Abstract:

The advancement of online education has transformed the availability of higher education. Technology and adaptable curricula formats have expanded the speed, methods, and approaches in both traditional and non-traditional education environments. The flexibility and extended population of online education has allowed faculty and universities to expand their reach. Some business educators contend that online business programs appropriately prepare students with the tools, knowledge and ability to transfer acquired problem solving skills to business environments – enabling online learners to make positive contributions to the global business community. Others assert that online programs fall short in adequately preparing business students for the realities of our highly competitive business world. The purpose of this paper is to describe and understand Business Educator’s perceptions of potential barriers in online business education programs. Findings may provide insights to inform administrative decisions relative to program development and faculty training.

A survey, involving 98 participants (including balanced representation of traditional brick and mortar [49 participants] and online business program faculty [49 participants]), was conducted to gather data on current perceptions of business educators. Overall, data from the survey supports the literature in terms of perceived barriers in categories of status quo, societal perception and competitive barriers. The data also suggests that additional training for online business educators may be a key factor towards improving faculty perceptions relative to online business programs.

Key Words: Online, Education, Business
Introduction:

The dominant philosophy concerning higher education since the post-war period has roots as a personal pursuit. The philosophy that has begun to change as the pursuit of a higher education has evolved to become a pursuit that not only affects the individual but the collective too—society (Bennett, Cornwell, Al-Lail, & Schenck, 2012). The pursuit of a higher education is not only an ideal or a privilege, but a necessity for the individual and society as global competitiveness has changed the proverbial landscape of economics (Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011).

Traditional forms of higher education involving attending a brick and mortar institution have also evolved to include the online realm by which individuals can achieve educational pursuits while remaining employed. Students have also become motivated to pursue careers in fields in which they have the ability to gain wages, innovate, and create wealth-building opportunities (Christensen & Eyring, 2012; Fogle & Elliott, 2013). The globalization age has created an enhanced need and desire for online higher education programs in business (Allen & Seaman, 2006). According to Burian, Muhammad, Burian and Maffei (2012), the student of the 21st century wants an education that adapts to their life-style, careers, and personal or life events. Furthermore, they rely on higher education to embrace and implement emerging technology, yet ensuring the quality and learning experience remains valuable.

Limited literature exists on current barriers that may exist from the perspective of the educator, particularly in the business discipline. Business educators who teach online higher education business programs face formidable obstacles toward augmenting their delivery and style ensuring cross-platform success. Do online business programs provide students with meaningful opportunities to practice newly acquired skills and knowledge? This is a critical element to delivering an effective online instructional strategy. Identifying the existing barriers and to what degree business educators are trained concerning online education programs may advance the modality of online higher education.

Methodology

To ensure that online higher education business programs can continue to grow as productive disruptive technologies, it is incumbent upon educators in the online higher education business community to understand
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Business Educator’s perceptions of potential barriers of online education in business programs. This effort will describe how online higher education business programs are disruptive technologies in addition to the potential barriers experienced by business educators who teach these online business programs and work to legitimize online business programs so that they are viewed as favorably as traditional business programs.

This paper highlights current research describing and contextualizing online business educators’ perceptions of potential barriers to the success of online higher education business programs. Critical analysis underscoring the varied expectations across universities and how attitudes about online business programs affect the ability of online business educators to be best equipped to educate students about how to effectively compete against students from traditional higher education business programs.

In order to gain a more thorough understanding as to the perceptions of potential barriers of online education in business programs, three key questions have evolved:

1. To what degree do business educators agree with current barriers regarding teaching online education programs?
2. To what degree are business educators trained concerning online education programs?
3. To what extent do these expectations vary across universities?

Survey

An exploratory survey was further presented as a supplement to illuminate critical perceptions and insights regarding business educators perceived barriers regarding online higher education modality. The survey was an attempt to expand the current understanding of perceived barriers. The survey instrument consisted of 5-point Likert-type scale questions with anchors from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The survey and current literature responses were compared and contrasted to provide richer quality information to the research questions. Results are listed in Table 1 in a Hierarchical Cluster Analysis. The four purely qualitative questions were analyzed in alignment with Table 2. The relevance of each statement was verified against the context of the interview question retaining pertinent expressions for data analysis.

