Faculty Perspectives: A Comparison of Distance Education and Face-to-Face Courses

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ABSTRACT

With the increasing demand for distance education and the need for faculty to embrace this as a viable teaching tool, faculty perceptions and expectations for distance education as compared with traditional face-to-face courses is an important issue. The current study asked faculty to make comparisons of the two teaching mediums across numerous dimensions.

Introduction

Distance learning is a broad term that encompasses both distance education (a term commonly used in academia) and distance training (a term commonly used in industry). The current paper examines faculty perceptions of distance education as defined by Bordeau and Bates (1997); education that is computer based, remote, or asynchronous and supported by some instructional system.

The pros and cons of distance education are frequently debated at all levels of academia (Celsi and Wolfinbarger, 2001; Bryant, Kahle and Schafer, 2005). As educators we are greatly concerned with the degree to which our current educational practices prepare students to thrive in our ever-changing technological society. While there appears to be little consensus of judgment, most faculty agree that distance education is becoming more important as it provides an opportunity to service more students beyond a geographical location and to make improvements in operational efficiency and student service (Perreault, Waldman, Alexander and Zhao, 2002; Martins and Kellermans, 2004). This influx of students is typically seen as encouraging, because although additional demands are placed on the technological systems of the organization (computing networks, new hardware and software, etc.), there is not a corresponding demand for increased physical space associated with onsite students.

Despite the positives, distance education is not without its skeptics. With the explosion of distance education programs in business schools, issues related to maintaining accreditation standards now permeate curriculum discussions. In fact, current American Association of Collegiate Schools of Business accreditation standards state that "An institution that uses a variety of educational delivery systems at various locations must demonstrate comparable quality of its educational programs for all students. An institution must meet accreditation standards at all the various locations at which the included degree programs are delivered, or in the case of distance learning, standards must be met in all delivery modes" (AACSB, 2005). Faculty has also expressed concerns related to distance education, particularly the technological problems associated with course delivery (Perreault et al., 2002; Crow, Cheek and Hartman, 2003). While challenges still exist, colleges and universities are facing increasing pressure from both internal

and external stakeholders – including accrediting agencies, public agencies, and private organizations, to incorporate more technology into their curriculum (Driver, 2002).

Distance education is not only challenging for many students; it also presents challenges for instructors to create a well-designed virtual learning environment (Kearsley, 2002). Shea, Motiwalla and Lewis (2001) found that most professors sampled from 68 higher education institutions relied primarily on asynchronous tools for their distance education courses; only 63% used live chat, 32% used streaming audio, and 28% used streaming video. The lack of personalized communication has been previously documented as an obstacle in the distance education learning environment (Perreault et al., 2002).

Various recommendations in course design and administration have been offered to overcome potential obstacles, including the perceived lack of personalized communication. Berger (1999) suggests that distance education professors set up online office hours and incorporate live chat sessions into their virtual classes. Similarly, Perreault et al. (2002) recommend that professors strive to create distance education courses that promote interaction and collaboration via providing multiple means for communicating, including e-mail, discussion boards, online office hours and flexible telephone access. Further supporting these findings, Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fich (2006) report that separate from epistemological considerations, collaborative approaches to online course work result in better outcomes and higher levels of medium satisfaction. Riley and Gallo (2000) stressed the importance of incorporating all aspects of course design into a distance education environment. This includes providing the appropriate curriculum and teaching tools, as well as support, interaction, and selection of the best mix of technology tools. Daily (2000) equates the move to teaching a distance education course to the professor moving from an expert lecturer to more of a coach and mentor.

The Current Study

With the increasing demand for distance education and the need for faculty to embrace this as a viable teaching tool, faculty perceptions and expectations for distance education as compared with traditional face-to-face courses is an important issue. The current study reports faculty comparisons of the two teaching mediums across numerous dimensions.

METHODS

Research Setting, Participants, and Procedures

As part of an on-going, multi-phase research endeavor examining distance learning, faculty associated with both a College of Business and a College of Education from a large regional university were asked to complete an anonymous survey regarding their perceptions of distance education. The response rate for the survey was 47%; 109 completed surveys (52% male, 45% female, and 3% undisclosed) were received from the 235 faculty that were invited to participate. The average age of faculty participants was 48 years old, with an average of 12.3 years teaching at the university level and an average of 2.1 years teaching online. Seventy-seven percent of respondents held a PhD/EdD/MD or other terminal degree and 23% had a MA/MS/MBA or other Masters level degree. With regard to academic rank, 22% of respondents were lecturers,

33% were assistant professors, 19% were associate professors, 19% were full professors, and 6% reported some other status or rank. Approximately 71% of participants teach undergraduate courses face-to-face, 28% of participants reported teaching undergraduate courses online, 49% teach graduate courses face-to-face, and 40% teach graduate courses online.

