

Distance Education at WCU: Examining Strengths and Weaknesses

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Increasing Prevalence of Distance Education

- Over the last twenty-five years, **more and more universities have created distance education programs.**
- This has come about as a result of the proliferation of the Internet, an interest on the part of students to have a convenient way of obtaining education, as well as a realization that distance education is a way for universities to develop a new revenue streams.

Increasing Prevalence of Distance Education

In 2006, approximately 3.5 million students were enrolled in at least one online course, which was approximately a 10% increase from 2005 (Allen & Seaman, 2007). In contrast, in 2011, the number of students enrolled in an online course was 6.7 million students, almost doubling the number of students taking distance courses in 2006 (Allen & Seaman, 2013). **The percentage of universities and colleges offering online education programs increased from 34.5% in 2002 to 62.4% in 2012.** Simonson, Smaldino, Albright and Zvacek (2014) report that distance education has become an important part of many universities' long-term planning.

Quality of Distance Education

When it comes to the quality of distance education courses, the record has been mixed. Allen and Seaman (2013) reported that in 2003 “57.2 percent of academic leaders rated the learning outcomes in online education as the same or superior to those in face-to-face” (p. 5). In 2012, that number increased to 77 percent. In spite of the progress made in improving perceptions of online learning, **a significant percentage of academic leaders – in 2012, 23% - perceive online instruction to be inferior to face-to-face instruction.**

Dropping Out of Distance Education

Dropout rates, a significant concern when it comes to distance education programs, vary as well from program to program. Some programs reported more than 80% of the students completing their programs, while others report completion rates below 50% (Carr, 2000). **More recent estimates show that distance education dropout rates are higher than face-to-face courses by about 10% to 20%** (Bart, 2012), with some estimating it to be higher than that (Patterson & McFadden, 2009).

Need for Evaluation

- Although the quality of online programs has improved in general, there is still work to be done.
- If distance programs are to be perceived as a legitimate means of education, it is critical for administrators to evaluate and improve the quality of their programs (Moore, Lockee, & Burton, 2002).

Why is Evaluation Important?

Evaluation is an important part of a successful distance education program (Galbraith, Sisco, and Guglielmino (1997). Willis (1993) stated that “**even the best designed or adapted distance delivered course will likely require revision.**” (p. 70). While evaluation is most commonly used for accountability (Scriven, 1981), a well-planned evaluation program can help educators to carefully consider how they are teaching and can help them to be more effective in their instruction (Verduin and Clark, 1991).

Program Evaluation

- As Rovai (2003) points out, program evaluation can be broad and include evaluation of input, process, output, and impact variables.
- Rovai (2003) also discusses different methods of collecting data for these types of evaluations. These include objectives-oriented, management-oriented, expertise-oriented evaluation, adversary-oriented, participant-oriented evaluation, and consumer-oriented.
- While all these types of evaluations and methods of collecting data can provide important information to institutions of higher learning to help improve their distance education offerings, **a primary focus of much evaluation is upon output evaluation through the collection of data using a consumer evaluation method. One reason for this, perhaps, is that student satisfaction with distance education programs has been shown to be highly and positively correlated with student retention** (Astin, 1993; Edwards & Means, 1982) If administrators of distance education programs want to see their distance education program grow, then assuring that students are satisfied would be important.

Need for a More Comprehensive Evaluation

- A common approach is to survey students within each course. When it comes to research gaps in distance education, Phipps and Merisotis (1998) write:

“The research has tended to emphasize student outcomes for individual courses rather than for a total academic program. A major gap in the research is the lack of studies dedicated to measuring the effectiveness of total academic programs taught using distance learning. **Virtually all of the comparative or descriptive studies focus upon individual courses.**” (p. 5)

- While course surveys might be a good way at providing feedback to individual instructors, **it is not the best way of evaluating the overall quality of distance education at a university.**

Past Research

- Studies have been done which look at quality of the distance education at universities.
- These include Sun, Tsai, Finger, Chen, and Yeh (2007), Walker and Fraser (2005), and Chaney, Eddy, Dorman, Glessner, Green and Lara-alecio (2007).
- While these studies looked at the overall quality in a very broad sense, and looked at the literature, the study by Smidt, Li, Bunk, Kochem and McAndrew (2017) was more narrowly focused, and addressed student perceptions.

Creating the Instrument

- The study by Smidt, Li, Bunk, Kochem and McAndrew (2017) served as the basis for the development of a survey to evaluate distance education programs.
- Their research identified seven key elements of a quality distance education program: comparable rigor, clarity, interaction, meets objectives or outcomes, feedback, availability, and engagement. These served as the primary basis for the student survey used in this study.
- In addition, additional items were added based upon the review of research.
- Students were also asked to provide open-ended feedback.
- Prior to its use, items were reviewed with students to assure that the survey was clearly worded.

Research Questions

- What are students' perceptions of distance learning at West Chester University?
- In what ways can distance learning be improved at West Chester University?

Procedures

- The survey was administered at Avondale College of Higher Education as part of part of a sabbatical. Subsequently the same procedure was and is being followed at West Chester University.
- The survey was administered to all students who were currently enrolled at each university and who had participated in the distance education program.
- Each person identified was sent a link to a Qualtrics survey via email.
- A follow-up email was sent to remind people to complete the survey.