Finally, this paper adds to the existing literature regarding barriers of online higher education, particularly from business educators’ perspectives...
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as it contextualizes perspectives with the evolution of the higher education model with an emphasis on institutional power dynamics as they impact prospective student behavior and outcomes.

Background of the Literature

There are two opposing visions of new technologies in the field of education. One of these visions is the view that new technologies have “the power to transform education providing learners with a greater choice, flexibility, and control” (Cervero & Wilson, 2001, p. 187). This can bring about widespread availability for learning opportunities. The contrasting discourse is that “the increased use of new technologies for course delivery will serve to increase the gap between the information rich and poor” (Cervero & Wilson, 2001, p. 187). And, this can increase the risk of learners being easily manipulated.

Both of these opinions have both positive and negative aspects. There are many limitations to the use of technology in education, but there are also unmatched benefits to the use of technology. Although there are some drawbacks and limitations to the effect of new technologies on higher education, leveraging technology and innovation can improve our educational system. (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). The use of the internet and online education can be highly beneficial to students and the growing worldwide learning community.

Advocates of online instruction have identified benefits of online technologies for an institution. It is important to recognize the need for the instructional technology but also the knowledge required to use and create those technologies (Hannum, 2002). The goal for the use of new technologies in education is to improve teaching and learning in the university (Gilbert & Ehrmann, 2002).

Students can participate in business programs and courses without having to spend hours a day at a traditional brick and mortar institution when they may have work commitments, something that can be especially appealing for older, non-traditional students (Symonds et al., 2011). Online higher education business programs can now offer a direct connection to business opportunities that are often more difficult to locate within traditional higher education settings (Danneels, 2004). This occurs because students can more intimately and productively interact with online higher education business program educators who are often themselves
businesspeople that can provide direct and meaningful social media connections with businesses that can bear fruitful post-graduate opportunities for students (Danneels, 2004).

The suggestion that online business programs can lead to close interactions with educators may seem counterintuitive especially when implicitly comparing such a student-educator relationship to that which likely exists in traditional higher education programs (Danneels, 2004). The increased use of social media tools allows for students and online educators to arguably have more flexibility within their professional and personal relationship than their traditional school counterparts. It becomes clear that although online higher education business programs represent a comparatively new and promising opportunity for business students, educators, and society at large to innovate, there exist non-linear disruptive innovation to the status quo of traditional higher education. Such programs are prime examples of disruptive technologies – technologies that challenge the status quo by transforming the manner in which humans live, work, and associate with each other within knowledge markets.

**Barriers Experienced by Business Educators who teach Online Education Programs**

**Status Quo Barrier**

The greatest barrier that online higher education business educators face is the status quo, which is that the traditional higher education model is supreme and at least for the near future appears poised to remain that way (Chesbrough, 2010). For online higher education business educators, many of whom are also practitioners, this can be frustrating because they arguably know better than academics that “a candidate’s knowledge and skills far outweigh where that candidate went to college or their major,” which could help with objectively reducing the weight given to a student’s credentials solely based on the institution at which they matriculate (Kannry, 2014). One of the central allures of the traditional higher education model, specifically for students whose families can afford it, is to attend college away from home because doing so affords students their first sustained experience of pseudo-adult living and freedom (Settersten & Ray, 2010). This away-from-home living experience has long been thought to foster intellectual and social maturity among college students who must routinely interact with each other and educators via classroom instruction and professional networking should
students take advantage of such networking opportunities (Settersten et al., 2010).

**Residential-Based Barrier**

Online higher education programs, in business and in other fields, cannot offer students the opportunity to live among themselves, interact face-to-face in the classroom, or engage in the traditional type of social and professional networking at college clubs that has been part of the storied residential college experience within the United States. The greatest barrier that online higher education business educators face is the fact that their programs cannot offer the types of residential-based, educational experiences that traditional colleges offer (Berge, 1998). The central tenet of advertising is to convince consumers that they not only want a particular product or lifestyle, but also that they need it (Armstrong, 2011).

