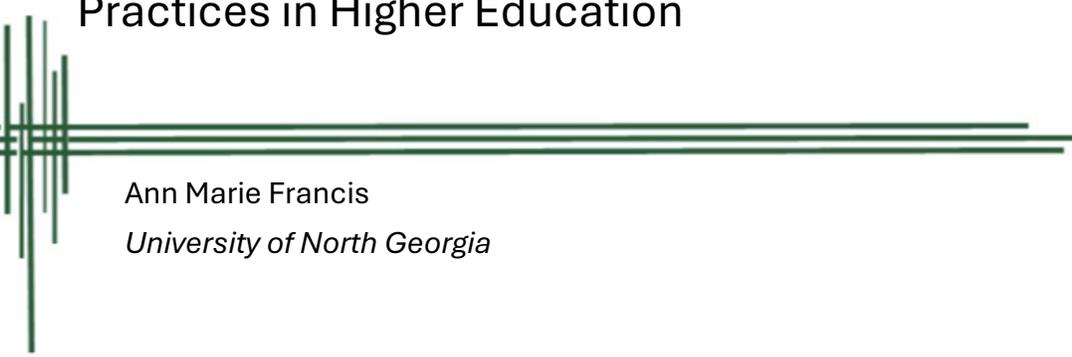


# Exploring the Impact of Online Education on Labor Practices in Higher Education



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## Abstract

Higher education has seen a sharp increase in the demand for online classes since the pandemic, with little indication that the demand will slow. Students like the flexibility that online classes give them and find that the asynchronous classes often work better for their schedules. As such, colleges are offering more online classes than ever before. While the classes work well for students, many faculty feel the opposite, reporting that online classes are more time consuming than face-to-face classes, especially when teaching a course in the online format for the first time. Faculty note that the time required to teach online classes takes them away from their other professional duties and that they are not always compensated for the extra work that online classes require or that the compensation is not adequate. This paper explores the impact that the increased number of online classes has on faculty and considers how a course release can serve to compensate the faculty teaching the class, benefitting not only the faculty member teaching the class, but also the students taking the class and any faculty who will teach the class in the future.

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Higher education has been seeing more online course offerings since online education was first introduced, but there has been a stark increase recently, especially since the pandemic. In 2019, 37 percent of college students took at least one course online, a number that was expected to gradually increase over time (Barshay), but when COVID forced educational institutions to close their doors, nearly all classes were moved to an online format, igniting online education. While we have since returned to normal operations in higher education and schools are again offering face-to-face (F2F) classes, the number of students

enrolled in online courses still has not returned to pre-pandemic numbers. In the fall of 2022, 54 percent of college students took at least one class online, with almost half of those students—26 percent of all college students—taking all their courses online (Carlton). The demand for online education is not expected to slow in upcoming years (Venable), and this trend has resulted in considerable research exploring the impact online classes have on the students and their learning experience, including student success in online classes, pedagogical approaches to the online environment, achieving outcomes in online classes, and online student engagement. While there is considerable research on the impact of online learning on students, research that explores the effects of increased online course offerings on the faculty teaching those classes is limited. This paper considers the impact that the increased number of online classes has on faculty and offers an option to support faculty that is often overlooked.

### ***Faculty Concerns About Online Teaching***

Although online classes have become more prevalent in post-secondary education, faculty overall still prefer F2F teaching. When Educause Center for Analysis and Research (ECAR) surveyed 13,451 faculty from seven different countries, they found that only 9 percent of those surveyed indicated that they would rather teach fully online classes than teach F2F classes (Pomerantz and Brooks 25). Interestingly, not only did the faculty indicate that they would prefer not to teach fully online classes, but they also stated that they would rather not have most of the components in their F2F classes online (24). Their conclusions are supported by other researchers as well (Young and Bruce; Atwa et al.; Kulikowski et al.), Faculty have many reasons for preferring F2F classes, but the most common stated reasons are the beliefs that online education does not result in the same learning as F2F classes, that teaching online classes demands more from faculty, and that online teaching feels like doing administrative work rather than teaching (McQuiggan; Betts & Heaston; Bolliger & Wasilik; Hartman et al.; Wingo et al.). Specifically, faculty feel that online classes take more work and provide little reward, with up to 90 percent of faculty stating that online classes are more difficult to teach (Hartman et al. 166).