Response Rates

	Avondale	WCU
Number Distance Education Students	274	3198
Number who Responded	80	963
Did Not Respond to 50% of Items	10	216
Number Valid Responses	56	747
Return Rate	20%	23%

Overall Evaluation

Students were asked to determine the percentage of courses which were excellent, good, fair, poor, and very poor. These percentages were combined into an overall score by weighting the categories by 4, 3, 2, 1, 0 and then standardized by dividing by the highest score. The average across all students was calculated.

	Avondale College	West Chester University
Average (standard deviation) score	75.4 (20)	85.0 (16.6)

Mean, standard deviations, medians and sample size for ratings of quality criteria

Criteria	Avondale		WCU	
	Mean (SD)	N	Mean (SD)	N
Assessments measure instructional objectives	73.9 (22.2)	52	77.3 (23.8)	708
Well organized	71.5 (25.7)	55	80.5 (24.9)	707
Same/higher rigor compared to face-to-face courses	69.3 (28.4)	49	72.5 (29.8)	705
Helped students to think critically/Engage students in higher-level thinking skills	69.2 (27.9)	56	74.8 (27.8)	706
Helped students to apply knowledge to the real world	64.3 (27.4)	56	75.4 (27.0)	703
Actively engaged the student with the subject matter	62.3 (31.3)	56	72.4 (29.0)	706
Facilitated group interactions among the students	49.6 (33.0)	52	77.3 (29.0)	700
Accommodated different learning styles	47.9 (30.8)	56	66.6 (30.6)	695

Accessible and Personable

Students were asked about the percent of the instructors they found personable and accessible. Means and standard deviations were calculated.

	Avondale College		WCU	
	Mean (SD)	N	Mean (SD)	N
Personable	86.8% (19.0)		81.7% (24.3)	
Accessible	79.1 (22.4)		81.5% (26.6)	

Collaboration

Students were asked whether in their distance courses they were given opportunities to collaborate with their fellow students.

	Avondale College	WCU
Percent of students who were given opportunities to collaborate	73.2	79.0
Average of combination score for quality of interactions.	63.3 (25.0)	74.8 (23.8)

Those students who did were asked to indicate the percent of the interactions which were excellent, good, fair, poor, and very poor. These percentages were weighted, combined, and divided by the maximum possible score, as was done above.

How Close to Fellow Students

- Students were asked to rate how close they felt they were to their fellow distance education students.
- In Avondale College, the majority of the respondents, 53.6% did not feel close at all to their fellow students, with 19.6% and 16.1% reported feeling a bit close or somewhat close.
- At WCU, students were also asked how close they felt to their fellow students, 31.2% did not feel close at all to their fellow students; 21.8% and 26.0% reported feeling a bit close or somewhat close respectively.

Helpfulness and Timeliness of Feedback

Students were asked how helpful the assistance provided by the distance lecturer(s) was. The percentages for helpful and very helpful have been combined.

	Avondale College	WCU
Assistance helpful or very helpful	87.5%	84%

Students were asked about their perception of the timeliness of the feedback provided by lecturers on work completed in distance courses.

	Avondale College	WCU
Timely	55.4%	67.5%
Somewhat Timely	29.6%	24.8%
Not Timely at All	15.0%	7.8%

Things Learned from the Open Comments

- Timely feedback is critical. Instructors should provide students with their grades on one assignment before requiring them to submit another assignment.
- Ideally, all course web pages should be organized in the same way. The information provided should be located in the same places. The resulting organizational structure should be well planned and easy to navigate.
- Using supplemental technologies, such as VoiceThread, appears to be beneficial. However, a limited number of technologies should be used, if possible, to avoid students having to learn to use different technologies.

Things Learned from the Open Comments

- Avoid overburdening students with assignments. It is easy to underestimate the amount of time that students require to complete assignments – especially when they require learning new technologies.
- Make sure that the assignments given are meaningful. Each assignment, including online discussion assignments, should be evaluated to make sure that it is not just busy work, but advances learning in a meaningful way.
- When professional degrees are being pursued, the instruction and assessment should be relevant to the activities that the student will be doing in their profession.
- Providing opportunities for students to interact with their fellow students. Some interactions can simply be ways of creating a sense of community, which is important.

Things Learned from the Open Comments

- Instructors should not shy away from group activities to create learning communities. Group activities are ways of helping students feel less isolated.
- Discussion boards are one way of creating community so that students get to know one another. However, it is important to avoid trite discussions. Like the group assignments, the required activity must be meaningful.
- Courses need to address different learning styles. Specifically, all courses should provide the opportunity for students to at least hear the voice of their professor within an instructional context.
- It is important to understand that distance education students approaching their education differently than face-to-face students. They expect flexibility in their educational experience.

Limitations

- One of the limitations of the research is that there is no objective way of evaluating the ratings.
- It should also be noted that different students have different experiences. Some students love one aspect that others don't.
- A survey of students is limited in what it is evaluating of the program.

Future Research

- Focus groups!
- Create a set of norms by surveying other universities?
- More comprehensive evaluation??