This tenet applies to the higher education marketplace regarding the perceived need to attend a traditional college that many families and their college-age students share (Armstrong, 2011). This arguably forms the greatest barrier that online educators face because they cannot help provide their students with that residential-driven, educational experience (Armstrong, 2011). Online higher education business educators have yet to find a way of convincing students that online higher education business programs can provide crucial benefits that traditional programs currently lack. One benefit include the ability to obtain a cost-effective education in which students can have a practical appreciation for money by spending less on their education and possibly by setting aside funds that would have been spent on a traditional college education in order to have seed money for a post-collegiate start-up.

**Societal Perception Barrier**

Online higher education business educators are also acutely aware of the perception that students who pursue online programs are either divergent from the norm because they allegedly do not favor traditional higher education experiences, or because they are too old to be competitive forces in the workforce upon the conclusion of their studies (Kannry, 2014). Online business educators are aware of the perception that individuals who gravitate toward online business programs are perceived as less scholarly, less serious, and arguably less likely to succeed in the real world. Online higher education business educators must contend with the societal perception that
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their programs are still largely viewed as catering to a non-conformist community (Kannry, 2014; Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009).

This becomes problematic because it can adversely affect the ability of online business educators and the programs through which they educate students to secure the necessary resources to counteract this perception and effectively advertise to improve the branding of online business programs (Bolliger and Wasilik, 2009). Though there is a demand for alternatives to the traditional higher education model, the status quo is nevertheless still the norm, which makes it difficult for the majority of consumers to perceive online business programs in the same favorable light as traditional higher education institutions because there is a profound “resistance to change” (Berge, 1998).

Competition Barrier

Another major barrier that is experienced by online business educators who teach online revolves around the issue of competition. Educators lament the type of competition that exists among educators who teach online as opposed to those who teach in person at traditional programs because they view it as structurally unfair (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009). Educators in traditional universities and college have long acted as the gatekeepers of academia, with virtually unchecked power in higher education. Educators would attend college and then graduate school in order to earn their doctorates and be able to teach at the collegiate level.

The traditional educational setting became a forum in which not only education occurred, but also in which power dynamics were forged to differentiate professors from students, with the latter effectively being subservient to the former. This created a power imbalance in which traditional institutions could claim educational supremacy by creating educational hierarchies rather than by forging partnerships between professors and students so as to innovate (Christensen & Eyring, 2011). This has historically been the case, especially within the business program community as there has been a strain of elitism in which virtually anyone can pursue a business degree at the undergraduate or graduate levels, but only relatively few are likely to find considerable employment success upon graduation and only if they attend a prestigious program (Terwiesch & Ulrich, 2014).
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Professors and students at such institutions are therefore part of a community that has enough cumulative power to insulate themselves from outside competition. This is primarily the case for professors whose professional credentials are bolstered by the fact that there is a hierarchy among business schools and business programs (Terwiesch & Ulrich, 2014). Traditional business schools have been able to crowd out competition, including that which stems from online business programs (Terwiesch & Ulrich, 2014). It is important to mention that although unbalanced competition and elitism have long favored traditional schools and programs, educators who teach online business courses can, in fact, help their programs become more competitive and online business educators become more satisfied with their prospects when the institutions for which they work actively endeavor to treat previously held obstacles as opportunities for growth (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2014). The manner in which to create opportunities from obstacles primarily stems from how online business educators frame the academia-based dialogue about modern education in the twenty-first century, especially as it concerns creating space for online higher education business programs so that they not only proliferate, but also become viable, mainstream alternatives to the traditional higher education business model.

