

Distance Education Issues as Perceived by Faculty and Students

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Introduction

Distance learning includes correspondence, interactive television and web-based delivery. Although correspondence and interactive television courses have been used for years, web-based courses have been offered for ten years or less (Green, 2001). Web-based learning, or e-learning, opportunities grow yearly. By 2005 it is expected that 90% of American universities will have at least some courses online (Shea and Boser, 2001). Web-based courses use a variety of technologies to provide interactive learning opportunities for students. Students can take a class at any time from any place. The adjustment to a virtual learning environment, however, is not easy for the student or for the teacher. By examining perceptions and concerns of those who have participated in a distance learning experience, important information can be gained in how to better support learners and instructional developers in adapting to and being successful with a distance format.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to determine the perceptions of faculty and students toward components of and issues relating to distance learning. The findings will be useful to program faculty and administrators involved in developing and delivering distance learning courses. Understanding the perceptions of students who have participated in a distance-learning course and of teachers who have prepared and/or deliver instruction through distance learning is one component that may influence the success or failure of a distance-learning experience.

The problem of the study was to determine distance education perceptions of students and educators at business schools accredited by the AACSB—The International Association for Management Education. The specific research areas examined in the study include (a) identifying the types of problems or issues associated with distance learning from both a learning and teaching perspective and (b) establishing the degree of importance the students and educators place on factors associated with distance learning courses.

Review of the Literature

Distance learning options expand yearly with the majority of public institutions offering or planning to offer distance education by 2002 (American Council of Education, 2000.) A variety of issues are related to the successful development and delivery of an e-learning course. Faculty members who have taught distance courses can provide valuable insight and council to those about to develop or teaching such a course. Students also can provide valuable information on issues relating to learning and participating in a course delivered through technology. The review of literature includes both faculty and student viewpoints.

The flexibility of distance education courses is an important consideration for students. Studies reported in the National Education Association (NEA) and American

Federation of Teachers (AFT) commissioned report, *What's the Difference*, indicate that students select such courses for their flexibility (Institute of Higher Education Policy, 1999). Several researchers (Appleton, 1999, Chamberlin, 2001, Graves, 2000) contend that distance-learning courses are most effective in meeting the needs of students if they are student-centered. Student-centered learning requires that the instructor assume the role of facilitator and consider new approaches to teaching. According to Gene Ziegler, distance-education consultant, the biggest change for faculty is moving from a lecture to a coach or mentoring style when teaching online courses (Daily, 2000). The instructor provides the resources, activities and feedback but allows the student to set the pace. The student can skip or repeat sections as needed (Appleton, 1999).

Students new to distance learning become more comfortable with the new format once they understand the protocol and have had contact with the instructor. Loeding and Wynn (1999) suggest that instructors use multiple means for communicating with students including the telephone, faxes, or email. Special efforts need to be made in a distance education class setting to share course expectations and to provide students with easy access to instructional and technical support. Kiser (1999) reports dropout rates are lower for courses that build in student communication and support.

A common barrier or disappointment reported by students with a distance delivery format is the lack of face-to-face interactions with the professor and other students. Discussions, collaboration and team projects are standard components of college classes but such projects can be difficult to manage in distance education courses. Chamberlin (2001) suggests that faculty members seek ways to have students communicating about the theory and sharing ideas. He encourages faculty members to spend less time posting theory and devote more time to having students interact with one another about the theory.

Methodology

The study was conducted to determine the perceptions of university students and faculty towards distance-learning issues. Based on the related literature review and researchers' experience with teaching distance education courses, two questionnaires were developed to identify the perceptions of distance education instructors and students. One questionnaire targeted student perceptions and the other faculty perceptions. Both questionnaires contained the following sections: (1) distance education experience, (2) problems and issues relating to distance education, and (3) factors relating to distance education success. A twelve-member panel of experts that included distance educators and administrators validated the content of the questionnaire.

Through web-site e-mail addresses and phone numbers, all 335 AACSB accredited business schools in the United States were contacted and asked to provide the names of professors teaching a distance learning courses in a business area. Sixty-one institutions agreed to participate in the study and provided names and mailing addresses of 184 professors who taught business courses through distance learning. The business professors were sent a cover letter with the questionnaire. Approximately 6 weeks later, a follow-up letter coupled with the questionnaire was sent to non-respondents. Of the 184 professors

identified as possible participants, usable responses were received from 81 resulting in a response rate of 48.5%.

To obtain students perceptions, professors teaching distance-learning courses were asked to help gather the data. The professors willing to participate either sent the instrument to their distance-learning students or provided a mailing address for the students enrolled in a distance education course they were currently or had recently taught. Data was collected over the course of 3 academic semesters. A total of 153 questionnaires were received from the students and all were usable.

