

Chapter VII

Looking for Indicators of Success for Distance Education

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Abstract

The purpose of this chapter is to identify key components of distance education satisfaction. The distance education environment is an expanding market driven by several market forces. A working list of potential variables for satisfaction can be developed from the previous research done to compare the traditional to the distance education environments. A questionnaire was developed using these variables and administered to 341 distance students in a successful, top 26, M.B.A., distance education program. The results of the questionnaire are factored into five constructs that ultimately correlate well with the satisfaction ratings of the subjects. Using these factors as guidance, some operational and administrative implications of those findings are discussed.

Introduction

The primary market driver for Distance Education is that it is the major growth segment in the education industry. In 1999, nearly 80% of the public, four-year institutions and over 60% of the public, two-year institutions offered distance education courses. More than 1.6 million students are enrolled in distance courses today. Technology advancements, such as the Internet, video streaming, voice-over IP, groupware, intranets, etc., are enabling this vast market. Traditional education providers, such as universities, see the market as a way to expand. More than 90% of all colleges are expected to offer some online courses by 2004 (Institute of Higher Education Policy, 2000). Corporations envision online training warehouses saving large amounts of training dollars. Combined, the virtual education market and its sister market, corporate learning, are predicted to grow to more than \$21 billion by the end of 2003 (Svetcov, 2000).

Other Market Drivers

There are several other drivers in the growth and acceptance of distance education. First, job market expectations are changing. In the past, employees and employers maintained employment relationships over long periods of time. Today, employees are not expected to stay in the same job for long periods of time. The current modes of careers include: multiple careers, combinations of part-time work in multiple jobs, telecommuting, leaving and then reentering the full-time work force, switching jobs, etc. Today's employee easily envisions the need to maintain a level of knowledge current with his or her career demands (Boyatzis and Kram, 1999). The concept of lifelong learning has emerged. Lifelong learning is the idea that people, in order to respond to the quickly changing work environment, will need to perform continuous learning throughout their work careers.

The educational institution, itself, sees a growth opportunity. The program implemented must make operational and financial sense, but may be seen as a way to make money (Shepherd et al., 2002). For example, elective classes that do not have sufficient enrollments on-campus may pick up enough distance students to make teaching the course more feasible (Creahan and Hoge, 1998). Costs savings may be obtained and, if significant enough, may drive up demand as costs may be lowered. Finally, most educational institutions serve a geographical region, either by charter or by mission and a distance learning program may be a practical method to help satisfy this strategic mission (Creahan and Hoge, 1998). There can be problems, too. For example, the administrative premise that the distance education program will save money (Creahan and Hoge, 1998) can

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