Peca (2007) stated that such prejudices in academia are partially due to the lack of certain experiences that are difficult to offer with many online programs. Specifically, these opportunities include teaching apprenticeships, research

opportunities, and publication opportunities (Friedman, 2016), resulting in what some see as a “watered-down” degree (Monaghan, 2009; Wechler, 2012). In essence, opportunities to gain practical experiences in preparation for teaching and researching at brick-and-mortar institutions largely do not exist in online doctoral programs. The limited access to such opportunities appears to place graduates of online doctoral programs at a major disadvantage in comparison to graduates of traditional doctoral programs and might seriously diminish their eligibility to teach at a large number of brick-and-mortar institutions.

Type of Institution Matters

According to the American Association of University Professors (2010), hiring at brick-and-mortar institutions has evolved over time in response to significant budget cuts and in an effort to maintain financial security. The changes can be seen

most clearly in the depletion of tenure-track positions in favor of adjunct or contract positions as well as the differentiation of research-focused and teaching-focused institutions (Delany, 2013). In large part, tenure-track positions remain somewhat abundant at research-focused institutions (Porac, 2016). These universities maintain the highest esteem and tend to offer higher-paid faculty positions (e.g., PayScale, 2016). In return, faculty members are expected to meet rigorous publication standards. Among students who graduate from strictly online universities, employment at these institutions appears to be virtually impossible due to negative perceptions of online degrees and the associated lack of experience (Aven, 2015).

Conversely, obtaining positions at teaching-focused institutions is slightly easier due in large part to the availability of adjunct faculty positions. However, these

positions are still highly competitive, and the prejudices against graduates of online universities often are pervasive, requiring extra care and strategy to obtain employment (Flowers & Baltzer, 2006).

Strategies

It appears that the biggest hurdle to obtaining a position at a traditional university that graduates of online doctoral programs face is finding opportunities to build teaching, collaborative learning, research, and publishing experience (Good & Peca, 2007). As previously mentioned, there are numerous adjunct faculty positions available at academic institutions. Although such positions may not be ideal due to the pay and inconsistent employment, they provide individuals who are new to teaching at the college level an opportunity to gain valuable experiences. These opportunities include creating lectures that adhere to syllabi and meet accreditation needs,

advising students, and maintaining collaborative relationships with peers (Porac, 2016). Graduates from online doctoral programs might also consider volunteering as a presenter or lecturer at a brick-and-mortar institution. This experience provides not only graduates with opportunities to add to their curriculum vitae (CV) with relevant teaching experience, but also personnel to become familiar with their work ethic and abilities. While in these positions, it is also important to network with other faculty members to learn about other job openings as well as potential research collaborations. Using these experiences to bolster their CV might help to increase graduates' chances of securing an interview.

Similarly, several interview strategies that graduates of online doctoral programs can use have been identified via online forums (Venable, 2016). One strategy is to openly and enthusiastically acknowledge the

online degree during the interview and further discuss the specific experiences that are unique to online learning that make the graduate the right candidate for the position. These strategies appear to provide both an opportunity to inform and bring awareness to experiences that are perhaps not otherwise considered by the interviewer as well as a relevant topic of conversation in which the graduate can demonstrate eloquence, mastery, and passion. Venable also noted the importance of researching the institution ahead of the interview to determine which unique online learning experiences to highlight as they relate to the specific position.

Reflection

Living in the shadows of several nationally recognized, prominent universities presents many difficulties for me as a graduate of an online doctoral program who is forced to compete with graduates of brick-

and-mortar institutions for coveted employment positions. In addition to the aforementioned strategies, it seems that the most important activity that an online doctoral graduate who aspires to obtain an academic position can participate in is pursuing information about the trends and experiences of others who were once in their position. There are numerous social media outlets (e.g., Facebook, Higher Ed, and LinkedIn) that online doctoral graduates can use to learn from, connect with, and network with other graduates, faculty members, and professionals associated with online universities. Learning from the mistakes and triumphs of others by maintaining a constant dialogue can assist in creating an individualized interview strategy that works best for that specific graduate. Viewing each interview, successful or not, as a learning opportunity can provide the best chances of earning an academic position (Phillips,

2016).

Based on personal experience, I discovered that a combination of all of the previously mentioned strategies worked to secure positions in academia. Several years ago, I obtained a lecturer position at a local well-known, private university. I subsequently secured a position as an assistant professor at a local historically black college/university (HBCU). Judgments lodged against online degrees have been widely acknowledged and discussed by scholars in the literature as well as among graduates of strictly online universities, as observed on numerous discussion boards on LinkedIn and other social media sites. Nevertheless, I did not experience such judgments. The individual who made the hiring decision for this particular position was a graduate of a strictly online university; therefore, it was not necessary for me to employ additional strategies to address the

online doctoral degree. In addition, the institution was experiencing financial and name recognition challenges at the time, which might have resulted in greater willingness to hire a graduate of an online doctoral program.

In the years that followed, I made numerous attempts to transfer to one of the more prominent universities in the area. Despite my possessing numerous years of successful teaching, a 4.0 grade point average throughout the doctoral experience, reference letters from multiple prominent leaders in the field, service on the Board of the State Chapter of the governing entity, and over 20 years of practical subject matter experience, none of the universities even granted me an interview. These difficulties associated with being hired also generalized to other positions requiring a doctoral degree, such as postdoctoral positions and

positions in the pharmaceutical industry that required research experience.

Although this has been my experience, the importance of adding to the CV with teaching, research, and publishing experiences has been supported in the scholarly literature. It is of paramount importance that graduates of online doctoral programs keep this in mind while pursuing their degree so that they can work to obtain these necessary experiences before entering the job market. If such opportunities are not available at their online institution, they should consider creating them. It might also be helpful to apply for positions at institutions at which other graduates of online universities are employed and/or at which the individual who makes hiring decisions graduated from an online institution.

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