Survey Instrument

The survey instrument used for the current study was comprised of questions used in previous research on technology acceptance (Davis, 1989), distance education (Christensen, Anakwe and Kessler, 2001; Martins & Kellermanns, 2004), and other questions specific to the researchers' interests.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Table1 and Table 2 both depict the responses of faculty with regard to comparisons between traditional face-to-face courses and distance education courses.

An examination of reported faculty perceptions indicates that faculty believes there are numerous differences between distance education and traditional face-to-face courses; although some things are thought to be quite comparable. For example, distance education courses were perceived to provide more flexibility for students, better cost efficiency, and even improved student-centered learning than do face-to-face courses. Likewise, faculty reported that at least comparable resources – training, technological, and clerical, were available for distance education courses as for face to face teaching. Additionally, faculty felt that distance education provided greater opportunity to try new, innovative teaching techniques. However, faculty still felt that online courses provided less structure and likely included less professor-to-student interaction than does the traditional classroom setting. In addition to this, faculty reported than distance education courses are more time consuming in several ways – time spent grading, responding to student email, talking to students on the phone, and in overall course administration. Encouragingly, student motivation, performance, and learning were all perceived as being comparable across the two teaching media.

Christensen et al. (2001) argue that online education is becoming more suitable for traditional learners as professors integrate more technological features into their virtual classrooms. As distance education courses become more sophisticated, they have greater success at "mimicking" the traditional classroom (Christensen et al., p. 276). The current study, while obviously a preliminary examination of faculty perceptions, indicates that distance education courses are also beginning to be seen by faculty as more and more like traditional face-to-face courses on several dimensions. As we continue to increase our understanding of faculty perceptions we will be better equipped to provide the support and resources necessary to allow faculty to best serve their diverse student populations by delivering the best possible courses.

Table 1. Compared with traditional face-to-face courses, how do distance education courses compare with regard to:

	Less than F2F	Comparable to F2F	More than F2F	Uncertain	Total Response
Student to professor interaction	56% (61)	26% (28)	6% (7)	12% (13)	109
Amount of course structure	47% (51)	28% (30)	17% (18)	9% (10)	109
Flexibility for students	5% (5)	37% (40)	49% (53)	10% (11)	109
Cost efficiency for students	5% (5)	19% (21)	68% (74)	8% (9)	109
Student-centered learning	3% (3)	16% (17)	62% (68)	19% (21)	109
Student performance (grades)	13% (14)	42% (46)	25% (27)	20% (22)	109
Student learning (synthesis and integration)	11% (12)	61% (66)	6% (6)	23% (25)	109
Student motivation	28% (30)	49% (53)	4% (4)	20% (22)	109

Table 2. When compared to traditional face-to-face courses, what are your expectations for distance education with regard to:

	Less than F2F	Comparable to F2F	More than F2F	Uncertain	Total Response
Flexibility for professors opportunities to try innovative teaching techniques	18% (20)	18% (20)	59% (64)	5% (5)	109
Time spent developing/prepping the course	14% (15)	45% (49)	30% (33)	11% (12)	109
Time spent administering a course	1% (1)	23% (25)	70% (76)	6% (7)	109
Time spent grading student assignments	6% (6)	20% (22)	68% (74)	6% (7)	109
Time spent interacting with students via email	8% (9)	41% (45)	44% (48)	6% (7)	109
Time spent interacting with students via phone	3% (3)	11% (12)	83% (90)	4% (4)	109
Time spent interacting with students in general	9% (10)	39% (42)	35% (38)	17% (19)	109
Training resources available from the institution	20% (22)	37% (40)	35% (38)	8% (9)	109
Financial resources available from the institution	4% (4)	39% (43)	39% (42)	18% (20)	109
Technology resources available from the institution	2% (2)	30% (33)	43% (47)	25% (27)	109
Hands on support from the institution (graduate assistants, clerical support, etc)	1% (1)	37% (40)	48% (52)	15% (16)	109

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