Academia Expectations and the Debate about the Viable Future of Online Higher Education Business Programs

To properly understand the current debate concerning the degree to which there is acceptance or reluctance about online higher education business programs, it is first necessary to highlight the traditional premise of education, and specifically a college education, which is that it is not a business but something between a well-cultivated art and science. This premise has merits because education, regardless of whether it is in business or another field, involves the cultivation of the human mind by harnessing intellectual curiosity and assisting students with developing skills that can best prepare them to make contributions to society upon the completion of their studies. This premise also misses a finer point of education which is that it is indeed a business. Higher education institutions may be for profit or nonprofit institutions, but the common connection they share is that all types of higher education institutions are marketplaces for ideas. While individuals may be driven, if possible, to pursue college majors that interest them and can be used to improve upon their talents, virtually all students attend college in order to become employable (or advancement) or to
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become skilled and self-employed. The dialogue that must occur within higher education settings must concede that education, including business education, merges idealism and pragmatism.

The demands for online business education programs continue to increase with greater accessibility although there is still a clear preference for traditional higher education options. However, online business educators can capitalize on current trends by arguing that the online platform is something that is already routinely used by companies who conduct business nationally and internationally (Hitt et al., 2012). Learning in a manner that is efficient and effective is good business and it is demonstrative of a new wave of thinking and interpersonal relations that is premised on experiential learning rather than traditional, classroom-based learning. (Hitt et al., 2012). Interdisciplinary arguments for online business education programs could include the fact that knowledge management, which is a central part of corporate strategy in the twenty-first century, requires quick and convenient communications and the transmission of data, something with which online business program educators and their students are already familiar (Hitt et al., 2012).

The issue of access has always been a hurdle in education prior to the information age (Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2005). There is an opportunity to reach out to many different individuals that was not possible before online learning occurred. There are new opportunities for learners “which are not dependent on being available at a particular time or place” (Cervero & Wilson, 2001, p. 190). Learning at home at a time that is convenient for the learner opens up a lot of doors for many people who otherwise could not obtain an education (Mason, 2006). This has opened up education for learners from all over the world, and even learners with disabilities who could not have taken part in education in other venues. New technologies can change distance learning in ways that could be highly beneficial for learners (Cervero & Wilson, 2001).

The cultural aspect of emerging instructional technologies could be considered an obstacle due to access issues and the relationship between technology and economic realities among social groups. There are many individuals who may not be able to use the new technologies due to funding and logistics issues. So, this new online technology will be helping a percentage of possible learners, but not 100% of all people. Not everyone is going to be able to have ready access to computers and the new technologies. Without changes in social policy to support less-advantaged people to have
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access to the best technologies, there can be discrimination in higher education online programs. People in underprivileged social classes can be excluded from technology courses (Cervero & Wilson, 2001).

The quick growth of online education in the age of globalization has led many people to question the validity of online learning. In studies conducted in the areas of communication, legal assistantship, and social work, there has been no significant difference shown in student learning between traditional education and online learning. Saunders & Weible (1999) agreed that the mode of educational delivery has no effect on student learning. There are other supporters of these ideas who have added that teachers can benefit from online education as well (Edwards, Cordray, & Dorbolo, 2000). Online education has become an excellent means of furthering university programs, especially to keep professionals up-to-date on current trends in their field. More interactive tools can be used in online education which could enhance performance.

The literature has highlighted the nature of the gap between those who support traditional education programs and those who support online education programs. Specifically within the business education field and how this affects the perceptions of online higher education business educators, particularly concerning their views on how to improve the standing of their programs. Two overarching themes that have been discussed have been that while there are formidable barriers that have prevented online higher education business programs from gaining the same respect and popularity as traditional higher education business programs, there are also available opportunities for online higher education business educators to advocate more forcefully on behalf of their institutions and programs and demonstrate to prospective students the worth of their programs.

