

Flexibility Within Structure: Factors contributing to Faculty Perceptions of Autonomy and Standardization in Course Design and Delivery

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At times, universities' structures for quality assurance can impede professors' sense of autonomy. This descriptive qualitative study examines factors that contribute to stakeholders' perceptions regarding standardization and autonomy in the realm of course design and delivery. The central understanding of this study is that stakeholders are keen to adopt standardization when they perceive those structures to be advantageous for faculty, students, and degree programs. Yet stakeholders imagine the borders of these structures to be flexible, thus creating a space for autonomy. As administrators explain quality assurance structures to professors, they should leverage the perceived advantages and demonstrate to faculty how they will retain the required flexibility.

Introduction

Accrediting bodies expect universities to guarantee faculty high levels of autonomy regarding course design and delivery, but accreditors also expect a certain degree of standardization to ensure quality (DeCesare, 2021). There is wide variation in the ways that universities balance autonomy and standardization. Some institutions are more “faculty-centered” (Abbot et al., 2018) and others engage in more “centralized design” (Felber, 2020). One main factor that seems to impact an institution’s approach toward autonomy and centralized design is faculty and administrators’ conceptualizations of “quality” and “quality assurance.” For example, Goff (2017) discovered stakeholders who think of quality in terms of prestige tend to support institutional approaches that are very hands-off, while those who conceptualize quality as return on investment, or alignment with objectives, tend to support centralized design. Stakeholders seem to hold complex attitudes about centralized design, at times championing course templates (Burgess et al., 2008), standardization of rubrics (Reddi & Andrade, 2010), and assessment structures (Cardoso et al.,

2013). At other times, they refer to standardization as time-consuming or restrictive (Harvey & Newton, 2007; Newton, 2000).

Much research has examined quality control measures in course design and delivery (Gregory et al, 2020) – especially in the online environment (Conklin et al., 2020; Lynch & Gaston, 2020). However, little empirical research has been done to understand factors contributing to stakeholders’ perceptions of autonomy and standardization of course design and delivery. This descriptive qualitative study closes this knowledge gap by providing data from stakeholders who are involved in the course design process at multiple universities, with various roles at their institutions.

Studies on Stakeholders’ Attitudes Toward Quality Assurance

Many universities implement some level of centralized design to assure that the curriculum is achieving its desired outcomes. Therefore, the standardization of course design and delivery falls under the wider issue of Quality Assurance (QA). While QA is notoriously difficult to define (Welzant et al., 2015), Vroeijenstijn’s (1995) definition will suffice here: QA is the “systematic, structured and continuous attention to quality in terms of quality maintenance and improvement” (p. 30).

Various bodies of literature examine how structure leads to the enhancement of quality. Some institutions have standardized and incentivized professional development to improve quality. Additionally, online programs have leaned heavily on standardizing course design and delivery. The literature review below discusses empirical studies on stakeholders’ perceptions of these efforts to enhance quality.

Perceptions of Assessment as a Means for Enhancing Quality

A growing body of literature exists on the scholarship of assessment. One subset of this corpus is comprised of empirical studies on faculty perceptions of assessment as a means for quality assurance. For example, Cardoso, Rosa, and Santos (2013) surveyed 1,782 academics in Portugal to determine the aspects of QA professors are more likely to embrace. Participants were least supportive of the assessment of non-curricular student support services and most likely to support the assessment of professors’ qualifications and teaching activities.

Reddy and Andrade’s (2009) meta-analysis of studies on the use of rubrics for assessment indicates faculty attitudes are mixed: Faculty are not certain rubrics increase student outcomes, but they do recognize that rater calibration with the use of rubrics can lead to grading consistency.

Emil and Cress (2014) interviewed seven faculty to understand their perceptions of engagement in assessment. Their study revealed that the degree to which departmental leadership embraced assessment structures affected professors’ engagement. The study also suggests professors who have a commitment to research and data-driven decision making may be more likely to embrace assessment. However, their study did not involve inferential statistics and cannot be generalized.

