Components of a Distance Education Evaluation System

Martha Henckell
Southeast Missouri State University, USA

Michelle Kilburn
Southeast Missouri State University, USA

David Starrett
Southeast Missouri State University, USA

INTRODUCTION

As with any new program, the chance of failure runs high and distance education, in comparison with the longevity of traditional education, is considered relatively new. Enrollment growth, as well as the number of distance courses and programs now offered, demonstrates that distance education appears to be here to stay. Allen and Seaman (2013) report 6.7 million online learning students were enrolled in at least one online course in 2011. This figure represents an increase of 570,000 students over the previous year. With this much interest and popularity, the need for policies to regulate distance education program practices should be recognized by all participating institutions of higher education (Czubaj, 2001).

While students appear to be more focused on the conveniences that distance education provides, universities are more attentive to the need for offering a valid learning alternative. Couple this with the view held by 69.1% of chief academic officers who consider online learning to be critical to their long-term strategy (Allen & Seaman, 2013), the offering of distance education courses and programs stimulates the need for new decisions by academic administrators for quality and accreditation purposes (Shea, et al., 2001; Tricker, Rangecroft, & Long, 2001).

One of the first steps toward ensuring success of distance education programs is identifying the requirements of all those involved. Student needs are to receive a quality education. In the Changing Course report, 77% of the chief academic officers surveyed believe that online learning provides learning outcomes as good as or better than face-to-face instruction (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Faculty needs are to have at their disposal (and to use) the knowledge and means to provide this education, as well as a belief in this modality of teaching. Unfortunately, only 30% of the surveyed chief academic officers believe that their faculty accept the value and legitimacy of online learning. Institution needs are to assess that students receive a quality education and to provide faculty the resources in order for student educational needs to be met. One of the barriers to a strong distance education program is the lack of a good evaluation system. The focus of this article will be to identify and describe, from the literature, the components of an effective evaluation system. Armed with this information, administrators will be able to make better program decisions.

BACKGROUND

The number of studies comparing the effectiveness of distance and traditional education has decreased, lending some to believe distance education is more accepted as a viable learning opportunity (Davies, Howell, & Petrie, 2010). Regardless, the newness of distance education dictates that the distance education programs will continue to evolve. The need for information in any decision making process is crucial. One of the most popular methods for amassing information in higher educational settings is by performing evaluations. According to Patton (1997), education has a long history of using evaluations. Users of this data have their own purposes in mind. Students are seeking

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-5888-2.ch215

affirmation that the course contains relevant content, the instructor teaches effectively, and the course will help them reach their long-term goals (McKeachie, 1996; Spencer & Schmelkin, 2003; Willis, 1993). Faculty will have access to feedback that can help guide them in their teaching. Job performance reviews can be gleaned from either an administrator or student evaluation of faculty (Algozzine et al., 2004; Chen & Hoshower, 1998; Halpern & Hakel, 2003; McKeachie, 1996; Spencer & Schmelkin, 2002; Willis, 1993). Critical to institutional administrators is the collection of information that relates to whether or not institutional strategic goals are being accomplished. Decisions as to the potential development of a distance program (Willis) and changes to support programs (i.e., bookstore, tutoring, etc.) that support this program can be made. Academic administrators use evaluation data as one means to judge teaching performance (Emery et al., 2003; Neumann, 2000; Willis, 1993). Using evaluation data for this purpose requires the need to consider biases that may be present in student responses due to level of interest in the subject matter, prior experience, or suitability for distance education (Liu, 2011). Whether appropriate or not, decisions on tenure and promotion are frequently based on this information (Algozzine, et al., 2004; Chen & Hoshower, 1998; Halpern & Hakel, 2003' McKeachie, Spencer & Schmelkin, 1996; Willis, 1993).

Regardless of the reason for information collection, quality information can be gathered only with the use of a quality instrument. Reliability and validity of the information is always in the forefront of concerns when conducting an evaluation (Scanlan, 2003; Griffin et al., 2003; Marshall, 2000; Regalbuto, 1999; Achtemeier et al., 2003). To further perpetuate this problem, unless faculty believe in the validity of the information collected, change is not likely to occur (Reid & Johnston, 1999); unless students believe their responses will provide a reward, less than valid responses may be supplied (Chen & Hoshower, 1998).

Differences associated between distance and traditional courses can hinder the desired outcome of validity, emphasizing the evidence that an alternate evaluation instrument is required. Despite the distinctiveness of distance education, many universities continue to use traditional course student evaluation instruments to evaluate distance learning courses (Achtemeier et al., 2003). To increase the reliability and validity of evaluation data, an evaluation instrument designed to represent distance education uniqueness would be required (Henckell, 2007). At the very least, alterations or amendments are required when making use of a well-designed traditional evaluation instrument to evaluate distance education courses (Holcomb et al., 2004; Shuey, 2002; Willis, 1993).

A system contains parts that, when placed together, represent and share a relationship to the whole or what Marshall (2000) describes as a model. As with traditional courses, student evaluations are a vital part of the system for assessing distance education programs. Information collected from student evaluations should not stand alone. Administrative reviews are also necessary to provide a more accurate picture of performance. With each type of evaluation, there is the need to review the components of the evaluation process and what can positively or negatively affect these events. With the recommendations provided in this article, changes can be made to perfect the components used in an evaluation system. Improvements to current evaluation systems will hopefully lead to a greater buy-in of the system by students, faculty, and administrators.

SYSTEM COMPONENTS

Involved in the building of an evaluation system is an evaluation plan. This plan must recognize purposes and rationale of an evaluation and identify how, what, and when to evaluate (Henckell, 2007). Evaluation methods, styles, and strategies can then be determined (Robson, 2000). University administrators, academic administrators, faculty, and students are the four parties that should be included in all evaluation systems of distance education courses (Willis, 1993).

How to Evaluate

First and foremost, the purpose of the evaluation must be identified in order to know the right information for decision making will be present. The cynosure of an evaluation, according to Patton (1997), is its intended use. Data gathered from the process can be utilized to relinquish judgments, expedite improvements, and create knowledge. Patton's judgment oriented evaluation could be used to focus on program effectiveness and accountability. His second evaluation type, improve-