

## Chapter 19

# Doctoral Student Experiences in an Online Degree Program: A Review of the Distance Education Literature and an Exploration of Their Perspectives

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### ABSTRACT

*With the proliferation of distance education as a common educational delivery mode in higher education, increased scrutiny and criticism has seriously challenged its merit. Despite the widespread hesitancy to embrace distance education as a legitimate component of the higher educational system, the access it affords to adult learners pursuing graduate education is undeniable. To that end, this chapter briefly discusses the history of distance education; reviews the distance education literature; presents findings from a study exploring the experiences of doctoral students regarding the benefits and challenges of pursuing an online degree; discusses emerging trends for distance education; and concludes with recommendations for administrators, faculty, and students in higher education.*

### INTRODUCTION

Whether at the PK-12 or higher education level, educational institutions are continuously transforming to meet the needs of its students. With globalization, the increased popularity of learning online, the economic recession, shrinking postsecondary institutional budgets, and an acknowledgment of the need for lifelong learning, an area that

has had tremendous growth within the educational landscape is in the emergence of online courses and programs (Allen & Seaman, 2007; Benson, Johnson, Taylor, Treat, Shinkareva, & Duncan, 2004; Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009; Owusu-Ansah, Neill, & Haralson, 2011). Likewise, the distance education literature has exponentially mounted within the last decade. The growth of online courses and programs in institutes of higher education has

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mainly been attributed to student demand because of its convenience and flexibility with regard to time, place, and space (McEwen & King, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2011). It has certainly been an attraction for non-traditional, older students since, increasingly, these individuals are no longer willing to quit their jobs and relocate to study full-time at a college or university of their choice. Further, non-traditional, older students oftentimes have family and other life challenges that prevent them from pursuing their studies on campus, and some are geographically distant from higher education institutions. Therefore, the presence of distance learning has certainly afforded access to educational opportunities for groups who have historically been underserved (Allen & Seaman, 2007; Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009; Dziuban & Moskal, 2011; Gaytan, 2007; Kim, Kwon, & Cho, 2011).

In terms of the prevalence of distance education, the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (2011) indicated 20% of undergraduates (4.3 million) enrolled in at least one distance education course and 4% participated in a totally online program in 2007-08, which is a sharp increase from 16% enrolled in at least one distance education course in 2003-04. Interestingly, the percentage of undergraduates enrolled in a totally online program decreased from 5% in 2003-04 to 4% in 2007-08. For graduate students, 22% enrolled in at least one distance education course in 2007-08 and 9% enrolled in a totally online program.

Despite the emergence of online delivery as an increasingly growing platform for curricula in higher education as well as its capacity to reach a historically inaccessible population of potential students, considerable resistance and criticism has most likely inhibited its expansion (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009; Mitchell & Geva-May, 2009). To substantiate, research regarding the implementation of online programs across institutions of higher education in the nation has emphasized the mounting concern about the quality of learning

in a virtual environment (Allen & Seaman, 2007; Bernard, Abrami, Lou, Borokhovski, Wade, & Wozney et al., 2004; Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009; Dziuban & Moskal, 2011; Flowers & Baltzer, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 2009) as well as its value and effectiveness (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009). In the words of Sampson, Leonard, Ballenger, and Coleman (2010), "the quality and substance of web-based course content and delivery have come under attack" (para. 4). The heightened concern with the quality of online programs is undoubtedly a substantial contributor to the current phenomenon of negative dispositions and perceptions of faculty towards not only the implementation of online courses and programs, but also to the consideration of hiring faculty candidates with degrees from online programs and online universities. Regardless of the tensions that are currently present with the establishment of online courses and programs in higher education, "online and blended learning ideas have begun to shift the thinking and practice of educators and leaders in higher education" (Garrison & Akyol, 2009, p. 20).

Given the hesitancy of faculty and students toward the proliferation of distance education as a legitimate learning medium coupled with the increasing demand for working adults to gain access to graduate degree programs, a better understanding of the experiences of students in online programs is needed to shed light on the benefits and challenges of pursuing a doctoral degree. To that end, findings of a recent study exploring the unique lived experiences and frames of reference of doctoral students pursuing their degrees in an online program is presented to provide a glimpse into the educational needs of current working adults. This chapter is organized according to the following format: (a) briefly discusses the history of distance education as well as identifies important associated terms; (b) reviews the literature on some of the most researched issues on the topic of distance education; (c) presents findings from a study exploring the experiences of current doctoral

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