It should be noted, however, that in general, attitudes towards online teaching seem to improve as faculty gain more experience teaching in online environments (Major), and faculty perceptions of online education has improved over time (Johnson et. al). It is unclear, though, if the shift in attitudes is because of a recent appreciation for the benefits of online education, especially since the pandemic, because of a belief that online teaching can provide the same educational outcomes as F2F classes, or because faculty are simply accepting that online classes are not going away. In reality, faculty continue to have concerns about many aspects of teaching online, including the demands that online classes have on their time, the quality of the educational experience for students, the effects online teaching will have on their ability to complete other required work tasks, and the impact it can have on their work-life balance.

### ***Demands on Faculty's Time***

The biggest concern that faculty have about teaching online is the time it takes to design and teach online classes, a concern that is warranted according to much of the research. A study conducted by DeGagne and Walters found that while faculty consider online teaching to be a

positive experience, they also felt that it was incredibly time consuming (362). Many faculty argue that designing online asynchronous classes demands more time than traditional F2F classes, noting that what draws students to online education is the flexibility, and what comes with such flexibility is the need for faculty to respond to student questions at all times during the day and on the weekends (Birch & Burnett; Conceição). As such, they feel that online teaching demands more time than a traditional F2F class. Hislop and Ellis differentiate between time and effort, a key distinction (16). Time is easily measured in defined increments or units, while effort is more difficult to measure, and often, Hislop and Ellis argue, faculty's perception of the efforts they put into online classes is often due more to the challenges of learning new technology and the demand to adjust schedules to fit the needs of online students (27-28). Regardless of whether it is defined as time or effort, faculty still believe that teaching online demands more from faculty than teaching a traditional F2F class.

This impression that online teaching takes more time is supported by much of the research. A study by Worley and Tesdell compared time spent teaching technical communication classes online and in person and found that on average faculty teaching the classes online spent 20 percent more time per student than those teaching corresponding face-to-face courses (143). While Worley and Tesdell's study has one of the larger gaps between time spent teaching online classes and teaching F2F classes overall, other research agrees that teaching an online class takes more time than a traditional F2F class (Conceição; DeGagne & Walters). The research makes sense as online classes have additional components that F2F classes typically do not, including video lectures, discussion forums, online exams, and checklists, which faculty must set up, monitor, and often grade. And since for many faculty creating much of the supplemental materials in an online class requires using unfamiliar technology, faculty have to dedicate time to learn technology as they work to get the course set up in the course Learning Management System (LMS) before the semester starts.

In addition to the time spent designing the online class in the LMS, faculty also spend more time teaching online classes due to the extra components of online classes such as discussion threads. Interestingly, the majority of the time faculty spend on discussions is in the background. While faculty do not need to reply to each post, nor should they, they do need to monitor the posts and jump in if the students are unclear or mistaken about the course content or if there are any inappropriate or aggressive posts, which means constantly reading the posts and responding to clarify information, expand on ideas presented, and add to the discussions (Smith 24). Because most online classes are asynchronous, the students are posting discussion responses throughout the day, making it essential for faculty to monitor posts regularly, a fact that makes faculty feel that they must be online at all hours of the day to check and monitor discussion threads. This time commitment is very different from a F2F class, where all discussions take place in the classroom during a set time, with a portion of that time spent on lectures, questions from students, and in-class discussions.

In addition, online classes tend to require faculty to spend more time communicating with students. There are two primary types of communication in online classes. The first is communication from the faculty that is sent to all students in the class, often sent through email and/or LMS announcements. Many faculty send messages using more than one method to help ensure the students see the information, a standard practice in online teaching. The other type

of communication, one-on-one between a student and the faculty member, can take place over email, direct messages, phone calls, or even video calls. A typical online class generates more emails, phone calls, discussion threads, and chatroom questions and answers than F2F classes, with some faculty reporting they receive up to 600 emails from their online sections (Cavanaugh 4), which can leave faculty as though they are essentially on call and expected to be available at all times, a theme that was common in DeGagne and Walters' research on online faculty. Participants in their study indicated that they found it difficult to get away from work in asynchronous online classes since students are constantly sending messages, asking questions, wanting clarification, and needing assistance, with the communication from students not being limited to standard working hours. While no one expects faculty to be on call 24/7 when teaching an online class, the students do need answers to questions when they are working on assignments, which is often outside of standard business hours, leaving faculty to feel like they are constantly working.