Perceptions of Professional Development as a Means for Enhancing Quality

Several studies have examined how professors respond to professional development as a means for quality assurance. Openo et al. (2017) suggest that the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) can help professors understand the link between assessment structures and quality enhancement (QE). Specifically, SoTL encourages professors to consider alternatives to lectures as a means of increasing students’ comprehension and retention (Halliday & Soden, 1998). Pleschová and McAlpine’s (2015) meta-analysis of 17 studies showed that universities had utilized peer mentorship to calibrate professors’ teaching methods, though there is a need for more research on how professors’ attitudes change due to mentoring. Hopkins’ (2020) phenomenological study of 20 faculty members at a community college described participants’ beliefs about the impact of professional development on their course design. One theme that emerged from the study was the sense that while professors were confident as experts in their own disciplines,

they felt they had not previously learned how to be high-quality educators. Five professors described learning the process of “backwards design” (p. 78). The participants also widened their repertoire of learning activities (Hopkins, 2020).

Universities are implementing other structures such as first-year faculty experiences to communicate course design and delivery standards. Additionally, promotion and tenure requirements may be tied to teaching outcomes. Unfortunately, little research to date has focused on stakeholders’ perceptions of institutional efforts to improve quality through these incentives.

Perceptions of Enhancing Quality Through Course Design Training

Several empirical studies have examined how universities enhance quality by training faculty in course design, especially for online delivery. Quality Matters (QM) is an example of these efforts. The QM framework has been adopted by more than 100,000 members at over 1,500 institutions worldwide (“Quality Matters”, n.d.). In Kearns and Mancilla’s (2017) survey of over 2100 faculty members who had been trained in QM, between 55% and 71% of participants said they improved their course overviews, objectives, assessments, and instructional materials as a result of the training. In another study, a Kennesaw State University survey of 57 faculty showed that 94 to 100% who went through a course on online instructional technology believed the course helped them design higher quality courses (Terantino & Agbehonou, 2012).

Several researchers have used the QM rubric to score courses before and after faculty have been trained in course design. Conklin et al. (2020) indicated that all three courses improved in all eight criteria of QM after a course design workshop. Shields et al. (2021) reported that the mean QM scores of 29 professors’ courses went from 80 to 91 points after being trained in course quality. Mercer (2013) reported that 25 faculty who participated in a QM workshop indicated a statistically significant increase in knowledge about best practices but could not show a significant increase in willingness to use the QM rubric. Later, Budzick (2014) carried out a modified version of Mercer’s (2013) study and discovered that after the course design workshop, faculty (n=19) were more likely to use QM and were more aware of their course quality, and said they were more aware of best practices. In focus groups for Budzick’s (2014) study, faculty indicated a willingness to adopt QM because of empirical research, which indicates that alignment and clear objectives lead to student retention, engagement, and success.

Perceptions of Enhancing Quality Through Templates

Some empirical studies have also been conducted to understand stakeholders’ perceptions of quality assurance through standardized course templates. A survey of 72 professors at the University of West Florida showed that 95% of faculty would use the templates again, 85% felt the templates did not stifle their creativity, and 37% noticed an improvement in student outcomes after adjusting the course to match the templates (Burgess et al., 2008).

Despite the success of templates in these studies, standardization of courses can be a sensitive topic. To combat potentially negative concepts, administrators at the School of Nursing (SON) at Indiana State University decided to introduce humor as a strategy to get professors to accept course templates. They implemented the Robinhood-esque theme of “stealing content” throughout the training in template use, but assured professors that they would retain their autonomy. The SON professors adopted the innovation. According to Huun and Hughes (2014), “After adopting and implementing the template, encouraging results show that faculty are even more impressed with the template design and application, with 67-80% of respondents each semester being ‘very pleased’ after implementation versus 20-33% prior to application” (p. 22).

Haubrick, Levy, and Cruz’s (2021) mixed-methods study of the use of “master templates” suggested that some professors may fear that the implementation of a “master template” may cause them to be seen as replaceable (p. 322). How professors deal with this fear may be a factor impacting their attitudes about autonomy and standardization.

