

Chapter 98

Understanding Faculty and Student Attitudes About Distance Education: The Importance of Excitement and Fear

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to further understand faculty and student attitudes about distance education by exploring the psychological processes through which these attitudes are influenced. The authors explored whether feelings of excitement or fear mediate and/or moderate the relationships between experiences with distance education and various faculty and student attitudes. Survey data from 152 faculty and 1,400 students from a mid-sized United States public university were collected. The results of multiple regression analyses revealed support for both mediation and moderation in both samples. Thus, feelings of excitement/fear play a large role in explaining both why and to what degree experiences with distance education relate to attitudes. The authors suggest that consistent communication about the positive aspects of distance education that instill a sense of excitement among campus communities may be helpful in shaping more positive attitudes about online learning.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-5631-2.ch098

INTRODUCTION

Distance education has grown exponentially over the past decade with more and more universities adopting the practice as a way of expanding their reach, and students' learning options (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Magiuka, Shi, & Bonk, 2005; Shea, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 2006). The Instructional Technology Council reported that between Fall 2012 and Fall 2013, there was a 5.2% growth rate in online student enrollment, which far surpassed the overall student enrollment growth rate of 1.2% at American colleges and universities (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Lokken & Mullins, 2014).

Although the number of students taking online courses has grown tremendously over the past decade, faculty acceptance still lags. The most recent survey conducted by Babson Survey Research Group and Online Learning Consortium (Allen & Seaman, 2015) showed no improvement in faculty concerns over distance education. In fact, there is still widespread speculation among faculty about their perceptions of online learning regarding student retention, learning outcomes, online course development effort and so forth (Allen & Seaman, 2006, 2015). With faculty at the forefront of the online education movement, it is important to understand their attitudes as well as factors that impact their participation in online education.

Allen and Seaman (2015) also noted that the growth rate of distance education is uneven. The overall growth rate of the number of students taking at least one distance course was 3.7% in 2014, which was much lower than previous online growth rates. Furthermore, for-profit four-year institutions reported the first-ever drop of 8.7% in online student enrollment. Thus, in order to sustain the growth of distance education, it is also important to investigate and understand students' attitudes as well as factors that impact their participation in online education.

The authors' institution is rather new to the field of distance education. An Office of Distance Education was established in 2011 in response to the president's initiative to promote and grow distance education offerings and enrollment on campus. The growth of distance education has been steady in the last few years. However, there is a need to understand more about faculty and students in order to maintain the growth and provide appropriate support to distance education faculty and students.

This study aims to further understand faculty and student attitudes about distance education by exploring the psychological processes through which these attitudes are influenced. Specifically, we are looking at emotional factors such as excitement and fear, and how they influence faculty and student attitudes. The authors propose that both online teaching/learning experience and motivation/emotion play important roles in shaping faculty/student attitudes and fear/excitement. The particular focus of the study was to find out whether and how the emotional motivational factors, namely excitement and fear, moderate and/or mediate the relationship between online teaching/learning experience and attitudes about online education.

This research expands upon previous research by focusing on fear/excitement as a key factor in explaining faculty and student distance education attitudes thus having the potential to make both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, the research adds to the existing body of knowledge surrounding the role that various psychological variables can play in understanding attitudes about online learning. Practically, its focus on fear/excitement should be promising to university constituents wanting to effect positive changes related to distance education, given that fear/excitement can be influenced in a number of ways. The comparison between how faculty and student attitudes are shaped differently by emotional factors can further help institutions establish various strategies to promote distance education from both faculty and student perspectives.

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