### *Courseware*

One direct effect of the increase in online class offerings is the use of courseware. Because of the extra work that online classes demand, or at a minimum that faculty perceive that online classes require, some faculty use courseware to design and organize their online courses. Major publishing companies create courseware to complement their books and facilitate learning; the students in the courses must purchase the courseware to have access to the electronic textbook and accompanying materials. The systems can typically be integrated with the school's LMS and usually include videos, interactive webpages, quizzes, and even assignment prompts. Courseware is becoming increasingly popular as a tool for faculty. According to a survey by the National Association of College Stores (NACS), 31 percent of faculty surveyed indicated that they use courseware or adaptive learning platforms. It is important to note that the faculty surveyed by the NACS included both faculty teaching online and those teaching F2F classes and that some of the faculty are required to use the courseware as part of their departmental requirements. That being said, courseware is obviously becoming popular.

There are, of course, concerns about the use of courseware, one of which is price. The fees for the courseware can be high, sometimes exceeding \$200 for some classes, especially those in STEM (Swaak, "The Homework Tax"), a price that is especially hard to swallow when student access to the electronic textbook and other materials often expires at the end of the semester. The reality is, however, that while professors are aware of the expenses of course materials and want to find lower cost options for their students (NACS), they are also aware of the demands on their time, and they perceive courseware as a way to decrease their time on course preparation and course management, thereby increasing their time available for other responsibilities.

Courseware saves faculty time by doing much of the course design for the faculty and providing supplemental materials that traditionally were created by the professors, including assignment prompts, case studies, exams, and discussion questions. The publishing companies furnish everything needed for the class, and work with all the major LMS platforms to seamlessly integrate the two, allowing students to access the materials that are designed by the publishers directly from the LMS. Course design is one of the most time-consuming aspects

of teaching an online class, especially when faculty are unfamiliar with the technology or how to create multimodal components that are encouraged in online teaching, and publishing companies use courseware to solve this problem and reduce the time required of faculty. They provide an abundance of the course materials, usually considerably more than the faculty need, allowing faculty to decide what to use and what not to use.

In addition to the time savings, faculty often see courseware as a way to provide course material created by professionals and experts in course design. While professors are experts in their subject area, most are not as knowledgeable about course design, so having someone with extensive knowledge about designing a course, incorporating multimodal lessons, and embracing online pedagogy research when designing different components for an online class is an attractive option for many faculty. Courseware is also popular because for many faculty, teaching is the least important aspect of promotion and tenure, an important point since Johnson et al. found that the majority of faculty felt that teaching online classes resulted in lower learning outcomes, which directly affects promotion and tenure (298). Faculty who do not believe that online classes provide the same learning experience as F2F classes often trust that having someone else design the course will result in better outcomes for the students, especially when the people and/or companies producing the course packs are experts in online course design. When coupled with the fact that teaching is often the least impactful consideration for promotion and tenure, it is logical that many would outsource their course design and focus on the areas for promotion that they feel will better benefit them in the long run.

In addition, faculty turn to courseware because of the time it saves. When faculty use a course pack instead of doing all the steps of course design on their own, they can use the time they would spend developing the class, creating course materials, recording video lectures, writing assignment prompts, and even providing feedback to focus on other responsibilities, such as service and scholarship. Not only does courseware save time, but it also usually includes content that incorporates videos, music, animation, and hyperlinked content that faculty often lack the technical knowledge to create but that many consider essential to online course development. And since many faculty don't have extensive training in online course design or the technology to create the media that is provided by the courseware, using content already developed is often preferable. Again, the use of courseware is not limited to online classes. Faculty in F2F classes also use courseware, but when it is used in an asynchronous online class, the faculty are more likely to depend on the courseware to take the place of instructor-created lectures and student-faculty interactions, sometimes even using the courseware to put the class on autopilot and limiting faculty engagement (Swaak, "The Substitute Teacher").