The review of literature shows that institutions with centralized course design have subject matter experts create the outcomes, rubrics, and assessments. While faculty in these institutions may not have total autonomy over the design of

their courses, these universities have leveraged multiple opportunities for faculty to interject their voice in creating and delivering the content. Additionally, many universities attempt to control and improve quality by training professors in course design. The quantitative studies discussed above show that course outcomes, student satisfaction, and course quality improve when faculty are trained in instructional design, and qualitative studies show faculty view training as beneficial. Yet little is known about factors contributing to stakeholders' adoption of standardization or their requirements for autonomy.

Methods

This section describes the methods for collecting and analyzing data in this study. The limitations are also described below.

Data Collection

Purposive sampling was used to identify “individuals that are especially knowledgeable about” this research topic (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Twelve professors and administrators from four different universities in the United States were recruited. They represent a variety of disciplines and backgrounds in higher education. Table 1 below gives some participant descriptions.

Table 1

Participants

Susie	West Coast US	Private	Professor, administrator (traditional)
Oliver	West Coast US	Private	Professor, administrator(traditional)
Linda	West Coast US	Private	Professor, administrator(traditional)
Tyler	West Coast US	Private	Professor, administrator(traditional)
Karl	Southeastern US	Private	Adjunct (online)
Jim	Southeastern US	Private	Professor, administrator (online)
Joseph	Southern US	Private	Professor, administrator (online and traditional)
Lacey	Eastern US	R1	Professor
Lydia	Eastern US	R1	Professor
Genny	Eastern US	R1	Professor
Nora	Eastern US	R1	Professor
Elizabeth	Eastern US	R1	Professor, staff

Semi-structured, open-ended interviews were used to gather their experiences with structure and autonomy in the arena of course design and delivery.

Data Analysis

As the interviews were completed, they were transcribed and coded in Dedoose Software—first at the idea-by-idea level to generate discrete “open codes” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990); then, the researchers used the “interpretive approach” described in Miles and Huberman (1994) to “compare, aggregate, contrast, sort and order” the data (Savenye &

Robinson, 2004, p. 1059). Two main themes emerged: adopting structure and making space for autonomy. The findings section describes the parameters within these two major themes.

Limitations

The study is limited to participants' self-awareness and candor regarding their experiences with autonomy and centralized course design. Some may have felt uncomfortable and, therefore, less candid when sharing their negative experiences with university oversight in their course design. To mitigate these limitations, the participants were assured confidentiality would be maintained. Additionally, the collection and constant comparison of data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 105) to the point of "theoretical saturation" (Saunders et al., 2018) has helped the study achieve a thick, rich description of the participants' attitudes regarding standardization and autonomy.

Findings

Surprisingly, the findings did not indicate that participants can be grouped into either a "champions of structure" camp or an "advocate of autonomy" group. Instead, the findings show that participants all adopt structures, and all require flexibility, depending on the perceived advantages that flexibility and structure provide for the faculty, students, and the degree program.

Adopting Structure

Certain aspects of curriculum development in higher education call for structure. Participants noted several issues that warrant adopting structure to support the faculty, support the students, or assure the quality of the degree program.

Perceived advantage of structure for faculty

Designing new courses can cause anxiety for faculty members, especially when they are given a short time period to prepare. Yet structure can relieve some of that anxiety, as it clarifies what an instructor must do to prepare for class. Two participants felt relieved to discover the course they were assigned to teach was already well-developed and ready for delivery. "Nora" [pseudonym], who teaches traditional courses at an R1 institution, said, "I was very grateful, right, to not come up, start a new class from scratch . . . Like, the *tabula rasa*, right? Like the blank canvas, might be a little bit intimidating." Jim [pseudonym], who teaches online and on-campus courses, explained that he is given plenty of advanced notice for his on-campus courses because "they expect me to go in and do the work to design it and set it up and review the textbooks and all those sorts of things." On the other hand, his online courses are assigned with less than ten days' notice. This time crunch does not cause undue stress because, in contrast to his traditional courses, "when you have a canned [online] course like that, you don't have to do all those things."

