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A Vision Among Challenges: Lessons About Online Teaching From The First Online Master's Degree in Digital Sociology

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Introduction

According to data from an American Sociological Association survey, just half of all degree-granting sociology departments in the academic year 2012-2013 offered at least one “distance learning course in sociology” (Spalter-Roth, Van Vooren & Kisielewski, 2013). Two years after this report was released, Virginia Commonwealth University’s Department of Sociology (VCU SOCY) launched the first online master’s of science degree in digital sociology in a climate where distance learning could not yet be considered hegemonic in U.S. sociology programs. Digital Sociology, for the purposes of this research, is both the study of how people are using digital technologies and how relationships are increasingly digitized with all the implications and criticisms involved in a sub-discipline (Lupton, 2015). In launching the program, VCU SOCY attended to several documented trends in online learning at sociology departments. First, the degree program exists in the same “market model” (Brint, Proctor, Murphy, Hanneman, 2012) mentioned in the ASA report. This a macro context that is shaping all manner of educational expansion and stratification. This market model attaches various forms of status (Tuchman, 2009) and economic resources to creating revenue-generating degree programs. Second, the degree program is part of a trend in model diversification that aims to serve the new “traditional” college student, i.e. not a straight-from-high-school undergraduate student. By 2014, the majority of all college students were what we would have once called “non-traditional”, making schedule flexibility the new norm for colleges that want to grow enrollment, prestige or market share. Third, this new master’s of science program was responding to growing disciplinary interest in digitally-mediated societies and social processes. In this paper we explore how these three trends impacted the design and implementation of online teaching in an online graduate sociology program. We find that market models incentivize departments and faculty to develop online courses but resource uptake is uneven. We also find uneven success with online educational materials and tools when the focus is on graduate students as opposed to undergraduate students. And, we find that new online teaching models might be best suited for bleeding edge disciplinary innovations because the union of new models of teaching and new models of thinking have natural synergies.

Origins of SOCY Online: The Original Vision and Lessons Learned

Around 2011, as a part of the growing entrepreneurial emphasis in university budgeting processes across the country (Brint et al., 2012; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004; Tuchman, 2009), the president of Virginia Commonwealth University used a revenue based program called the “Entrepreneurial Program Tuition” program

(EPT) to incentivize the development of degree programs offered completely online. This call was met with mixed reviews; some units, particularly those in professional fields embraced the call while others, particularly in the liberal arts were more skeptical. At the time, Sociology at VCU (henceforth, VCU SOCY) was a small program inside a larger professional school which was itself transitioning out of the College of Humanities and Sciences consisting of only two tenured faculty, two junior faculty and a cadre of temporary, part time and/or adjunct faculty. In order to remain at the core of the university's liberal arts curriculum, a position highly valued by all Sociology faculty, the faculty elected to leave the professional school, remain in the College and reestablish itself as a department. The greatest concern in making this move was fiscal as the College faced significant budgetary restraints. How could we make this transition back to a fully functioning department given the current environment of declining economic support and increasing reliance on university entrepreneurialism?

Despite hesitancy among disciplinary peers, VCU SOCY applied for an EPT to begin offering its applied track in the MS program entirely online. The EPT would provide tuition revenue directly to the department based on the number of students enrolled in the online track. In Spring 2014, the EPT was approved by the university to begin with the Fall 2014 cohort. Our initial conceptualization of the program as outlined in the EPT was to reproduce the same curriculum and pedagogical goals as those of the traditional on campus offerings; students would continue to take the same required courses and number of electives as the on campus applied students.

At VCU SOCY the M.S. in Sociology allows students to choose between two tracks, Thesis or Applied. Both tracks require 36 hours of coursework, including core courses in theory, research methods, and statistics. The thesis track is for students intending to continue in a PhD program or a research-intensive professional position. In this track, six credit hours are devoted to preparation and defense of the thesis. The applied track is for students working in (or aspiring to work in) settings where they could benefit from deeper knowledge of social phenomena and stronger data skills. In the applied track, six credit hours are devoted to completion of an internship.

The department expected the online M.S. program to appeal to those interested in professional social science-related positions in government and non-profit service organizations; military officers who wish to further their careers by completing an advanced educational degree in one of the social sciences; students coming directly from an undergraduate degree or transferring from another M.S program with the goal of obtaining a master's degree from an accredited academic institution, but who are unable to reside in/near Richmond; and/or community college professors who are required to complete a certain number of graduate hours to teach sociology courses.

