



## Conflicted: Faculty and Online Education, 2012

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By [Steve Kolowich](#)



([http://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server\\_files/styles/large/public/IHE\\_cover-final\\_0.jpg](http://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server_files/styles/large/public/IHE_cover-final_0.jpg))

Faculty members are far less excited by, and more fearful of, the recent growth of online education than are academic technology administrators, according to a new study by *Inside Higher Ed* and the Babson Survey Research Group.

But professors are hardly the luddites many still assume them to be. Nearly half of the 4,564 faculty members surveyed, three-quarters of whom are full-time professors, said the rise of online education excites them more than it frightens them. And while more than two-thirds of instructors said they believe that students currently learn less in online courses than they do in the classroom, other findings suggest that their estimation of online education quality stands to rise as the technology improves and more professors get firsthand experience with the medium.

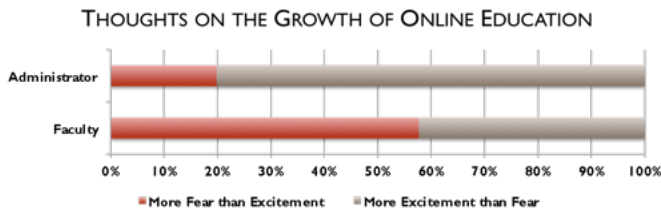
For example, 60 percent of professors at institutions that offer online courses have recommended one to a student or advisee -- a proportion that holds true even among tenured and long-serving faculty members.

The study was based on a pair of related surveys about online education, co-designed by *Inside Higher Ed* and administered and analyzed by the [Babson Survey Research Group](http://www.babson.edu/Academics/centers/blank-center/global-research/Pages/babson-survey-research-group.aspx), which has studied online education for more than a decade. The surveys garnered responses from representative samples of 4,564 faculty members (of about 60,000 who were sent invitations to participate) and 591 academic technology administrators, from all types of institution. The surveys asked a wide range of questions of both groups about their perceptions of online quality, institutional support and training in instructional technology, and compensation, among other things. The response rates for both surveys were below 10 percent.

A PDF copy of the study report can be [downloaded here](http://babson.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_d56joeL1tDzZY7G). To read the text of the report, [click here](http://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server_files/survey/conflicted.html).

The surveys asked an overarching question intentionally designed to cut through all the hemming and hawing to faculty members' core attitudes about the outlook for higher education, and its purveyors, in an inexorably online world: On balance, does the growth of online education excite or frighten you?

A solid majority of faculty members (58 percent) described themselves as filled more with fear than with excitement, although there were some differences based on gender, type of institution, and the like (see charts in the accompanying report). Meanwhile, academic technology administrators -- defined as "individuals with responsibility for some aspect of academic technology at their institutions" -- were overwhelmingly enthused; 80 percent said the online boom excited more than frightened them.



This was not the only case in which the administrative perspective deviated optimistically from the faculty one. Asked whether their institutions were "pushing too much online," nearly 30 percent of faculty respondents agreed, and another 30 percent declined to disagree, giving a neutral response. Academic administrators overwhelmingly disagreed, at a rate of 79 percent. Administrators also tended to believe that their institutions were paying their online instructors fairly, whereas most faculty members either disagreed or opted not to weigh in.

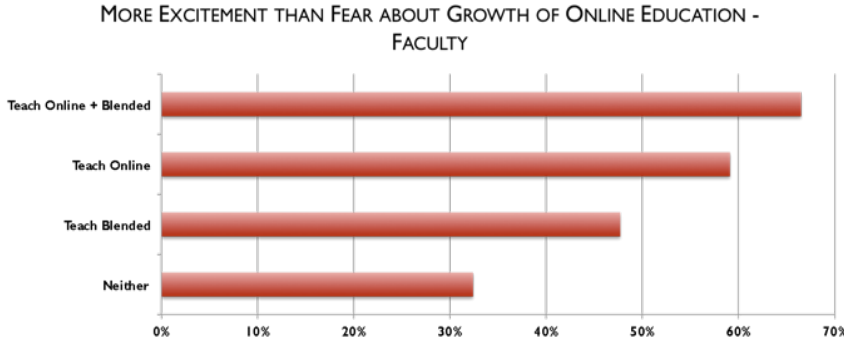
The faculty and administrative respondents were in closer agreement on how well their institutions do to recognize and reward online teaching. Both groups generally said that their institutions "respect teaching with technology (in person or online) in tenure and promotion decision" -- only 18 percent of faculty and 17 percent of administrators disagreed with that statement (although more faculty opted for a "neutral" stance instead of agreeing outright). And professors and administrators held similarly mixed views on whether their institutions "have a fair system of rewarding