Participants were also happy to adopt structure that supports the adjunct or guest faculty members, who may not have the time or inclination to develop a course from scratch. Joseph [pseudonym], who is the chair of an online and traditional program, said, "adjuncts are asking for more structure, not less." Due to time constraints, courses that are already developed and ready to go allow adjunct faculty to step in quickly and do well with the material even if they do not have time to spend on course design. Karl [pseudonym] explained his full-time employer gets his "best energy and time," whereas he tries to keep his adjunct responsibilities "contained to ten hours a week" by "fitting it in at the end of the day." He can take on this added responsibility because his adjunct courses are "pre-packaged, almost like a box. Just like- you just open the box, and it's ready to go." He said that if he were "overly managed" at his "real job," he would be "pretty irritated . . . But I don't want my adjunct teaching role to be something that has a lot of uncertainty." This aligns with one participant's hunch that "usually adjuncts teach the bare minimum." Therefore, it may be unreasonable or unrealistic to expect adjuncts to create courses without any structure. As Lydia [pseudonym] said, "we don't pay them enough." Participants largely agreed providing structure for courses taught by adjunct faculty was a positive act of support.

Structure may be as comprehensive as "inheriting" a course (as one participant indicated), but it may be as minimal as providing templates for syllabi. Elizabeth [pseudonym], an instructional designer at an R1 institution, believes that "when

faculty use [syllabus templates], they're always, always helpful. They're always pleased to use that for the most part." Lydia described how she shares syllabi with part-time faculty who may not have time to develop a syllabus from scratch. Genny [pseudonym] said the syllabus and learning activities are "pretty much spelled out" for professors in her program.

Participants also experience the way that structure provides clear expectations. Tyler [pseudonym] had extensive experience as an adjunct before becoming a full-time professor. He worried that he would "miss the base . . . not really giving students all they need," when the only structure he was given was the name of a textbook to use for his courses. He found it easier when he was "given a shell" that described the key learning objectives, assignments, and rubrics. "I was like, okay, whew, good, this is already there. Now I can build on it." Linda [pseudonym] said that the course templates helped her know:

the absolutes and then where you have some freedom . . . The freedom is mainly in the description of the assignments, how many assignments we have, what value they have, how they're linked to the objectives. But other things are already just laid out as in the template.

Perceived advantage of structure for students

Participants also embrace structures they believe lead to student success. Specifically, professors may embrace institutional guidelines they perceive have pedagogical value. They also note consistency of the layout in the Learning Management System (LMS) can improve the student experience.

Program leads had difficulty selling structure unless they could show how the new structure would add value to the student experience or to the faculty experience teaching the course. Jim, who directs over thirty professors in a large university, had to communicate to his team about a new policy for giving feedback on assignments. The professors resisted the change because "they said, 'students don't read feedback anyway. And you're asking me to invest this time?'" He believed for professors to adopt a structure, they must see "the value-added." Tyler, who also must communicate university policies about structure to professors, said he needs to explain to professors, "this is going to help you, it's going to help the students . . . Everybody wins."

The consistency of the layout in the LMS was a repeated theme. One program director recognized structure would keep students from "having to learn Blackboard all over again" each time they encounter a new course, as they try to find the syllabus, policies, and course content. She explained, "If that were the case, there would always one place where students would go to look for materials."

Structure in the LMS may be especially important for online students. Karl mentioned above that he adds his adjunct responsibilities "at the end of the day" and recognizes that many of his online students do the same:

They're busy with full-time jobs . . . They're probably doing a lot of coursework in the evenings. I think that generally [structure] translates into a pretty predictable product for them, which is going to be a highly structured experience: Very clear instructions for assignments, pretty predictable feedback timespan.

Perceived advantage of structure for the degree program

Participants also described a need for structure to maintain the quality of their degree programs. Eight of the 12 participants referred to the need for consistency in content. One program director worried that professors "do their own thing without structure." Another said some departments at her university are like "the wild west." Susie [pseudonym] said she wants a "framework, right? Because I want to make sure we're getting the same outcomes" across the department. Tyler, who has the added responsibility of a curriculum coordinator, said the powerpoints are placed in all course sections "to ensure continuity across sections of courses."