Discussion:

Table 1 displays a hierarchical cluster analysis by placing the survey items into groups or clusters based on how similar they are. Survey items have been placed the survey items into the resulting clusters on the frequency table and created headings for each of the clusters. Some variables were placed into different categories in the interest of best fit. The same cluster names as the names for the identified barriers gained from a review of the literature. Utilizing this approach, the results of the survey and of the literature were defined into common variables between the two methods. To compare data results, SPSS was used for descriptive statistics in Table 1. After the survey and reminders were sent, 98 participants responded to the
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survey. 95 respondents responded to all questions, and three respondents declined to answer certain purely text questions. The results obtained from the survey are used to gain greater insight and maximize the applicability of the study’s findings with no objective to establish causal or correlation relationships.

Table 1
Hierarchical Cluster Analysis ($N = 98$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey item</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I consider faculty with credentials from Residential/ traditional education programs more elite than faculty from primarily Online education programs.</td>
<td>29.41</td>
<td>23.53</td>
<td>17.65</td>
<td>29.41</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individuals who gravitate toward online business programs are perceived as less scholarly (or less serious, and arguably less likely to succeed in the real world).</td>
<td>17.65</td>
<td>47.06</td>
<td>5.88</td>
<td>17.65</td>
<td>11.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online courses have the same student engagement opportunities as residential courses</td>
<td>5.88</td>
<td>23.53</td>
<td>17.56</td>
<td>47.06</td>
<td>5.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Terminal degree from an Online higher education program/institution is second-rate to Traditional higher education.</td>
<td>17.65</td>
<td>29.41</td>
<td>29.41</td>
<td>17.65</td>
<td>5.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social and networking activities can be accomplished for online higher education programs the same as residential/traditional programs. (Interaction abilities, engagement, professional networking, etc)</td>
<td>5.88</td>
<td>11.76</td>
<td>17.65</td>
<td>47.06</td>
<td>17.65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What are your biggest concerns of Online education?

Lack of Technology | 17.65 | 35.29 | 17.65 | 17.65 | 11.76
### Business Educators Perceived Barriers Regarding Online Higher Education Modality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lack of highly qualified faculty</th>
<th>17.65</th>
<th>41.18</th>
<th>29.41</th>
<th>11.76</th>
<th>0.00</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of adequate social engagement</td>
<td>11.76</td>
<td>41.18</td>
<td>35.29</td>
<td>11.76</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey item</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of faculty training</td>
<td>23.53</td>
<td>58.82</td>
<td>11.76</td>
<td>5.88</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equivalent education standards</td>
<td>47.06</td>
<td>29.41</td>
<td>11.76</td>
<td>11.76</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of employer acceptability</td>
<td>41.18</td>
<td>35.29</td>
<td>11.76</td>
<td>5.88</td>
<td>5.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less scholarly</td>
<td>23.53</td>
<td>29.41</td>
<td>29.41</td>
<td>11.76</td>
<td>5.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too much Technology</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>29.41</td>
<td>29.41</td>
<td>11.76</td>
<td>29.41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

**Identified Themes and Supporting Statements**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Participants’ supporting statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| In your perception what are current barriers regarding online education programs? | “The way society sees the programs. They are not highly respected as traditional programs and students are concern that jobs after school is limited.”  
“The reputation as being less scholarly to traditional programs and technology. Online navigations are simply too technical for a good number of people.”  
“Stigma due to diploma mills and for-profit mentality of gauging student’s price wise and giving a mediocre college experience. Online faculties are then caught up as contributing to the outcome.”  
“Knowledge and acceptance of graduates from online programs.”  
“Over-emphasis of customer satisfaction over academic integrity.” |
| Describe training classes and professional development you have obtained concerning online education programs? | “Tutorials that you read and click through.”  
“One thing I did notice all of the students were able to take the knowledge and give it to somebody else.”  
“2000 Cardean University facilitator training. 2011 Benedictine University facilitator training. 2014” |
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| facilitator training. 4 years of practical experience delivering online education.” |
| “Online certificates for training. 5 faculty training courses and monthly professional development“ |
| “BlackBoard, D2l/Brightspace, Angel, Moodle, and many proprietary platforms. Also trained on and used GoToMeeting, Citrix, Adobe Connect, etc.” |