contributions made to digital pedagogy.”

**The Impact of Exposure**

The dubiousness among faculty members may be attributable, in part, to the makeup of the sample. About 75 percent of the respondents were full-time faculty members, many of whose teaching careers predate the online boom. And 61 percent of them were not teaching a fully online or blended course at the time of the survey.

Those who were teaching online at the time of the survey, meanwhile, seemed to hold online education in higher esteem than their classroom-bound colleagues. And the greater the proportion of their teaching that occurs online, the more optimistic they are.



Nearly 70 percent of faculty members who taught only in the classroom said they feared the online boom. Those who taught a blended course (where between 20 and 80 percent of the content is delivered online) feared the boom at a rate of 52 percent.

The majority of those who taught a fully online course, meanwhile, were more excited than fearful, at a 59 to 41 percent rate. Faculty members who taught both an online and a blended course were the biggest boosters of all, with 67 percent saying they were more excited than fearful.

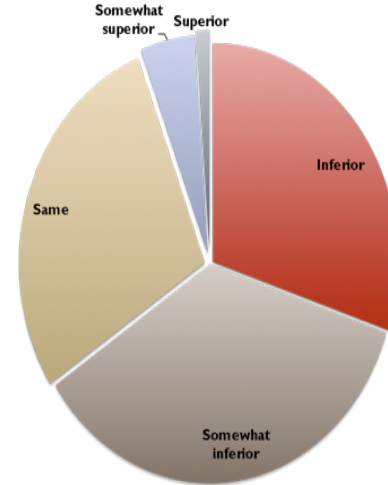
Professors who were teaching online at the time of the survey also had a more positive estimation of the effectiveness of online instruction relative to the face-to-face kind.

Over all, the faculty view of online quality was bleak, with 66 percent of respondents saying learning outcomes are inferior compared to traditional courses, and only 6 percent saying online is superior. “The level of concern about learning outcomes among faculty members is far greater than either the previously surveyed chief academic officers or the academic technology administrators,” write Jeff Seaman and I. Elaine Allen, the co-directors of the Babson Survey Research Group, in the report. The pair has conducted surveys of each group in recent years.

Even among faculty members who teach online, 39 percent say online courses produce inferior learning outcomes. (Nearly half said online and traditional courses produced equivalent outcomes.) That is still a high rate of dubiousness for a group with “the most vested interest in online education,” write Seaman and Allen. But the link between online teaching and faith in the medium’s effectiveness is nevertheless strong.

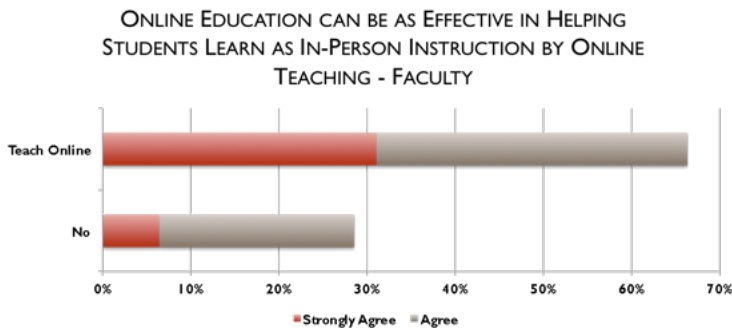
That pattern extends to the faculty members’ belief in the potential of online education. The question about the promise of online learning brought out the most dramatic difference between professors who teach online and those who don’t. Asked whether online education *can be* as effective as the face-to-face kind, only 29 percent of respondents who did not teach online said it can. But among those who do teach online, 66 percent said online is capable of matching face-to-face instruction on learning outcomes.

