

Chapter 23

Methodological, Ethical, and Epistemological Challenges of Evaluating Academic Achievement and Course Completion in Distance Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the various challenges of evaluating the quality of distance education programs and proposes methodologies for future research. The authors provide a framework for teaching within the context of distance education and discuss the existing literature surrounding the characteristics of students who engage in distance education, their academic achievement, and their rates of completion. Empirical studies in primary and higher education are examined. While some research supports the great promise of distance education, there are inherent methodological, ethical, and epistemological challenges in evaluating the quality of distance education. The chapter illuminates the need, promise, and challenge of conducting rigorous evaluations and concludes with suggestions to strengthen evaluation in the future.

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INTRODUCTION

The growing body of research and evaluations on distance education in both the K-12 and higher education contexts has yet to paint a coherent picture of effectiveness as indicated by the characteristics of students who engage in distance education, their academic achievement, and their rates of completion. To some extent, the wide range of findings stems from different ways of evaluating technology use, and the fact that the technology is quickly evolving. Regardless of the challenges of evaluating distance education, researchers must strive to conduct rigorous evaluations because the distance education modality of instruction is expanding at an astonishing rate.

Educators from around the world have developed an interest in Web technology and distance education which is now readily accessible from anywhere in the world to almost anyone in the world (Summers, Waigandt, & Whittaker, 2005). The introduction of distance education technology has caused an upheaval in the education field in which the delivery of education via this technology has accelerated at a pace that exceeds, and in many cases has supplants, traditional forms of delivering instruction (Wojciechowski & Palmer, 2005; Morris & Finnegan, 2008). Describing the rapid expansion of distance education in United States primary and secondary (K-12) schooling, Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, and Rapp (2012) noted,

We estimate 275,000 students attended fully online schools in SY [School year] 2011-12, however, growth has slowed somewhat. There are only two new states allowing fully online schools in SY 2012-13 for a total of 31 states. The annual increase in the number of students attending these schools in the largest states is typically hovering around 15%. We count 619,847 course enrollments (one student taking a one-semester-long online course) in 28 state virtual schools in SY 2011-12, an increase of 16% since last year (p. 5).

The continuous innovations and advances in technology have provided the catalyst for distance education instruction to cross the threshold of higher education and become an important element in the mainstream (Moore & Kearsley, 2005). There is a need to increase the access to higher education for all students, especially those from less represented groups such as women, ethnic and racial minorities, and individuals who do not live close to institutions (Enoch & Soker, 2006). Distance education instruction has become an important factor in meeting this objective. Countless institutions searching for viable approaches to provide as many students as possible with the opportunity to obtain an education in spite of the constraints dictated by their personal lives have begun to offer distance education courses (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2003; Moore & Kearsley, 2005; Allen & Seaman 2007, 2010). Currently, virtually all institutions of higher education have undergone substantial expansion in the distance education they provide (Allen & Seaman, 2007).

In 2007, Allen and Seaman conducted a survey of 2,200 colleges and universities in the United States. Of the institutions which had a student population that exceeded of 15,000 students, 96 percent offered distance education. In addition, it was noted that in 2004 enrollment in distance education courses was 2.4 million and by 2005 it increased to 3.2 million. In a report for the Sloan Consortium in 2010, Allen and Seaman conveyed that from fall 2008 to fall 2009 enrollment in distance education increased by almost 1 million with colleges and universities nationwide reporting that approximately 5.6 million students were enrolled in at least one distance education course in fall 2009. According to Allen and Seaman (2010), "This represents the largest ever year-to-year increase in the number of students studying online...." "Nearly thirty percent of all college and university students now take at least one course online." This modality of delivering higher education has become a portal for accessing

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