

From Artist to Technician: The Emergence and Institutionalization of the On-line Professor

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Abstract

Religious organizations and universities are said to be the oldest and most enduring institutions in society today. Given their rich history and embeddedness, they are also highly resistant to change; yet, they can and do change. Recently, institutional theorists have turned their attention to the role of professions as sites of institutional conflict, and drivers of organizational and institutional change (Greenwood, Suddaby & Hinings, 2002). The current case involves an examination of the emergence of a new sub-profession – the on-line professor – and explores issues of change that cut across different levels of analysis ranging from the individual to the institutional.

Using introspective narrative inquiry, supported by document analysis, and archival data, this paper traces the development of an on-line education program over a six year period, and explores the experiences of a contract professor teaching in the program during the period of study. A two-pronged approach is utilized to give analytical attention to the relationship between the individual and the organization – a relationship that is often overlooked in institutional research (Dacin, Goldstein & Scott, 2002; Zilber, 2002). At the organizational level, significant change occurred over the six year period of study as a new on-line academic program was developed, elaborated, and institutionalized. These changes are documented and discussed.

At the individual level, analysis focuses on the personal reactions, behavioral responses, and coping mechanisms evoked by the various changes in the organizational strategy, programs and policies. Identity theory is utilized as a basis for organizing and analyzing individual thoughts and actions (Ibarra, 1999; Ashforth, 2001). The analysis reveals that as the program was developed and elaborated, standardization, formalization and administrative control increased, while individual autonomy and academic freedom diminished. The analysis suggests that the role of the professor became less dependent on subject matter knowledge and experience and more reliant on technical skills, familiarity with and adherence to policies and procedures, and timely responses to student inquiries.

Research using institutional theory as its foundation has typically viewed the elaboration of new professions as a collective step forward as standardization and the implementation of accountability systems are viewed as ways to increase quality and control. In the present case, it appears that the changes experienced were not necessarily positive for the students, the

professors or the university and that the emergence of a new profession or sub-profession - the on-line professor - may have in fact led to in a reduction in quality. These and other issues are explored in the paper, and a theoretical model is developed that illustrates the balance and tension of interests for professors, students, and the university, as the educational delivery model became more standardized, technical and rule-based. Implications for other institutions and professions are considered, and an agenda for further research is proposed.