Market research showed that there were few other options available for obtaining an online MS degree in Sociology. At the time there were three other online Sociology master's programs offered by U.S. universities all of which offered a M.A. as opposed to a M.S. In designing a distinct program the goal was to emphasize the strength of our current curriculum while also drawing on open technologies to create an engaging and supportive environment within which students could develop in a sense of community and participate in broader discussions. At the time, the university had an office for innovative teaching through technologies called the AltLab. VCU SOCY partnered with the AltLab because it had just developed Rampages.us, a WordPress blog site open to all university students. The push was to create an open learning environment where students and faculty, both inside and outside the university, could collaborate on and curate learning outcomes culminating in an e-portfolio or professional web presence for the student to use to pursue future academic or career goals. Pedagogically, the goal was to create a more integrative and communal learning experience rather than an assemblage of individual courses.

Three cohorts were admitted under the original curriculum. The first, in fall 2014, was small, just two students. The second, in Fall 2015, was triple the size at six and thus met the enrollment goal of five set in the EPT. The third, and final cohort admitted on the last mid-year admissions cycle offered in the program was three. Of the eleven early adopters, four left the program early. Three of those four left due to personal and family issues including illness and military demands. The fourth had significant challenges with the online format and left the program due to disappointment with the approach to teaching. Of the remaining seven original students, two graduated and the remaining five are continuing part time thus producing a 64% retention rate. Although attrition and graduation rates are notoriously difficult to come by for graduate study, our retention rates exceed those of the highest often cited as 50% (Howery, 2002).

The courses in the original curriculum were online versions of the same required and elective courses, sharing the same intellectual goal of applying the sociological imagination to the world. Papers and projects were driven by student interest and were largely in the same vein as the on campus students. While most students expressed value and a sense of success in their online courses, their suggestions indicated room for improvement particularly related to clarity of expectations, early preparation of course materials and relevancy of the material to their lives particularly since they were not meeting face-to-face. These comments, as well as our own teaching experiences, led to some significant lessons learned and the eventual reimagining of the program.

Lessons Learned: Reflections from the Chair

The challenges associated with moving the program online were individual, departmental and institutional. Due to the small number of faculty in Sociology at the time, we did not face internal challenges of faculty support. The only two senior faculty were the ones initiating the development of the program. However, the small number of full time teaching faculty did present staffing problems for an entirely new set of courses. The market model would have had us adopt outsourcing, a common practice in U.S. higher education where by 2005 over half of all undergraduate instruction is now performed by adjuncts (Schuster and Finkelstein, 2006). We were committed to staffing the courses with internal, well-established faculty to avoid the quality and stability problems associated with outsourcing teaching to remote faculty who are less accountable to the culture of the department (Schibik and Harrington, 2002 & 2007; Street, Maisto, Merves and Rhoades, 2012). To ensure the program had the strongest pedagogical footing for its launch, the two senior faculty led the course development and taught the initial courses. We also reached out to a local emeritus professor who was eager to develop a new course based on her recent academic work. We were also lucky to have a collective of dedicated, vibrant and engaged temporary and adjunct faculty who were able to backfill the on campus courses. This arrangement allowed us to bridge the gap until we hired more faculty.

Still, even with our most experienced faculty teaching the courses, we struggled to give the program coherence and stability. The reasons for these difficulties are three-fold. First, the then location of VCU SOCY, as a program in a larger professional school was not ideal. Without a clear departmental identity, VCU SOCY lost faculty and student interest declined. The two senior faculty advocated to have the program return to a stand-alone department located in the College of Humanities and Sciences, the traditional heart of the liberal arts curriculum. This introduced a lot of flux at the same time we were trying to respond to the President's call for more online programs. Ironically, while this level of institutional anomie made building a coherent structure more difficult, it also provided cover for significant entrepreneurial efforts. A well-entrenched faculty governing a well-established department may have inhibited our ability to respond in a nimble and innovative manner. The influx of EPT funds into the Sociology coffers not only supported faculty and student development, but it also incentivized the Dean's office to better support our transition back to a stand-alone department now staffed with 15 full time faculty, an almost a five-fold increase in permanent faculty.