Student participation was voluntary and participation had no effect on a student's final grade. The students were informed through a letter accompanying the survey that the results were confidential that all responses and comments they provided would be combined with responses and comments provided by the students at other universities taking distance education courses. The surveys were returned in a pre-addressed envelope to the researchers. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including percentages and frequencies.

Findings

An analysis of the findings from this study are presented as follows: (1) demographics of respondents, (2) student perceptions of taking distance education courses, (3) faculty perceptions of teaching distance education courses, (4) student concerns with distance education courses, (5) faculty concerns with distance education courses, (6) student perceptions of important distance education course factors, and (7) faculty perceptions of important distance education course factors

Demographics of Respondents

Of the 81 faculty respondents, 53 (65.4%) indicated that they were teaching graduate courses, 8 (9.9%) were teaching undergraduate courses, and 19 (23.5%) were teaching business courses at both levels. Thirty-five (43.2%) of the respondents were teaching web-based courses, 27 (33.3%) were teaching ITV (Interactive Television) courses, and 17 (21.0%) were teaching using both types of technology.

The faculty members surveyed were relatively new to distance education, with the majority having taught distance-learning courses for no more than three years. However, 23 percent indicated that they had been teaching some type of distance-learning courses for five or more years.

All of the 153 questionnaires completed by the students were usable and included in the findings. Almost half (49.0%) of the students had full-time jobs, 36.0% had part-time positions, and the rest (15.0%) were not currently employed. Most of the student respondents were graduate students (92%) and close to half (45.6 %) were over 30 years old. Almost 56 percent of the respondents were female.

Student Perceptions of Taking Distance Education Courses

The first analysis identified student perceptions of taking a distance education course. Almost eighty percent (79.9%) of the students agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoyed taking distance education courses, and over three-quarters (76.8%) agreed that they received good administrative report. Less than half (49%) of the students agreed or strongly agreed they had received good technical support, and fewer than thirty-five percent (34.9%) perceived their distance education professors were more enthusiastic than those who teach in traditional classroom settings, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1

Student Perceptions of Taking Distance Education Courses

Perception	Strongly Agree		Agree		Uncertain		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
I enjoy taking distance education courses	55	36.9	64	43.0	19	12.8	7	4.7	4	2.7
I receive good administrative support for taking distance education courses	36	23.8	80	53.0	29	19.2	4	2.6	2	1.3
I receive good technical support for taking distance education courses	17	11.4	56	37.6	61	40.9	11	7.4	4	2.7
Distance education professors are usually more enthusiastic than those in traditional classrooms	14	9.4	38	25.5	68	45.6	25	16.8	4	2.7

Faculty Perceptions of Teaching Distance Education Courses

The second analysis identified faculty perceptions of teaching a distance education course. Over seventy percent (72.9%) of the faculty agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoyed teaching distance education courses, although less than half (46.9%) indicated agreement that they received good administrative report. Over sixty percent (60.5%) of the faculty agreed or strongly agreed that they received good technical support, but only about forty percent (40.6%) indicated agreement that their distance education students were more motivated than those in traditional classroom settings. This analysis is displayed in Table 2.

Table 2

Faculty Perceptions of Teaching Distance Education Courses

Perception	Strongly Agree		Agree		Uncertain		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
I enjoy teaching distance education courses	25	30.9	34	42.0	10	12.3	9	11.1	3	3.7
I receive good administrative support for teaching distance education courses	8	9.9	30	37.0	17	21.0	16	19.8	10	12.3
I receive good technical support for teaching distance education courses	16	19.8	33	40.7	6	7.4	14	17.3	12	14.8
Distance education students are usually more motivated than traditional students	13	16.5	19	24.1	31	39.2	11	13.9	5	6.3

Students' Concerns with Distance Education Courses

The third analysis identified students' concerns with distance education courses. The three highest concerns reported by distance education students as being somewhat of a problem or problematic were student team projects (65.4%), technology reliability (56.4%), and student/teacher communication (44.4%). This analysis is shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Students' Concerns with Distance Education Courses

Concern	Not a Problem		Somewhat of a Problem		Problematic	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Student/teacher communication	79	55.6	46	32.4	17	12.0
Student team projects	45	34.6	63	48.5	22	16.9
Student access to resources	81	59.1	41	29.9	15	10.9
Student test administration	98	76.0	26	20.2	5	3.8
Student technology competence	105	72.4	36	24.8	4	2.8
Teacher technology competence	112	79.4	25	17.7	4	2.8
Technology reliability	62	43.7	62	43.7	18	12.7
Technical service from school	84	66.1	33	26.0	10	7.9

Teachers' Concerns with Distance Education Courses

The fourth analysis identified teachers' concerns with distance education courses. The three highest concerns reported by distance education faculty as being somewhat of a problem or problematic were technology reliability (80.1%), student access to resources (65.3%), and student technology competence (62.3%). This information is presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Teachers' Concerns with Distance Education Courses