In addition to continuity of content across sections, stakeholders want to ensure there is not unnecessary duplication of the material as students move through the courses in the degree program. Linda recalled when she was first hired, students would tell her they had used the same textbooks or had done the same activities in previous courses. She

believed someone must have compiled the scope and sequence but was unsure where to find it. She said, “What are the courses we’re offering, and the objectives? That’s someplace. I just had to get my hands on it. What are the textbooks people are using . . . what is our plan here?”

Other participants were in departments that adopted structures to show scope and sequence. For example, two department chairs described how a committee reviews the required textbooks for all sections of the courses under their purview. Oliver [pseudonym] said, “we moved away from the ‘whatever you want to do’ model twenty years ago to, ‘We’re using the same textbook for this class.’ Or, ‘If you’re an adjunct, you get the choice of textbooks for this class.’” Joseph explained students in all sections of a particular general education class “all read the same book and then write a reflection paper on that book. That’s been done for a number of years.”

Consistency in general education, lower-division courses, or courses that are offered early in the program often leads to more complex courses later in the major programs. Participants may adopt structures that ensure the courses’ curricula are sequenced. Lydia explained, “I know my colleagues that teach general biology . . . actually talk across all the [department] and share syllabi, and there are modules that are online that they also share . . . they communicate much more . . . for the courses that are part of sequences.”

In summary, participants are willing to adopt institutional structures that guard against “curricular drift” by establishing textbook committees, creating standardized syllabi, and even creating course templates. Structure for the purpose of maintaining rigor and quality within the program is seen positively by instructors.

Making Space for Autonomy

The findings above indicate stakeholders adopt structures they perceive to be advantageous for the faculty, students, or degree program. However, participants cautioned that they are leery of structure for structure-sake. One professor felt that the curricular control “clipped his wings.” A program chair was concerned the educational effectiveness arm of the university “may not know the people they’re relating to,” and another likened the university structure to the bureaucracy of the department of motor vehicles. Linda’s department viewed one university policy as “standardization to the nth degree.” Oliver recalled that the “assessment culture” at his university had resulted in nine different assessment systems in 18 years. He recounted, “There was assessment fatigue . . . It was the tail wagging the dog . . . Assessment *ad nauseum* — I needed a vomit bag.”

Yet participants did not express a wanton desire for autonomy. Instead, they articulated a need for flexibility to embody their individuality as experts in their fields, to respond to individual student needs, and to meet department needs.

Perceived advantage of flexibility for faculty

Participants described times they had inherited a course or had been provided course templates, yet they were quick to note that faculty members who have taught the class in prior semesters should have the ability to “make the course their own” (as one put it) by adjusting the activities or the content. Oliver asked rhetorically, “We don’t want to tell the experts what to do all the time — to micromanage them, right?” And, as faculty teach courses, they desire the flexibility to make the course their own. Linda said she updates and changes her course as “I’m feeling more comfortable in my skin.”

Professors’ expertise on a topic can cause them to reject structure for flexibility. For example, Jim shared how a book had been chosen for the class because it was “easier” for the students to understand. Jim was concerned that the book “contained flaws.” He advocated (unsuccessfully) for a more rigorous book with accurate content. This top-down structure left him frustrated with the constraints of the system. Nora described how she operationalized flexibility:

I changed different pieces and moved things around and changed the assignments and things. I think I have — practically speaking - complete control . . . I’ve changed the course objectives. If I wanted to change the schedule, if I wanted to change the content that we’re talking about. As long as there’s sort of like a pedagogical, methodological reason for it. I think people would be very supportive.

Lacey [pseudonym] believes adjunct faculty should be expected to make changes to the class as a sign of being a good instructor. If the adjunct professor is not allowed to make appropriate changes, “then this is not the right field for them.” In fact, adjunct or guest instructors may also add value because of their specific expertise. Genny explained, “we have guest speakers come in who teach things that we are not experts in.” When the expertise of the adjunct instructor is valued, the instructor is given more freedom with the course.