The second reason for our initial difficulties in establishing a more coherent and relevant set of courses was technological. As a part of the university's push for more online education, the Center for Teaching Excellence

was renamed to AltLab to emphasize the new focus on open learning platforms pedagogies, such as blogging and website development. This was a departure from closed learning management systems and pedagogies such as Blackboard and remote testing. The central piece of this shift was the introduction of Rampages.us, a WordPress platform designed to provide each student their own website for personal or educational use. Faculty were highly encouraged to incorporate Rampages into their course through assignments such as blogging and/or e-portfolios. Significant resources were dedicated to growing and institutionalizing Rampages, which has paid off as there are now over 24,000 Rampages blog sites.

The challenge for our faculty was the steep learning curve associated with moving towards more open technologies at the same time the university was building institutional resources to support the shift. While the AltLab provided support for assisting professors with learning new technologies, specifically WordPress, there was no corollary source of support for students. Thus, faculty had to teach the mechanics of new technologies to the students at the same time they themselves were using them in their courses. This double burden increased the slope of the learning curve and inhibited our ability to smoothly transition to new open pedagogies.

While the AltLab did an excellent job providing learning opportunities for faculty to remake their own courses, there was little in the way of broader institutional support for developing the program as a whole. For example, a tuition model based on state residency does not accommodate online learning nor was there marketing for new programs or any type of recruitment support to seek out new students. We were able to use EPT funds to do some limited marketing for ourselves, as well as hire outside consultants. However, both options require additional labor output from a small number of faculty participating in the program thus diminishing the potential return on investment.

The third reason for our initial challenges is conceptual. The initial concept of the online MS program was to replicate the on campus applied program. We quickly realized the limitations of this model. First, student interest in such a model was driven primarily by the logic of convenience. Thus, the areas of interest among the students was similar to those of the on campus students; they mostly wanted to study the “real” world using traditional social science theories and methodologies. We quickly realized that running parallel courses did not maximize the innovative potential of open learning nor did it carry forward the value of seminar style learning. We lost the intimacy of small on campus graduate courses without gaining the benefits of open learning models: deep learning, creative collective meaning-making, skill acquisition, and integrated student-faculty engagement. While our motivations for launching the online program including fiscal resources, we were committed to ensuring the quality of

education remained high and that it was of interest to students for reasons more than simple convenience. We wanted the program to be truly innovative and quickly realized that a new conceptual model was necessary to fully realize that potential. Once again an autonomous department, and now with two years of data about online learning from which to draw, VCU SOCY reimaged its online applied program as the nation's first digital sociology degree.

Reimagining the Master's of Science in Digital Sociology Program

The online sociology master's degree program at Virginia Commonwealth University was created in response to market incentives at the university and College level. By the end of one cohort (two years), the department leadership had determined that recreating the "off line" experience but online was not sufficiently rigorous, practical or valuable for diverse student populations. After surveying research on online learning and disciplinary trends, the department adopted a *digital sociology* focus for the online masters program. This digital focus would use online learning models to study "native-born digital" social problems. Native-born digital refers to how and why content, ways of knowing, and forms of engagement that emerge from technological processes and platforms. We define native-born digital social problems as those sociological issues which arise from technological change, diffusion, and adoption. This focus has the benefit of resolving the tension between pedagogical theory and praxis. Namely, students are living in the thing that they are learning to study. Next, we discuss the transition to digital sociology, describe where digital sociology fits into the disciplinary landscape, and discuss challenges to program implementation. Challenges include: developing rigor in an emerging sub-discipline using both open and closed learning systems; serving the competing needs of diverse student populations; and, learning how to navigate new institutional power relationships created by market models.

Digital Sociology: Native Born Digital Social Problems

In Fall 2016, VCU SOCY accepted its first cohort into the first U.S. Master's degree program with a focus in Digital Sociology. Digital Sociology is the study of the social processes that shape technologies like the Internet and how those technologies shape social processes (Daniels, Gregory, and McMillan Cottom, 2017; Lupton, 2015). Students study what technological change means for how we work, go to school, form families, construct identities, and enact social change. The digital sociology curriculum is designed for graduates to shape emerging local, national and global conversations about big data, privacy, algorithms, inequality and social movements. All students in digital sociology

program create meaningful projects from the start, building a digital portfolio of analytical skills, theoretical insight, and critical analysis. To achieve this native-born digital degree program, we reconfigured the course sequence so that digital sociology students move through the program as a cohort. A cohort model moved away from the atomization encouraged by the market model which incentivized the creation of the online degree program. Instead, this model adopts the ethos of distributed learning, which encourages pedagogical design centered on collaborative construction of knowledge (Dede, 1996; Lea and Nicoll, 2013). Digital sociology students move as a cohort through a twelve course sequence in methods, theory, substantive courses and practicum.