Concern	Not a Problem		Somewhat of a Problem		Problematic	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Student/teacher communication	32	39.5	32	39.5	17	21.0
Student team projects	25	41.0	24	39.3	12	19.7
Student access to resources	26	34.7	34	45.3	15	20.0
Student test administration	43	57.3	20	26.7	12	16.0
Student technology competence	29	37.7	39	50.6	9	11.7
Teacher technology competence	46	59.0	29	37.2	3	3.8
Technology reliability	16	20.0	41	51.3	23	28.8
Technical service from school	32	41.6	30	39.0	15	19.5

Student Perceptions of Important Distance Education Course Factors

The next analysis identified student perceptions of the factors felt to be important in distance education courses. The three most important factors regarding distance education courses as perceived by the student respondents were time/place flexibility (66.7%), the faculty's role as a facilitator (63.2%), and new teaching/learning approaches (62.0%). This information is provided in Table 5.

Table 5

Student Perceptions of Important Distance Education Course Factors

Factors	Very Important		Important		Unsure		Not Important	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Cost efficiency for students	41	27.5	45	30.2	41	27.5	22	14.8
Time/place flexibility	72	47.1	30	19.6	11	7.2	40	26.1
Faculty's role as facilitator	53	34.9	43	28.3	27	17.8	29	19.1
Opportunity for career/adult education	46	30.3	45	29.6	34	22.4	27	17.8
New teaching/learning approaches	31	20.7	62	41.3	45	30.0	12	8.0
Student-centered learning	34	22.4	54	35.5	48	31.6	16	10.5

Teacher Perceptions of Important Distance Education Course Factors

The final analysis identified faculty perceptions of the factors felt to be important in distance education courses. The three most important factors regarding distance education courses as perceived by the faculty respondents were time/place flexibility (90.1%), the faculty's role as a facilitator (86.0%), and new teaching approaches (73.1%). This information is illustrated in Table 6.

Table 6

Teacher Perceptions of Important Distance Education Course Factors

Factor	Very Important		Important		Unsure		Not Important	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Cost efficiency for students	12	15.2	23	29.1	29	36.7	15	19.0
Flexibility of time/place for students	51	63.8	21	26.3	5	6.3	3	3.8
Faculty role as facilitator	31	39.2	37	46.8	9	11.4	2	2.5
New opportunity for adult/career education	28	36.8	27	35.5	17	22.4	4	5.3
New teaching/learning approaches	29	37.2	28	35.9	16	20.5	5	6.4
Student-centered learning	25	32.5	20	26.0	28	36.4	4	5.2

Conclusions

A significant number of both faculty and student respondents expressed satisfaction with the distance education courses that they were teaching or taking. Students were more satisfied than the faculty with the administrative support that they were receiving. Faculty members, on the other hand, were more satisfied with the technical support that they received.

Nearly half of the student respondents were uncertain if distance education faculty were more enthusiastic than those in traditional classrooms. Similarly, almost half of the faculty felt that distance education students were no more motivated than students in traditional classrooms.

The responses of the students in this study show that student/teacher communication is still a major concern in distance education. The faculty in this study, however, did not rank such communication as a major concern. Despite the fact that faculty seemed pleased with the technical support that was available at their institutions, both they and the student respondents expressed concerns about the reliability of technology in distance education classrooms.

Nearly two-thirds of the student respondents perceived team projects as somewhat of a problem or problematic. This fact seems to indicate that there were problems with student-to-student communication. A high percentage of the faculty respondents were concerned about student access to resources and the technological competence of students.

Both the students and faculty in this study ranked time/place flexibility as their most significant distance education course factor. Both students and faculty also felt that the role of the faculty as a course facilitator and the incorporation of new teaching and learning approaches were important factors.

Recommendations

The results of this study indicate that communication issues are still important in distance education. Faculty and the institutions that offer distance education courses need to initiate or improve ongoing efforts to improve the interactions between students and teachers of these courses. Efforts also need to be made to improve communication between students in collaboration efforts such as team projects. New techniques and methods for improving communication need to be explored.

Since flexibility and the incorporation of new teaching/learning approaches are important to both students and faculty, efforts in this direction need to be expanded.

As technology reliability was a major concern of both faculty and students, institutions offering distance education courses need to expand the technology support in order to ensure that the equipment is more reliable. Since technology is improving so rapidly, a study of this type could be repeated in a few years in order to determine if faculty and student responses would be changed with advances in distance learning technology.

Further studies are needed in order to determine which techniques for communication are most effective in a distance-learning environment. Such studies could ascertain the techniques most effective for teacher-student interaction and which are most effective for student-student interaction.

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