Lacey described launching a course that had never been taught before. The field within the discipline was just developing, so there were no “tried and true” courses or textbooks out there to use to design the course. As a result, the course description was written very broadly to allow the faculty teaching the course to try different learning activities. She appreciated the ability to dig into the field and develop the curriculum herself, which she had the freedom to modify over time Lacey explained, “I really like the . . . freedom within the course to keep the course updated . . . As new tools come out . . . I can automatically update the course. I don’t have to go through any curricula process.”

Perceived advantage of flexibility for students

Professors need the flexibility to adapt course content depending on the students’ learning styles and interests. Linda said, “we all teach differently...and we’re trying to reach different learning styles . . . There should be a lot of freedom in . . . modifying what we’re doing to teach them.” Susie described her need for freedom stating, “I was like, oh, I do not want to teach it the way it had been taught. I can meet the learning objectives, but instead of short assignments, I had longer assignments.” She had:

academic freedom in the sense that . . . it wasn’t totally scripted . . . Students loved it. It gave them all sorts of levels of learning. They got the auditory, they were able to see what they were doing, and then they were able to actually create it.

Additionally, some courses lend themselves to tight structures, while other courses lend themselves to more freedom for the instructor. For example, Elizabeth described two different courses she teaches. One is a general education course that is very well-structured to provide a common experience that leads to other courses. Meanwhile, her other course is designed to develop general critical thinking skills. Instructors are expected to bring in current events, encourage students to talk about their life experiences, and engage in ongoing dialogue with students about the issues they bring up in class. In that case, Elizabeth believes it would be inappropriate to have a structured curriculum because the purpose is to build the discussion topics with the students throughout the class. Each section of the course has a different topical focus while developing the same skills.

Online programs typically have more structure than traditional face-to-face programs, and professors sometimes resist these structures. Jim’s university has structured the online courses down to the number of discussion boards, lectures, papers, and quizzes each week. Jim is philosophically committed to good discussion design and values his discussions with students throughout an activity. However, he felt there were times when a different learning activity would be a better way to engage students with the material. Twice while designing a course, he decided he was “not going to do” what the university structure required. Instead of creating a discussion board for one week in the course, he put in a different assignment. He felt that instructors should be able to make changes to the structure when there was a clear benefit to the students.

Karl, who also teaches at Jim’s university, agrees with the need for some flexibility — especially when it comes to constraints on videos. According to the course design policy, instructional videos may not be longer than six minutes. Although Karl generally agreed with the practice, he felt “handcuffed” by the “cookie cutter approach.” He wanted to use a particular video that was outside of the university’s policy regarding the length of videos. Both Jim and Karl spoke of how the policy, which was intended to support learning, became a barrier to good instruction. In this particular case, the guidelines were put in place to make it easier for students to access material, but they hampered the instructor’s ability to use quality content that supported course objectives. If the university had been more flexible, Karl and Jim believe the students would have benefited from engaging with better content.

Perceived advantage of flexibility for the degree program

Professional degree programs have the added dimension of maintaining currency with practices in the field. In some cases, participants talked about keeping up with the profession because the profession itself was changing so rapidly. A psychology professor said, “as new tools come out or as new types of visualizations are developed, I can automatically update the course” without going through the curriculum committee.

Linda and Susie shared that instructors in their fields often keep one foot in the industry to maintain relevancy and currency. These instructors often work side jobs outside the university to keep up with how the field adjusts each year. They then use those experiences to adjust the courses they teach. Susie spoke of redesigning a major assignment in one of her classes to ensure that students demonstrated certain skills prior to leaving the program.

The curriculum may also need to be flexible due to the different environments where the courses are taught. A health sciences professor emphasized the importance of freedom in course design to allow instructors in various settings to create learning activities that will benefit the local community. Programs that engage students in the community need enough flexibility to meet those needs and find appropriate placements while still meeting course requirements.

Discussion and Implications

This study touched on the themes of academic freedom and structure. Elman (1994) understood quality assurance and academic freedom as goals that regional accrediting bodies hold paradoxically. Sullivan (2018) did not see this as a paradox but as a balancing act:

There always has to be a balance between zones of jurisdiction and room for manoeuvre. Too much of the first is likely to crush agency, undermine initiative, damage enthusiasm, invite inauthenticity and prevent real responsibility. Too much of the second is likely to invite chaos, cause unnecessary inconsistency, damage coherence and fail to promote the mission (p. 118).

