

# Powerful or Powerless? Chief Online Education Officers' Legitimate Power over Online Program Quality at U.S. Higher-Education Institutions

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## Introduction

- Online education enrollments are climbing while overall higher-education enrollments are waning, confirming the fact that online education is mainstream and mission critical (Allen and Seaman, 2004; Allen, Seaman, Poulin, and Straut, 2016).
- The highest role on the organizational chart to focus on online education is that of the Chief Online Education Officer or COEO in brief (Fredericksen, February 2017; Pedersen, 2017).
- There is little known about COEOs:
  - A team of South Carolinians reviewed the literature and interviewed a number of leaders with the aim to understand COEOs' competencies, roles, and trajectories (Herron, Lashley, Salley, and Shaw, 2016).
  - A national study explored the views of 820 COEOs on the current state of online-education leadership in the United States (Fredericksen, June 2017).
  - Another national study painted the landscape of online education from the point of view of over 100 COEOs (Legon and Garrett, 2017).
- There is a gap in the higher-education leadership literature regarding the COEO's relationship to quality assurance in online-education programs.

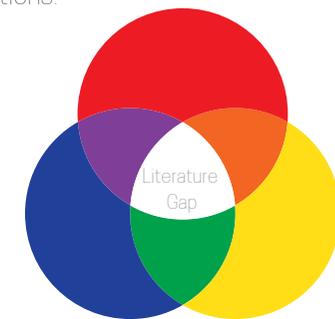
## Study Rationale

- The need for quality assurance in higher education is increasingly evident as federal regulations outweigh public expectations of speed and simplicity, the cost of education and student debt are on the rise, and graduation rates are plummeting (Fogarty, 2017).
- The COEO role should have power over the institution's mission, accreditation, resources, technology, curriculum, student needs, faculty needs, and—last but not least—quality assurance (Legon and Garrett, 2017).
- This study will provide information that will hopefully show which facets contribute to the COEO's authority to be able to influence online program quality assurance.

## Research Problem

- While course and program-level quality standards abound, some institutions are more successful than others at assuring the quality of online education. What forces are at play?
- As shown in Fig. 1, the gap in the literature lies at the intersection of the Chief Online Education Officer role, the COEO's legitimate power over online-program quality assurance efforts, and the unique environment of each COEO's institution.

- This study endeavors to depict the power landscape of Chief Online Education Officers and, in particular, their legitimate power over the process of assuring the quality of online programs at their institutions.



- The COEO Role in Higher-Education Institutions
- COEOs' Legitimate Power over Online Program Quality Assurance
- The Unique Environment of Each COEOs' Institution

Figure 1: Gap in the Chief Online Education Officer Literature

## Contribution

With this information:

- senior-most academic leadership can make job description, hiring, and performance-assessment decisions for the COEO role
- COEOs themselves could use this information to secure more buy-in, resources, and authority from their higher-ups, in order to increase their ability to assure online-program quality at their

institution (by empowering front-line employees in the administrative, faculty, and staff ranks with whatever may be necessary for them to create and maintain quality in online-education programming)

- those working under the leadership of COEOs can use this information to understand how to obtain support in their online program's quality-assurance efforts
- external stakeholders can use the information in this study to get a glimpse into the decision-making of COEOs and this role's ability to influence online programmatic quality.

## Research Questions and Hypotheses

The following questions guide the study:

**RQ1:** What is the correlation between the *Online Learning Consortium (OLC) Quality Scorecard for the Administration on Online Programs* self-assessment results and the COEOs' perceived legitimate power over each category of the OLC Quality Scorecard?

**H1.0:** There is no correlation between the OLC Quality Scorecard self-assessment results and the COEOs' perceived legitimate power over each Scorecard category.

**H1.1:** There is negative correlation between the OLC Quality Scorecard self-assessment results and the COEOs' perceived legitimate power over each Scorecard category.

**H1.2:** There is positive correlation between the OLC Quality Scorecard self-assessment results and the COEOs' perceived legitimate power over each Scorecard category.

**RQ2:** What environmental factors boost or limit the COEOs' ability to assure online-program quality at their institution?