### ***Administration Support for Online Teaching Faculty***

As the number of online class offerings increases, the requests from faculty for support also increases, primarily in one of two formats: incentives and training. Most chief online officers report that they provide incentives for faculty teaching online classes, with schools that offer more online classes most likely to provide incentives (Garrett et al. 31). In addition to incentives, the report shows that administration also tries to provide support through training

and teaching and learning centers, with 75 percent of chief online officers reporting that they have at least one teaching and learning center at their institution (34). Of those that have teaching and learning centers, 70 percent of the centers offer assistance with online course design to faculty, although the majority do not require online faculty to utilize the teaching and learning centers when designing their online courses (Garrett et al. 35). From this research, it would appear that faculty would feel that their institutions support those teaching online classes. Unfortunately, the opposite is true: faculty feel that institutional support is declining for those teaching online classes, especially with regards to training and compensation (Johnson et al. 302), a perception that directly affects the faculty's satisfaction when teaching online classes.

### *Training for Faculty*

A major area of disconnect between administration and faculty is training for online classes; administration feels they provide adequate training options for those teaching online classes (Garrett et al. 30), but faculty disagree. Almost half of the faculty surveyed report that the training they receive is inadequate, with faculty perceptions of institutional support trending down over the six-year span studied (Johnson et al. 302). One reason for the disconnect could be related to the type of training required. Online faculty need training not only on the technology used in online classes, but also on how pedagogical approaches differ in online classes compared to F2F classes. Often the training provided for faculty focuses on the administrative side of teaching online classes, such as monitoring attendance and tracking discussion replies but lacks training on online pedagogy and how to better design online classes to meet the specific needs of different disciplines. This approach of focusing on how to use tools in the LMS instead of focusing on the differences in online and F2F classes is problematic and limits faculty's understanding of the online student and their needs, as well as limiting faculty's confidence in their own ability to teach online effectively. McSpadden notes that faculty often are willing to incorporate different types of technology and multimodal activities into their online classes, but they are uncertain if they are incorporating it effectively from a pedagogical standpoint (60). These feelings of uncertainty in online course design are exacerbated if faculty have not been trained on the technology or if they feel the training was not adequate. The problem is often worsened by the fact that a large number of faculty teaching online classes never actually participated in a university-level online class during their time as students, so they have little to no experience as a student in the online educational world.

It is important to note that since the pandemic, training for faculty teaching online classes has increased. Before 2020, 54 percent of institutions offered training for online instructors, but the training was optional. After the pandemic, there was a shift for institutions to require training for online faculty, with the same number, 54 percent, requiring that faculty complete training before teaching online classes (Garrett et al. 26). While that research is encouraging, the study also found that the number of public four-year institutions requiring training for online faculty is decreasing over time, a trend which is concerning as public four-year institutions are increasing their online class offerings and faculty are feeling the strain of feeling unprepared to teach online classes.

### *Compensation*

There is also a disconnect between how administrators and faculty view rewarding faculty for online teaching. The *CHLOE8: Student Demand Moves Higher Ed Toward a Multi-modal Future*, a comprehensive research project that surveyed chief online officers from higher education institutions across the US, explored how institutions provide rewards or incentives for faculty teaching online classes. The administrators outlined the different types of compensation or other incentives provided to faculty teaching online classes: 55 percent listed working remotely as the incentive provided, 33 percent responded that teaching credit was given as an incentive, 18 percent provide faculty with new technology for teaching online, and 11 percent gave faculty a reduced load when teaching online classes (Garrett et al. 32). These findings do not match the findings of Johnson et al. who researched how faculty were rewarded, either through compensation or through course releases for teaching online classes and were unable to find any substantial reward provided to faculty teaching online (304). Their research, which considered faculty perceptions of online teaching, showed “very little evidence in the literature to suggest that rewarding faculty for teaching online has ever been a common institutional practice” (304). Their research additionally found not only that faculty feel the compensation for online teaching is inadequate, but also that those who volunteer to teach online do so only because of personal motivators, such as the ability to work around family demands (Johnson et al. 305). In other words, the faculty who are most likely to offer to teach online classes do so primarily because of the benefits it provides them and their personal situation. For example, those with small children can teach online and avoid childcare costs, providing a benefit that outweighs the challenges that come with online teaching.