| The top 5 things I would like to see in Online higher education are: |
| Top Choice: “Balance quality of education standards for students to ease of participation as a deliverable by the institution.” 42% |
| “Parody measurements against traditional schools” 22% |
| “More institution support for professional development” 22% |
| “More qualified peers (faculty and administrators)” 12% |
| Note- 1% other non-significant and 1% unanswered |
| 2nd Choice: “Increased use of technology to personalize student participation with each other and faculty.” 47% |
| “More tenure type employment and less reliance on part time instructors” 44% |
| “Focus on what the student needs to learn and less on how they learn” 4% |
| Note- 5% unanswered |

| Do you have any additional thoughts you would like to share regarding of potential barriers in online business education programs? |
| “Online institutions should strive to make sure their quality and engagement is on par with traditional universities. More details and academic programs in the sciences and math area would strengthen this aspect.” |
| “Legitimate universities need to do more to gain accreditation so that graduates don't have to constantly be fearing their degrees not being |
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Conclusion:

Online higher education business program educators, because of their professional experience, are acutely aware that the barriers they face are entrenched by long-held beliefs about the merits and purposes of obtaining a college education. The literature demonstrates there are several key barriers that online higher education business educators face. These barriers include status quo, residential-based, societal perception, and competition.

Specifically, the first five questions seek to understand perceived differences in online higher education business programs versus traditional higher education institutions.

The first question focuses on perceptions about faculty credentials in an online versus a residential/traditional institution. Despite societal perceptions that residential/traditional education programs offer better business programs because of faculty with more esteemed credentials; survey results relative to perceptions about faculty credentials, reveals approximately 53% of respondents do not support the notion that faculty with credentials from residential/ traditional education programs are more elite than faculty from online education programs.

Questions two, three and five focus on perceptions about online business students and whether or not they are perceived as less scholarly, and whether or not online learning experiences provide the same level of engagement and networking opportunities as a traditional business education program. Overall, according to the participants, perceptions that online learners are less scholarly was not supported; 65% of responses did not support the notion that online learners were less scholarly than students who attend a program at a traditional higher education institution. Likewise, nearly 53% of responses indicate that students in an online program have the same student engagement opportunities as residential courses and approximately 65% of responses reveal the perception that social/networking activities can be accomplished for online higher education programs the same as residential/traditional programs.

Question four seeks to understand perceptions about the value of a terminal degree earned online compared to the value of a terminal degree earned at a traditional education institution. While nearly 30% of the respondents...
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selected ‘neutral’ as a response, nearly 47% of the responses do not perceive online education as ‘second rate’ in comparison to a terminal degree earned via a residential/traditional institution.

Overall, the survey data supports the literature in terms of perceived barriers in categories of status quo and competitive barriers. When asked about perceived barriers in online education – respondents identified a perceived social stigma related to online education, as well as concerns about reputation and quality of online programs.

When asked about the biggest concerns of Online education, two areas stand out including perceptions about equivalency in education standards and employer acceptability of potential employee candidates who earned a degree online. Additional research to examine online business education standards in comparison to traditional business education standards in a traditional higher education institution is merited. Likewise, further research on employer perceptions about business credentials earned through an online higher education program is warranted.

When asked to describe training classes and professional development relative to online education programs, responses were limited. Based on the responses submitted, and the focus on tutorials and meeting platforms, it appears professional development for online faculty as an area for expansion.

In contrast to the literature, the data collected via the survey reveals little support for the barrier category identified as “residential-based”. Survey questions as they relate to the residential-based barrier could be further examined.

The literature also suggests that online higher education business educators and business professionals are aware of the fact that online programs can foster experiential learning and can teach prospective students about how twenty-first century businesses operate. It appears that faculty perceptions of the value, legitimacy, and learning outcomes of online education has not evolved as quickly as the demand for online course offerings. Ultimately this appears to indicate that online higher education business educators and business professionals agree on the merits and benefits of such online programs, however, further research is needed to identify and classify barriers that could further the advancement of the modality.
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