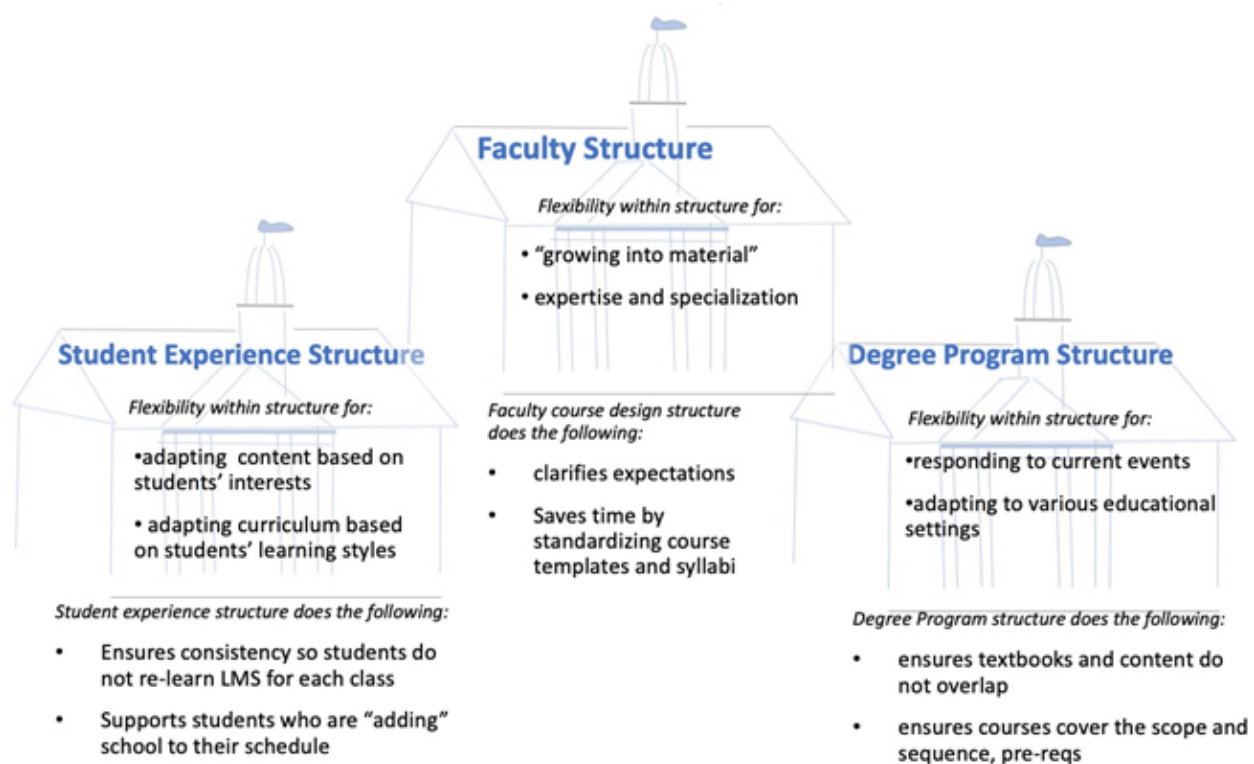
Aside from the complaints about “assessment *ad nauseum*,” participants did not describe an environment where structure “damages enthusiasm” or “crushes agency” as Sullivan (2018) put it (p. 118). Apart from one participant’s fear that it was the “wild west” in another department, participants did not perceive that autonomy in their workplace created chaos.

However, participants did not particularly conceptualize a balancing act (viz. Sullivan, 2018) nor as a paradox (viz. Elman 1994). Instead, participants accept flexibility within structure. They understand the need for consistency in policies and curriculum; they see the advantage that quality control provides for their degree programs, and they adopt structures that save them time. However, within those structures, professors want room to individuate learning activities, textbooks, and assessments based on their own expertise, the needs of their students, and the changes happening within their fields.

