PERCEPTION AND ACCEPTANCE OF ONLINE EDUCATION: DO ONLINE COURSES PASS THE MUSTER?

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ABSTRACT

Over the last twenty years, postsecondary institutions have experienced a rapid increase of alternative methods of instructional delivery. Because of the rise of online course offerings and student enrollment in these delivery methods, universities are experiencing an increase in requests for accepted credit towards traditional face-to-face course requirements. This study seeks to investigate the history of online education, evaluate the current and future state of alternative educational delivery and assess the perception of the rigor and validity of equality acceptance of alternative online education in the current academic model. A survey instrument will be distributed to over 500 faculty, university administrators, and employers to solicit their feedback towards current practices, attitudes, and beliefs towards online courses. This study seeks to provide a framework from which faculty, staff, and administrators can utilize as they engage in curriculum assessment and acceptance of online coursework for academic credit.

INTRODUCTION

Distance learning is rapidly becoming a popular option for delivery of course content. Text based correspondence courses, radio based delivery of lessons, and recent computer based technology have all contributed to the development of educational courses involving distance learning (Rodrigues, 1999). Some of the reasons for the popularity of online education can be attributed towards enrollment demands, economic necessity, limited classroom space and emerging technologies. As such many states, institutions, and organizations have been working on strategic

plans to implement online education (Kim and Bonk, 2006). Kim and Bonk (2006) further noted that with the increase of online course offerings it is not surprising that opinions are mixed about the benefits of online teaching and learning in higher education. Perhaps one of the main reasons for the mixed opinions lies in the perceptions held by faculty, university administrators and employers. For example, O'Malley and McCraw (1999) noted that until the 1980's "the primary educational delivery model for collegiate professorial staff was essentially the traditional lecture." As such, it is not surprising that many invested parties might have concerns about the transference of knowledge over new and perhaps untested technologies. O'Malley and McCraw (1999) raised a question regarding "how will these new educational delivery approaches that move away from the basic face to face relationship between a professor and students impact student learning and student perceptions of learning." However, this paper poses the question of how these new educational approaches affect the faculty, administrator, and employer perception of student comprehension and application of skillsets.

The format of this study is as follows. First is a background of online education. A background of online education can be separated into five sections—demographics, the breakdown of institutions offering online courses, learning outcomes, the impact of the economic downturn on online courses, and long term strategic initiatives. The second section discusses the research questions followed by the third section, which describes the methodology. The fourth section reports the results of the questionnaire. The last section discusses limitations and future research possibilities.

ONLINE COURSES

Today's post-secondary degrees offer students the options to engage in various delivery modes (Columbaro and Monaghan, 2009) According to the 2005 Sloan Consortium report, Allen and Seaman (2005) describe the following standard academic degree program configurations as:

- Traditional or Minor Web-Facilitated: No online technology used or 1 to 29 percent of course content is online through a course management system, such as Blackboard or WebCT, to support the primary use of the face-to-face format.

- Hybrid: 30 to 79 percent content covered online such as online discussions and readings; supplemented by occasional face-to-face classroom experience.

- Online: 80 percent plus of course content and interactions occur online (p. 4).

For purposes of this study online courses will be defined as those where most or all (80+%) of the content is delivered online and typically do not have face-to-face delivery. It may be interactive audio or videoconferencing, pre-recorded videos, webcasts, or computer-based systems delivered over the internet. Online degree programs, which are defined as entire degree programs taught online, will be addressed separately. All information is given for postsecondary education undergraduate level programs.

Demographics

From 2000 to 2008, the percentage of undergraduates enrolled in at least one online class increased from 8% to 20% (Radford, 2011, pg 3). Public institutions were the first to offer online courses and have continued to be the front runner of course offerings. At the University of Central Florida, 80% of the students who enroll for online classes are from the millennial generation (born after 1980) (Mayadas, Bourne, & Bacsich, 2009, pg 87). Yet, the U.S. average is that students are generally older, have a dependent and/or spouse, or have full-time employment (Booker & Rebman, 2005; Radford, 2011). Students with disabilities (26%) enroll in online classes or degree programs more often than students with no disabilities (20%) (Radford, 2011, pg 3).

Breakdown of institutions offering online courses

When considering online courses it is helpful to have a historical perspective of the number of offerings from institutions over time. For example, the percentage of 2- and 4-year degree-granting institutions offering distance education courses rose from 33 to 44 percent between 1995 and 1997, and the total number of such courses nearly doubled in the same period. In addition, distance education course offerings and enrollment have nearly doubled between 1994-95 and 1997-98, as have the number of degree and certificate programs offered. (Thomas, 1999). Figure 1 illustrates the findings from another report by the National Center for Education Statistics in 2003 that reported 56 percent of all 2-year and 4-year Title IV-eligible, degree-granting institutions offered distance education courses in 2000–2001 and another twelve percent of all institutions indicated that they planned to start offering distance education courses in the next 3 years (Tabs, et al 2003).