Faculty concerns about maintaining academic rigor influenced our decision to retain the same curricular requirements in theory, methods, and statistics for online digital sociology students as on-campus applied option students. However, these courses are imagined through the epistemological lens of digital transformation. For example, a foundational theory course in digital sociology builds on Durkheim's concept of density in social integration and a Marxist analysis of labor in technology-mediated labor relations. Methods courses include traditional reviews of survey design, regressions, and ethnography. But they have been expanded to include building tools for web data extraction, building online surveys, conducting social network analysis of digitally-mediated relations, and visualizing sociological data for different audiences. In digital sociology, the social problems course teaches the traditional analytical framework of public and private foibles but uses case studies of how technology creates emerging social problems. These changes acted back on program management. Because the cohort structure is unique to digital sociology the faculty decided to disallow students to move between online and on-campus courses. And, we changed the admissions policies to a fall-only admission cycle. These changes are pedagogically sound. They are designed to protect the integrity of the sociology degree program while also engaging with changes in the discipline. These changes also mean that the market imperative to hold-down administration costs are impractical. The cohort structure works best with full-time faculty, sustainable technology resources, and dedicated staff for program administration. These tensions emerge in other facets of teaching, labor and administration as we discuss next.

Context of Online Learning at VCU SOCY

Limits of Market Models to Sustainable Online Teaching in Sociology

The online graduate degree program was initially created in response to a university grant to seed new online degree programs. This seed grant was part of a

trend in higher education to adopt entrepreneurial market models to stimulate faculty innovation. Slaughter and Rhodes (2013) call this academic capitalism. Brint et al. (2014) refer to the market models that emerge as a result of not-for-profit colleges engaging in market activities like start-up incubators, revenue and performance based funding and competitive funding for material resources. The market model did incentivize the department to develop new online teaching models. However, market models do not circumvent faculty governance or academic freedom. Consequently, online graduate faculty were initially comprised of faculty who desired to teach online. Faculty who were not interested in online teaching were not required to do so. This division supported the development phases of the program. This phase included curriculum design, research, course sequencing, and shared learning objectives for degree progress and completion. There was also an initial phase of survey design to measure student learning. However, by year two, the market model had reached its natural limits: to grow online teaching models we would need more online teaching faculty. In this respect, VCU SOCY was like many sociology departments surveyed in AY 2012-13 who reported having “fewer resources although they designed new courses and developed online technology” (Spalter-Roth et al., 2013, p.4) In our experience building an online curriculum in sociology, market models can incentivize faculty who already have an interest in online teaching and it can sustain program and course development. However, sustainable online teaching requires equitable funding in teaching lines, research and development funds, and other material resources for these programs to sustain and grow.

Teaching Non-Traditional Students Online

The majority of the students currently enrolled in the online master’s of science degree in digital sociology are non-traditional. In this way, the composition of digital sociology student body is in step with demographic trends in higher education where the majority of students are non-traditional. Online teaching models have been critiqued for being beta-tested on well-resourced students (Hansen and Reich, 2015; McMillan Cottom 2016; Reich, Murnane, and Willett, 2012). Consequently, many models of online learning do not scale well for the majority of all college students. In the VCU SOCY program this manifested in several ways. First, students enrolled in the program with a varied degree of technology skills. We cannot conceivably identify skill ability during admissions. Therefore, some students started the first week of all online courses, some in a new discipline, and with different comfort levels navigating the online learning space. In the social theory course, for example, some students immediately took to the structure that required them to access online readings across four different platforms: google classroom, blackboard, Soc Abstracts, and social annotation

tool Hypothes.is. Other students did not even access the online classroom learning spaces because, as one student said in feedback, they “were waiting for the first day of class and the textbooks”. In a reading and writing intensive course like theory, this presented a problem for group discussion. Designing what the faculty member for this course called the weekly “course flows”, or the online lectures, was difficult given faculty could not assume students had accessed materials by a certain date. All faculty in the digital sociology program report difficulties addressing this issue of temporality in a way that preserves crucial discussion-based learning in graduate courses.