### *Discussion*

There is no scenario in which the increased number of online classes does not affect faculty or change labor practices for higher education. Most research supports the idea that online teaching takes more time and energy than F2F teaching, as well as demands more of the faculty. These extra demands on faculty directly affect their ability to complete additional responsibilities, including service and scholarship. Those responsibilities have not changed, even though the demands on faculty time have increased. For this reason, it is imperative that administration show support for those faculty designing and teaching online classes. Faculty are aware of the amount of time and energy that online teaching requires, or at a minimum have a strong perception of the time commitments, especially with online course development, and feel that doing such work can potentially interfere with their other duties, many of which are required for promotion and tenure. As the majority of the time demands are from the original course design and the extra work required the first time teaching the class, colleges and universities should provide compensation for faculty designing online classes or moving a F2F class to the online format.

As noted, there are different types of compensation that can be offered, with one of the least common options being a reduced course load. Although just over ten percent of the chief online officers surveyed indicated that they provide a reduced course load as incentive for designing and teaching online classes (Garrett et al. 31), it is an option that needs to be explored more often and should be offered as a way to compensate faculty for online course design. As

the research shows, developing and teaching online classes takes considerable time, and a course release allows the faculty to dedicate time to ensure the course is pedagogically sound without having that work interfere with their other duties or their progression towards advancement.

When giving a reduced course load, it needs to be clear what the expectations are. If the course release is specifically for course development, it is reasonable to have expected training requirements on online course design and implementation. Faculty should learn about different approaches to online education, what works best for their student body, how to engage students and build community in asynchronous online classes, and what techniques improve online learning in their discipline. If courseware is an option, there should also be clear expectations of how courseware is used within online classes. While courseware can be used to supplement, it is too often used to replace the instructor's expertise by relying on the publishing companies to design the course and then putting the class on autopilot. If a faculty member is getting a course release and they are using courseware, they should use the extra time from the reduced course load to determine how best to use the courseware and how to supplement the materials provided by the publisher with their own content.

One advantage of providing a course release to faculty who design online classes is that the faculty member has more time to complete training on online course design, allowing them to get trained on both general online pedagogy and online course design specific to their discipline. Time constraints often make it difficult for faculty to participate in all the training they would like to, but having a reduced course load frees time and allows the faculty to participate in various types of training. While training on the technical aspects of online classes, like creating videos and taking attendance, is important, faculty also need instruction on course design specific to their discipline, and they need the time to take the training, digest what was covered, and apply it to their classes. A course release provides the time for discipline-specific training and also sends a clear message that administration knows that online pedagogy is not the same as F2F pedagogy, and they want and expect faculty to dedicate the time and energy to make the online classes as effective as possible.

Once faculty have been trained and designed their online class, they have the tools and knowledge to then mentor other faculty who are teaching the same class or even similar classes in subsequent semesters. Universities often have departments dedicated to online education that provide training on LMS and other universal technology, but it is less common to find similar departments that focus on discipline-specific design elements of online classes. This approach would provide benefits extending beyond the initial training. First, because the faculty are teaching the same courses, the guidance would be specific to the discipline, providing the mentee with details of how to design an online course for their specific subject. For example, a writing professor might learn how to implement peer review sessions in an asynchronous online class, while the biology professors would focus on how to handle lab work. Since the two different disciplines require very different teaching approaches, having a mentor within the department who took training specific to the discipline is invaluable. In addition, the approach would increase engagement between faculty by providing an avenue for faculty less experienced with online course design to learn from those who have additional

training. Finally, it would provide a service opportunity for the faculty, something that is essential, especially those going up for tenure and/or promotion.

The opportunity to give a reduced course load for faculty designing and teaching online classes provides benefits that cannot be understated. It starts by sending a clear message that online education is important, so important that the college or university is ready and willing to provide what it takes to ensure the classes are done well. It also provides time for faculty to spend training and researching options to determine what will best work to help students meet the course objectives, which in turn improves student learning. But the benefits extend beyond the immediate faculty member and their students. As the faculty serves as a mentor to others in the department, engagement and community within the department increases. A reduced course load for faculty designing and teaching online classes is an overlooked option to compensate faculty for online design and teaching, and it is one that should be considered more often.

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