Coming to Campus to Teach Online

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In a recent blog post in *Inside Higher Ed*, Joshua Kim explored the value of telecommuting, rightly suggesting that the proven success of online education means that one need not be physically present to do a job well. “What we’ve learned from online education,” he wrote, “is that with a combination of thought, investment and a willingness to make data-driven continuous improvements, distance is not a barrier to quality.” And he closed by asking, “Should the champions of online learning also be advocating for telecommuting?”

It is absolutely the case that teaching remotely and doing it well is possible, particularly if professors accept that teaching online requires the mastery of new skills, an awareness of online pedagogies and best practices, a commitment to valuing those in digital spaces as much as we value those physically in front of us, and, in some cases, more time. And Kim is right to imagine that using the “methods and tools” of online education can help us improve productivity in workplaces that accommodate telecommuters. Certainly, tools like Slack and the Google suite have enabled synchronous collaboration among remotely situated parties.

But while I see a lot of logic and value in telecommuting, I want to make a case for having online educators, in particular, physically present on campuses. My motivation and reasoning stem not from a sense that physical presence is crucial to student learning (it isn’t), but from my understanding of the political landscape of academic environments.

In many academic departments, online education continues be the redheaded stepchild of higher education. In faculty meetings and curriculum committees, it remains an afterthought, even among faculty members who are not openly hostile to it.

Let me offer an example. Our faculty recently redesigned one of our undergraduate majors, creating a couple of new foundational courses that we hope will better prepare our majors for success in upper-level classes. Beautifully conceived, the new curriculum effectively pulls our major into the 21st century. After voting to approve the redesigned curriculum, the faculty organized into subcommittees that took up the task of framing out syllabi for each of the new courses. Despite the fact that our department now serves more majors online in 7.5-week courses than we serve face-to-face majors in 15-week courses, the committee developed a master syllabus for a 15-week course. Only after a few online faculty members raised questions did the committee sit down to develop a 7.5-week version of the course. Since faculty members had already invested so much time and effort into developing the 15-week course, the development process for the 7.5-week course was almost unavoidably a reductive rather than a creative one.

Why did this happen? One reason is that nononline educators are disproportionately represented in faculty meeting and on faculty committees. That’s because, in many departments, contingent faculty members are central to online programming. Yet because they often work remotely, few contingent faculty members regularly attend faculty meetings, despite the fact that, in our department, full-time contingent faculty enjoy voting privileges on most matters.

Outside faculty meetings, fewer contingent faculty members bump into their tenure-track colleagues in the break room, and fewer are around for spur-of-the-moment lunch dates -- meaning that casual conversations about teaching and learning tend to universalize the experiences of face-to-face teachers and learners. By virtue of their primarily face-to-face teaching load, the faculty members who established the subcommittees for our new major classes were habituated to thinking in terms of 15-week semesters and serving traditional (18- to 24-year-old, residential) students.

In short, the physical absence of contingent faculty from the halls of our department helps keep online education

marginalized in our curricular and policy-making discussions. And that’s too bad, because often it is our online teaching faculty who are the most pedagogically creative and most aware of the needs of nontraditional students.

Despite my contingent status, I come to the campus daily because I like my work and value the formal and informal interactions I have with my faculty and staff colleagues. To be sure, technology enables me to communicate with my colleagues remotely if need be, which I do when I’m at conferences or even when I don’t want to walk down the hall to ask someone a question.

But my physical presence on the campus provides me with insight into the range of issues and challenges -- many of them subtle -- that our department faces, and it means that I am available to serve when the need arises unexpectedly. I bring my identity as an online expert to the table in each and every conversation I have, whether that be in faculty meeting or when I grab coffee with a colleague in an effort to put off grading for 15 more minutes. My voice in those conversations helps chip away at an educational hierarchy that prioritizes traditional methods and campus-based students.

There are a host of reasons why online educators -- particularly full-time contingent faculty members -- should resist the lure of full-time telecommuting. If we hope to build an educational environment that truly values online spaces and online learners -- not to mention non-tenure-track faculty members -- we need to make ourselves impossible to ignore. The best way we can do that is to maintain both an intellectual and physical presence in our academic communities.