Most of these issues with digital skills are consequences of admitting students from diverse learning and educational backgrounds. As is well-known, race, class and gender inequalities in K-12 education disadvantage many students in acquiring technological exposure and skill (Volman and Van Eck, 2001; Selwyn, Nemorin, Bulfin, and Johnson, 2017). VCU SOCY is very committed to serving, developing and supporting diverse student groups. As a faculty, we decided early on that we would not narrow access for the sake of program efficiency. Consequently, digital sociology faculty met frequently the first semester of the new curriculum to calibrate skill-based learning based on classroom experiences. For example, co-author Dr. Tara Stamm developed flow-charts and other learning materials to help students using new technologies for the first time. Other faculty members adopted those materials and modified for onboarding to their learning environments. Co-author Dr. Tressie McMillan Cottom designed seven mini-lessons for the first two weeks of the course. Each mini-lesson required students to access one of the technologies used in the course (e.g. Zoom for teleconferencing, wordpress for reflection writing, skype for real-time lectures, soundcloud for audio lectures, hypothesis for social annotation). This design allowed students to experiment with all the digital functionalities with low stakes, early in the class when there was suitable time for intervention. Faculty adopted best practices from each other to onboard diverse students to the online learning environment.

Open versus Closed: A Challenge in Graduate Sociology Online Instruction

The promise of distributed learning is best achieved using open learning models. This includes open data, open textbooks and producing academic work in transparent, accessible platforms for pre and post review among a community of scholars. In the digital sociology program we experienced several problems executing on this promise. Faculty found it extremely difficult to find rigorous, high quality open source materials suitable for graduate sociology study. We attribute the dearth of open materials to two things: the diversity of the sociology canon and the disincentives for sociologists to produce open source materials.

Unlike other disciplines with more hegemonic curriculums like economics, sociology is what Kristin Thomson has called “dynamic”. An analysis of syllabi from thousands of courses as part of the Open Syllabus Project finds a great deal of intellectual diversity in how we organize, teach, and transmit sociological knowledge. Much of that is due to the importance of counter-hegemonic ways of knowing minority groups. This diversity means that there isn’t a single core sociology text or way of even dividing the labor of teaching sociology. This might explain why digital sociology faculty had a difficult time locating sociology textbooks for graduate courses. No single text would do and, given the market dominance of undergraduate readers as compared to graduate readers, what open access survey sociology textbooks do exist are skewed to undergraduate learners. Also, of the texts available in open access repositories like The Open Textbook Library, there were very few focused on issues central to rigorous graduate instruction: race, class, gender, sexuality and social problems. Open Educational Resources (OER) are considered cost-effective and sustainable for native-born digital learning (Community College Consortium, n.d.). But, OER materials are not free or even cheap to produce. Given the structural realities of the market model in academic capitalism, there are fewer well-resourced faculty members to produce and vet materials. This problem is particularly acute for faculty of color and women faculty who are disproportionately more likely to teach courses in race, class, and gender and to be trapped in adjunct or contingent roles (Moore, 2017). It was difficult to find OER materials in the most important areas of research where the most pressing social problems emerge.

Digital sociology faculty also encountered difficulty using and adopting OER tools in the new reality of the market university. We were caught quite unawares of the ascendant power of university branding and marketing offices (Hemsey-Brown and Oplatka, 2006). Gaye Tuchman (2009) describes the market logics that diffuse across higher education as “accountability regimes”. They include faculty surveillance and other impositions broadly called “measures”. These measures are intended to inculcate educational quality but, Tuchman argues, they are primarily a way to control faculty labor and mitigate competing interests of student-consumers. In transitioning to the digital sociology curriculum, the faculty governance structure approved broad powers for material adoption. The idea was that faculty committed to the program knew best how to source and implement digital tools that were suitable for their class needs. This included course website design (or eschewing a course website altogether) and adopting a suite of tools from both open access and for-profit providers. We considered these issues clearly in the purview of academic freedom. We did not encounter resistance from more expected bureaucratic sources (the provost or an academic dean), but instead faced resistance from university branding.

