



Chapter XXVIII

Empirical Study of Students' Perceptions of Online Courses

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ABSTRACT

The recent proliferation of availability of online courses and programs has caused some concerns related to ensuring that the time and cost investments provide beneficial results, both to students and the institutions providing the material. Students' perceptions of these programs are likely to affect their interest in enrolling in them. Schools need an awareness of these student perceptions to determine if a need exists to modify the delivery of online programs. This study was designed to determine current perceptions of online programs by potential students, compared with the traditional on-campus environment. Findings indicate those issues that are most important to students in course delivery and their beliefs as to whether these issues are more likely to be delivered through online or through traditional on-campus courses.

INTRODUCTION

More than 14 million persons participated in online classes in the year 2000, and some predictions have suggested that e-learning will become a \$2 billion industry by 2004 (Peltz,

2000). According to Weil (2001), 54% of U.S. higher education institutions are currently offering e-learning courses. Weil cited an International Data Corporation prediction that this will grow to 87% by 2004. Many universities are experiencing increasing pressures to offer college courses online, partly due to competition with other colleges and universities and offerings available through the business sector. An increasing number of traditional colleges and universities are offering online degree programs. Many AACSB-accredited Business schools provide courses and complete programs online. And, new schools have been created that exist solely in cyberspace (Peltz, 2000). Students can complete undergraduate degree programs in fields as diverse as nursing, business, engineering, and technology.

There are several possible reasons for schools offering online programs: to increase revenues and credit hour production, to better utilize limited resources, to serve an expanded geographic area or student population, to serve the existing student population differently, or some combination of all of these reasons.

Students may also take online courses for a variety of reasons: location convenience, time convenience, cost perceptions, quality perceptions, and a variety of other possible reasons.

Some online courses have been implemented so quickly that insufficient time has been available to allow in-depth assessment of the desires, interests, and concerns of their potential direct customers, i.e., students. The study described here was developed to identify students' expectations and current perceptions of online courses and programs offered by colleges and universities. The results are expected to facilitate effective planning and development of these courses in the future. This study focuses on perceptions of potential students and does not attempt to measure curriculum or performance of current students.

BACKGROUND

Convenience has been widely quoted as a primary reason for students taking online courses. Persons already in the workforce or on military bases can take courses without interrupting careers and work schedules. And, online courses are ordinarily offered on a more regular basis than traditional course offerings.

Critics of online instruction point out that a Web-based educational program has at least one disadvantage in that it does not provide a forum for physical contact and live debate between students and faculty. This viewpoint about online degrees is given by many elite universities. They claim that it is impossible to replicate a classroom environment with online courses. Harvard University professor W. Earl Sasser indicated that Harvard "will never offer" an MBA degree online, because it would distract from the residential experience (Symonds, 2001). Kumar et al. (2002, p. 140) cited "strong evidence that students perceive interaction, student-to-student and student-to-instructor, to suffer as a result of virtual education."

But, many information technology professionals argue that there is little difference between getting a degree on campus or over the Web. They point out that many traditional colleges, including the University of Chicago and Stanford University, have initiated online instructional programs. Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) plans to post lecture notes and reading assignments for most of its 2000 courses on the Web for free, as part of a program called OpenCourseWare (Symmonds, 2001). And Robert Baker, a systems consultant at Emergent Information Technologies, Incorporated, in Newport Beach, Califor-

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