LEARNING OUTCOMES IN AN ONLINE COURSE COMPARED TO FACE-TO-FACE - FACULTY



Seaman and Allen warn against reading too much causality into the correlation between exposure to online instruction and the belief in its promise. “What we are observing can be a self-selection effect,” they write. “. . . [T]hose faculty with more positive views of online education are more likely to volunteer for such teaching assignments, and are more likely to be selected for such assignments by academic administrators.”

In other words, it is unclear whether the enthusiastic faculty members in the survey believe in the effectiveness of online education because they teach online, or vice versa. Only a small portion of the faculty respondents were from for-profit institutions, where instructors have little say in decisions about technology. Because most of the respondents were full-time faculty at nonprofit institutions, it stands to reason that many of the 29 percent who taught either blended or fully online courses did so voluntarily -- a leap that might have been based on pre-existing optimism.



That optimism did not extend to online education offered by for-profit institutions, about which the faculty respondents (few of whom teach at for-profits) possess a transcendent skepticism. Nearly 80 percent of all faculty said they were concerned about the quality of online instruction at for-profit universities, with only about 7 percent actively defending those institutions. Part-time instructors and those with online teaching experience were less harsh in their assessments of for-profits, but not by much. Administrators viewed for-profits less negatively, but two-thirds of them still said they were concerned about the quality of online instruction there.

One small subgroup of the faculty respondents who were markedly more excited about the growth of online education were adjuncts. Part-time instructors were still pretty evenly divided on the excitement/fear question, but a slim majority (52 percent) said they were excited. By contrast, 39 percent of full-time professors were excited. Instructors at two-year institutions are more excited about the growth of online education than are their colleagues at four-year institutions, by rates of 49 percent to 40 percent, perhaps because two-year colleges tend to rely more on adjuncts.

Jack Longmate, an adjunct professor of English at Olympic College, says that adjuncts "could very well see online instruction as a source of new teaching opportunities and view it positively, and it could likely reflect the felt need by adjuncts for additional work." The relative apprehension of full-timers might also be explained by self-interest, says Longmate, who is a member of the board of New Faculty Majority, an adjunct advocacy group.

The full-time professors were, however, more positive about the potential of online education than they were about its current effectiveness. About 40 percent said online learning has the potential to match classroom learning, with another 14 percent saying they held a neutral opinion, putting the naysayers under 50 percent -- not a home run in the eyes of online advocates, but not a strikeout either. When contemplating the potential of online education, "The overall pattern for faculty members is still more negative than positive, but not nearly as negative as their responses on the quality of learning outcomes," write Seaman and Allen.

As for the quality of their own outcomes from participating in online education, with respect to compensation and career advancement, professors held mixed opinions. About 30 percent of faculty respondents believe their institutions pay fairly for online teaching, with 31 percent disagreeing and the rest remaining neutral. The professors were similarly mixed on the question of whether their institution properly rewards "contributions made to digital pedagogy," with slightly more disagreeing than agreeing. And they were positive, over all, about whether their institutions had fair systems for recognizing teaching with technology (not just online) when it comes to promotion and tenure reviews, with only 19 percent disagreeing.

Administrators held somewhat more positive views on their institutions' incentive structures for online teaching. The greatest difference was on the subject of pay, with 58 percent of administrators submitting that their institutions compensate online instructors fairly (nearly twice as high as the proportion of instructors who believe this to be true). But the differences between faculty and administrators on the other types of recognition were smaller. That's a good sign, says Matthew Gold, an assistant professor of English at the New York City College of Technology, part of the City University of New York.