Stakeholders are keen to adopt structures when they perceive the advantages to faculty, students, and the degree program. Yet they imagine the borders of the structures to be flexible, making space for autonomy. Figure 1 below depicts this “flexibility-within-structure” model.

Figure 1

Factors Contributing to Stakeholders’ Perceptions of Flexibility and Structure



Accepting Structure

The theory that emerged from this study indicates that stakeholders embrace structures that ensure quality. Quality is a "contested term that takes on different meanings to different stakeholder groups" (Goff, 2017, p. 180). Goff placed 10 administrators' conceptualizations of quality into five categories: 1) exceptional (i.e., having an international reputation); 2) fitness for purpose (i.e., students learn what the university promises they will learn); 3) value for money; 4) the ability to induce change; and 5) perfect consistency. No participants referenced the reputation of their institution (though some work for prestigious universities), and none spoke in terms of value for money. The concepts of fitness for purpose and consistency were corroborated by participants in this study.

The process of gaining faculty buy-in for structures like centralized course design can be seen through the lens of scholarship on culture change. Two theorists have examined the adoption rate of QM through a culture change lens. Huun and Hughes (2014) applied Rogers' (2003) theory of diffusion to explain the acceptance of course templates at a Midwestern University, and Budzick (2014) used Davis' (1989) Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) to understand the acceptance of QM at a community college in Ohio. This study's findings corroborate the relative advantage concept in TAM. Stakeholders adopted structures that clearly provided the advantages of time management, scope and sequence, and a consistent student experience. Some faculty were hesitant to adopt structures that seemed only to benefit the educational effectiveness department but showed no clear promise for improving the student or faculty experience.

Making Space for Autonomy

This study highlighted how stakeholders perceive the need for some freedom to choose or design academic learning outcomes, assessments, rubrics, and learning activities. Very little attempt has been made to define or understand freedom in this sense, although teacher autonomy is well-studied in the K-12 context (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014; Worth and Van den Brande, 2020; Wu & Wu, 2018). Worth and Van den Brande (2020) defined autonomy as "direction over one's own decisions and actions" (p. 6), specifically in terms of job tasks, work hours, and work manner. Note that the participants in this present study did not overtly assert a need to have direction over their own actions. Instead, all 12

participants desired autonomy when it proved advantageous for the faculty experience, student experience, or the degree program's quality.

Autonomy may seem to be semantically connected to the concept of academic freedom. However, in higher education, the term "academic freedom" is often conceptualized as the professor's freedom to write and teach according to his or her conscience (Bilgrami & Cole, 2015; Williams, 2016). In this study, participants distinguished between being able to select topics and materials that were pertinent to the ideas they wanted to share (i.e., academic freedom) and the ability to make changes to how the course was taught (i.e., autonomy). Constraints on course design from university policy was discussed in terms of student accessibility and learning rather than control of the topic. For example, faculty who had trouble selecting the book they wanted to teach were constrained by the length and readability of the text, not because of the ideas expressed within the text.

Conclusion: Putting the "Flexibility-with-Structure" theory into Practice

The identification of factors that contribute to a strong need for flexibility and to fears of "the tail wagging the dog" (as one participant stated) can foster mutual understanding among the various stakeholders across the university. The findings from this study suggest that administrators who bear the responsibility of standardization will benefit from doing the following:

- Demonstrate how standardizing syllabi and course content will save the professors time (see Faculty Structure in Figure 1);
- Demonstrate how standardizing the LMS will improve the student experience, but create space for customization (see Student Experience Structure in Figure 1);
- Limit textbook oversight to guard against duplication, and to ensure the materials are leveled and sequenced, but create space for professorial choice (see Degree Program Structure in Figure 1).
- Assure professors that assessment structures will not impinge on their own areas of specialization (see Flexibility within Structure in the Faculty Structure section of Figure 1).
- Reassure faculty of ways they can individuate curriculum based on current events and the pedagogical context (see Flexibility within Structure in the Student Experience Structure section of Figure 1)
- Communicate to faculty how they can grow into their courses by adding personal touches based on their specializations (see Flexibility within Structure in the Degree Program Structure section of Figure 1).

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