The resistance took on two common trajectories. One trajectory included challenges to any software adoption. For example, a group of branding and technology services officials, said that we were not allowed to use Skype for videoconferencing. Only the proprietary program Zoom had been approved for school use. Skype is a more widely available application. Students are likely to use it in the course of their professional careers. And, Skype had an accessible and easy-to-use mobile and website interface. Given our commitment to developing applied skills for students and minimizing issues of technology skill diversity, Skype was a logical choice. But, this group overruled use of Skype in favor of Zoom, citing that the university had paid a significant sum for the group license to use it. Zoom was unfamiliar to students, had speed connectivity issues, and a very unfriendly interface. These issues slowed down learning objectives and created a disincentive to use video-conferencing for teaching.

The second trajectory of resistance from branding authorities involved how the digital sociology program was marketed and positioned. Without any College resources to support marketing the new program, the VCU SOCY department found funds to hire a technical designer to build a digital presence for the program that matched its innovative curriculum. It did not seem logical to promote a digital program using a static website. After an initial hands-off arrangement, university branding effectively blocked the redesign with a list of approved design choices ranging from acceptable shades of blue to size and functionality of webpage headers. To work around the accountability regime of marketing and branding, digital sociology faculty began using non university platforms as much as practical. However, this delimits our ability to respond quickly to student needs within the online learning environment.

Finally, the diversity of the VCU student body and the nature of open knowledge production were occasionally in conflict. Teaching critical sociology necessitates engaging social problems that risk public censure. While rampages was designed for students to “learn in public”, we quickly learned that faculty were uncomfortable asking students to wrestle with ideas like sexism, racism, and inequality in the public domain. The risk for minority students was especially high as research has found that women, people of color and sexual minorities are frequently targets for online harassment (Finn, 2004; LaFrance 2016; McMillan Cottom, 2015). Faculty developed several strategies to help mitigate student risk in online learning spaces. Students in social theory used Google classroom as a safe learning space to work with new ideas. This space was not public. After submitting their papers to class peer review, students published more professional essays on their public blogs. Those blogs are aggregated to a department share site for public viewing but the student identifiers are obscured.

Conclusion

When Virginia Commonwealth University launched the nation's first Master's of Science degree program in digital sociology it did so in response to several competing trends shaping the future of online teaching. The program emerged as VCU SOCY was reasserting its centrality to the College. While ours is an extreme case, sociology continues to defend its position as a core discipline given the dominance of science, technology, engineering, and medical (STEM) fields in the modern university. This dominance is a direct effect of the other trend shaping the work of disciplines in the modern university: the shift to academic capitalism and market models of higher education. STEM fields are highly prized because university leaders perceive it as entrepreneurial given its reliance on grants and patents. At VCU SOCY we embraced the challenge to become entrepreneurial, in part because of attendant material resources during an era when there were few other sources to grow the department. As more departments face the realities of market logics, it is likely that sociology departments will find themselves in similar situations.

However, faculty governance and strong department leadership created a push to counter the pull of market models. By focusing on student outcomes and academic rigor, VCU SOCY created a native born digital degree program that is well-suited to emerging discussions in the field. We believe that these kind of innovative degree programs are best suited for online learning environments. Judging by our lack of success with building an online version of on-campus courses, this model does not work well. Instead, embracing what is unique about digitally-mediated learning encouraged VCU SOCY faculty to re-think what sociology is uniquely positioned to know about society in the digital age. Matching our pedagogy to the platform ultimately required an ontological reimagination of sociology that benefitted faculty and students.

Enrollment in the program continues to be strong. Students are engaging in relevant, rigorous, applied sociological work spanning the digital implications of online medical records to social network analysis of right-wing terrorist organizations. Potential employers have contacted digital sociology faculty asking about the pipeline for our graduates. On both the supply and demand side there seems to be a great deal of demand for sociological thinkers with digital skills. We are very hopeful that the discipline will continue to grow opportunities to develop students trained for engaging digital social problems and the VCU SOCY program is one of many possible models. Still, challenges remain. We find that any cost-savings from offering online degree programs is offset by the need for more faculty labor and technological resources. The market model may make for good incentives to enter online learning spaces, but traditional models of faculty and student centered learning are best for producing high quality online learning in sociology.

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