## Key Theory

- The study is conceptually built on contingency theory, which purports that there is no ideal way of managing organizations since organizational designs are environment-dependent—hence the name of the theory.
- The situational or contingency approach views organizations as systems interconnected with their environment; the more effectively the organization adapts to its environment (or the changes thereof), the more successful it is (Hellriegel and Slocum, 1973).

## Methodology

The study employs an explanatory, sequential, mixed-methods research design.

**Phase 1: Quantitative:** The anonymous and confidential Qualtrics survey is comprised of three sections

- **Section 1:** collects environmental information about the participants' role and characteristics.
- **Section 2:** takes participants through subsections (each covering one of the nine aspects of the *OLC Quality Scorecard for the Administration of Online Programs*—OLC Quality Scorecard for short) and designates two parallel sets of scores:

**Score Set 1:** The self-assessed overall institutional score for the administration of online programs as measured by the OLC Quality Scorecard.

**Score Set 2:** The COEO's perceived legitimate power over each Scorecard category, on the following scale:

- 0: no legitimate power
- 1: can make recommendations
- 2: full legitimate power.

- **Section 3:** a link participants can choose to follow to reach a separate survey through which to share their contact information if they are willing to participate in a 30-minute phone interview within 30 days.
- **Giveaway 1:** All participants in the quantitative portion of the study (regardless of participation in Section 3), are entered in a drawing to win one OLC workshop voucher, to be used within a year by the COEO or anyone at the respective institution.

**Phase 2: Qualitative:** Participants in this confidential second phase are interviewed to tease out details, as follows:

- **Part 1:** COEO participants are asked to talk about areas in which they have *the least* and *the most* legitimate power over online-program quality assurance at their institution.
- **Part 2:** COEO participants are asked to speak to factors in their institution's environment that *boost* or *limit* their legitimate power to assure online programming quality.
- **Giveaway 2:** All participants in the qualitative portion of the study are entered in a drawing to win one OLC professional membership, to be used by the COEO or anyone at the respective institution. This membership offers access to the *OLC Quality Scorecard for the Administration of Online Programs* as well as deep discounts on conferences, workshops, and much more.

## Participants

- **Population:** Chief Online Education Officers (COEOs) in higher-education institutions across the United States of America constitute the population for this study.

- **Characteristics:** COEOs lead online-education efforts at public or private, 2- or 4-year institutions in the nation and typically report to the Provost or Chief Online Academic Officer (Legon and Garrett, 2017).

**Sampling:** This study will invite participation from a subset of the population that is captured through the *Changing Landscape of Online Education (CHLOE)* survey.

- CHLOE was administered electronically in Summer 2017 by Quality Matters and Eduventures.
- CHLOE limits its scope to COEOs who self-identify as “the most senior person responsible for online learning” at their institution (Legon and Garrett, 2017, p. 47).
- CHLOE survey respondents were given the opportunity to opt into being contacted about participating in future research studies to help advance the quality of online education.
- CHLOE investigators provided the principal investigator with the names and contact of the 65 COEOs that opted in.
- **Participation in Phase 1, Survey:** Upon IRB approval to conduct this study, all COEOs whose contact was provided by the CHLOE investigators will receive an email invitation to participate in this study.
- **Participation in Phase 2, Interview:** Of the respondents that are willing to participate in the qualitative portion of the study, the principal investigator will invite a minimum of six COEOs to participate in a one-on-one phone interview.

## Data Analysis

- The investigator will use the Pearson correlation (r) formula to analyze data from **Phase 1: Quantitative:**
  - **Section 2** of the survey, to establish the presence (and strength) or absence of correlation between *quality of online-program administration* and *COEO power*.
  - **Section 1** of the survey, to establish the presence (and strength) or absence of correlation between *environmental information* and *COEO power over online-program quality assurance*.
- Once the interview audio files are transcribed, coding will be used to evaluate the transcripts and identify the prevalent themes from **Phase 2: Qualitative**, to establish what factors are perceived to *boost* or *limit* the COEOs’ power over quality assurance.