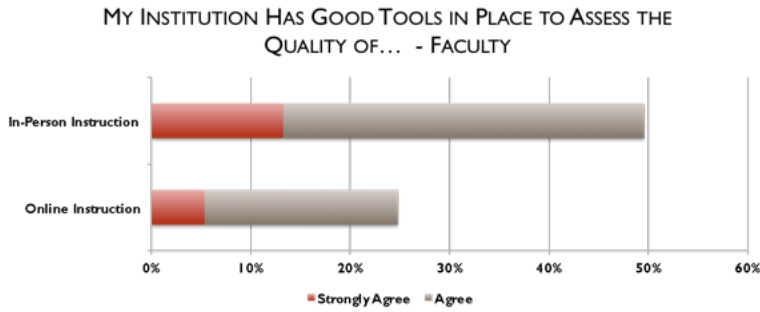
"These numbers are not as bad as they might have been," says Gold, who advises the provost of CUNY's Graduate Center on digital initiatives.

"It's encouraging and a bit surprising to hear that almost 50 percent of the faculty members surveyed believe that their institutional evaluation processes reward teaching with technology," he said. "Given the lip service often paid to teaching and pedagogy in tenure and promotion processes, this is something to build on."

**Instincts and Data**

While many faculty respondents held strong opinions on the quality -- and potential quality -- of online education, only 25 percent agreed that their institutions "have good tools in place to assess the quality of online instruction." By contrast, 50 percent believed their institutions have good tools in place to assess the quality of in-person instruction (with only 28 percent actively disagreeing).

**About This Study**  
 "Conflicted: Faculty and Online Education, 2012" is a joint project of *Inside Higher Ed* and the Babson Survey Research Group. It is designed to inject the voice of the faculty into the growing national discussion about online education. [Download a copy of the report here](http://babson.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_d56joeL1tDzZY7G) ([http://babson.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV\\_d56joeL1tDzZY7G](http://babson.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_d56joeL1tDzZY7G)).  
 The study was made possible in part with the financial support of CourseSmart, Deltak, Pearson and Sonic Foundry.  
 All decisions about the nature and wording of the surveys were made by BSRG and *Inside Higher Ed*.



This might strike some as odd given the scarcity of analytical measuring sticks for quality in classroom instruction, says Curtis Bonk, a professor of education at Indiana University who teaches courses and workshops to faculty about online teaching. The “tools” for evaluating in-person instruction are limited to student feedback, peer observation and adherence to checklists supplied by curriculum departments, says Bonk. Meanwhile, online courses tend to generate more data from which instructors and their overseers can glean quantitative insights on student engagement and the degree to which a professor has succeeded in meeting specific learning objectives.

Administrators seemed more confident that their institutions were indeed supplying their online instructors with good quality-assessment tools; more than 50 percent of administrators believed their institutions had such tools in place, compared to 25 percent of faculty members.

That disconnect might be due to a lack of awareness or training, says Bonk. “Administrators might be aware of new programs for quality assessment systems that have recently been put in place, or are about to be, that faculty have not heard about,” he says. “They might be proposing innovative online courses and programs and are putting in place assessment systems and tools” of which faculty have not yet been apprised.

But there is a larger confounding variable at play as well, he says: the lack of agreement on what constitutes “tools” or, for that matter, “quality.” A more in-depth research project -- albeit a more tedious one, perhaps prohibitively so -- would ask faculty and administrators to list what they consider to be the available “tools” for assessing instructional quality in online and face-to-face courses; and then evaluate how “good” each tool is according to a standard rubric.

Such an exercise would not necessarily help faculty members and administrators understand whether online education is “better” or “worse” than the traditional kind, says Bonk. But it might just help each understand more precisely what the other believes about online education, and why.

While the data in the survey provide a sense of general attitudes toward online education, broad questions about the quality of “online” and “classroom” education fail to bring out the nuance that comes with making crucial distinctions within those categories, says Hank Reichman, professor emeritus of history at California State University at East Bay and a first vice president of the American Association of University Professors. Online and classroom education comes in many forms, some of which are fair to compare side-by-side and others of which are not, he says.

“In-person instruction takes a wide variety of forms,” wrote Reichman in an e-mail. “An online class of 30 students may well be more effective than a lecture class of 300. But if we compare a similar online class to a small discussion seminar, or if we compare a ‘live’ lab with an online one, the comparison is quite different.”

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