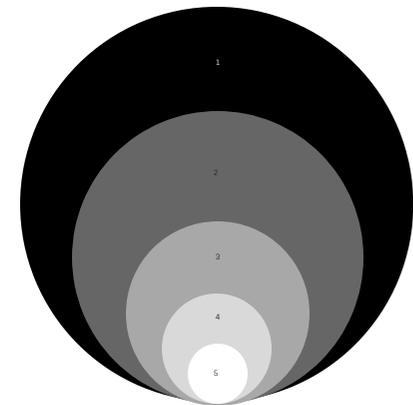
## Reliability and Validity

- The investigator will pilot the study with at least two COEOs that are not among the study sample, to refine questions and ensure their reliability and validity.
  - \* **Score Set 1** of **Phase 1: Quantitative, Section 2** is comprised of the *OLC Quality Scorecard for the Administration of Online Programs*, an instrument that has already been validated as part of the Delphi study from which it originates (Shelton, 2010).

- To obtain evidence of validity, the investigator will collect evidence based on content, internal structure, and relations to other variables (Johnson and Christensen, 2017).

## Limitations

- **Sample Representativeness:** As shown in Fig. 2, this study sampled from a subset of a subset of a number that cannot be determined. Little is known about the size of the entire COEO population in the United States (Herron, Lashley, Salley, and Shaw, 2016; Fredericksen, June 2017; Legon and Garrett, 2017). It is therefore hard to say how representative this study’s sample is to the larger population.



- 1 The entire COEO population in the United States.
- 2 Those COEOs who took the CHLOE survey.
- 3 Took CHLOE and agreed to participate in future research.
- 4 Those who agreed to participate in Phase 1 of this study.
- 5 Those who agreed to participate in Phase 2 of this study.

Figure 2: Study Sample vs. Unknown Population

- **Sample Size** The 65 potential participants represent 7.9% of the 820 known COEOs (Fredericksen, June 2017).
- **COEO Bias** Since COEOs describe their role in online-program quality assurance in isolation (i.e., their superiors and direct reports do not provide their perspectives on the matter), the COEOs' point of view might be biased.

### Target Publication

- Once the study is completed, the investigator intends to publish the manuscript in the *Online Learning Journal (OLJ)*.
- *OLJ* is the journal of the Online Learning Consortium (OLC), "the leading professional organization devoted to advancing the quality of online learning worldwide" (OLC, 2015).

### Rationale for Publication Choice

- *OLJ* promotes the development and dissemination of new knowledge at the intersection of pedagogy, emerging technology, policy, and practice in online environments" and its mission is to "provide scholars, practitioners, administrators, and policy makers in online education with knowledge about the very best research in online learning" (OLC, 2015).
- Through its double-blind peer review, systematic data-support requirement, and acceptance rate of 25%, the journal aims to provide "the very best research in online learning" (OLC, 2017a).
- The journal is indexed in the EBSCO and ERIC databases, among others, and it is indexed in the Directory of Open Access Journals, a directory

currently encompassing 9,426 journals representing 125 countries (OLC, 2017a; DOAJ, 2017).

- This study would fit in with several topics of interest to the *OLJ* publication, namely "how online environments amplify, shape, and constrain teaching and learning", "analysis of large data sets in understanding online education processes", "critical reviews of thematic areas", and especially "papers useful to administrators" (OLC, 2017a).
- Additionally, the *OLJ* is the publication that Dr. Eric Fredericksen chose to share the results of his study of online education institutional leaders (Legon, Garrett, and Frederickson, 2017).
- A final reason for targeting this particular publication is that it functions under the auspices of the Online Learning Consortium whose proprietary Scorecard is used in this study.
- A possible preface to the manuscripts' publication could be an in-progress talk or poster at the annual Online Learning Consortium Accelerate conference, which encourages graduate student presentations of in-progress work (OLC, 2017b).

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## Contact

For information about this study, contact the primary investigator, Georgianna Laws, M.Ed., at [glaws1@live.maryville.edu](mailto:glaws1@live.maryville.edu).