Figure 1: Percentage distribution of 2 and 4 year postsecondary education institutions that offer distance education courses Source: U.S. Department of Education, 2003.
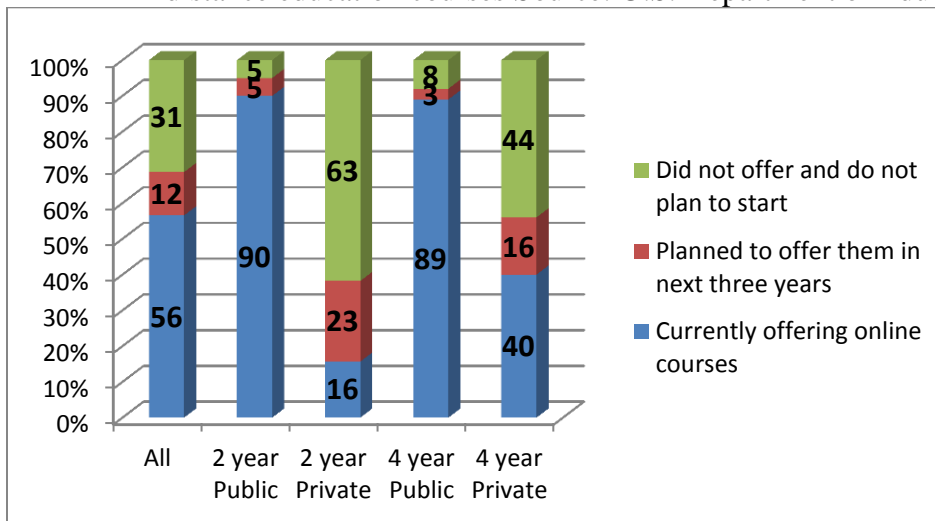

Figure 2 illustrates the lead that 2-year, community colleges have over other institutions in terms of online courses. The primary source of online degree programs is from for-profit institutions.

Figure 2. Percentage of undergraduates enrolled in at least one online course or an online degree program, by type of institution, 2007-08. Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2007-08.
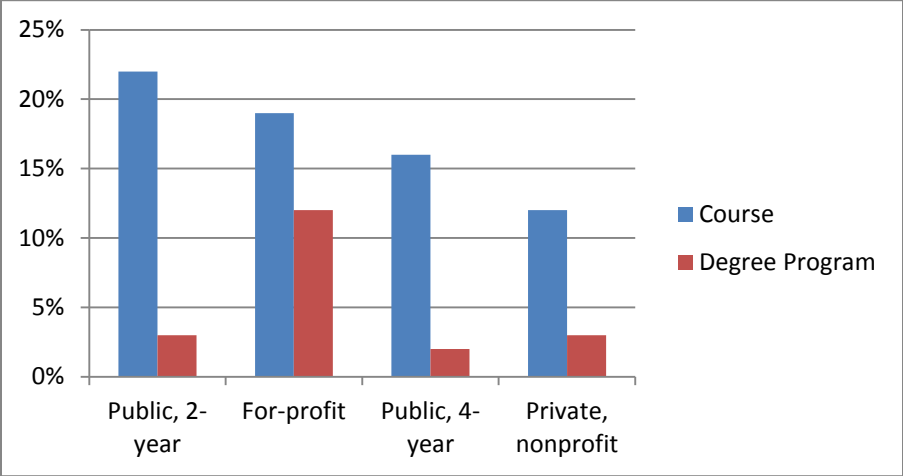
In additional to evaluating online course offering it is important to review a breakdown of the total enrollment with respect to different aspects. This is shown in Figure 3. The blue columns indicate percentage distribution of enrollment in all types of classes and programs by type of institution, the red columns show the online enrollment, and the green columns show the degree programs. A key finding is those for-profit institutions have about 10% of the total undergraduate enrollment but 35% of all undergraduates enrolled in online degree programs are at for-profits (Radford, 2011, pg. 9).

Figure 3. Percentage distribution of total enrollment, enrollment in online courses, and enrollment in degree programs by type of institution, 2007-08. Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2007-08.
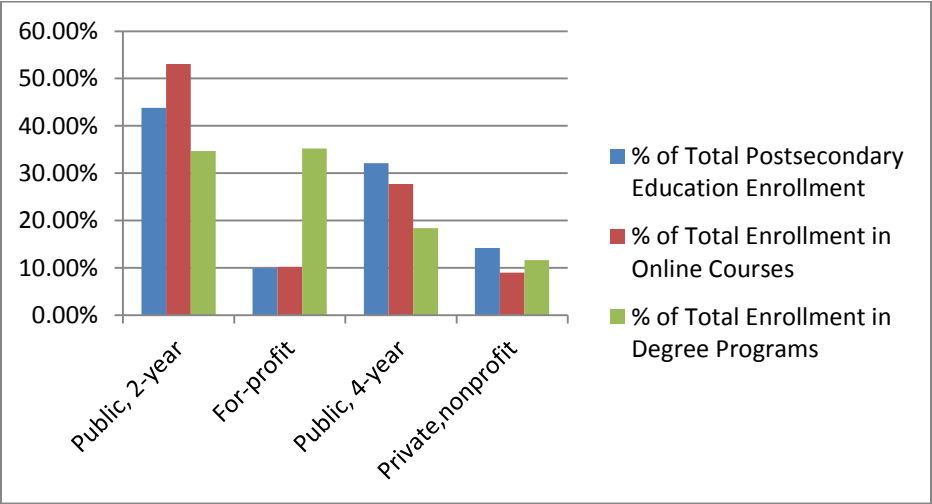
Learning outcomes

The perception of online learning is that it is inferior to face-to-face learning. Those institutions *not* offering online learning perceive it to be inferior more often than those who *are* offering courses or degree programs. Figure 4 illustrates the survey results when academic leaders were asked about their perception of the comparison between the two learning styles (Allen & Seaman, 2010, pg 10). Despite this perception, research indicates there are equivalent outcomes from online and traditional environments with similar dropout rates and students receiving similar educational quality.

Figure 4. The perception of academic leaders about learning outcomes in online courses compared to face-to-face by type of institution, Fall 2010. Source: Babson Survey Research Group, 2010.
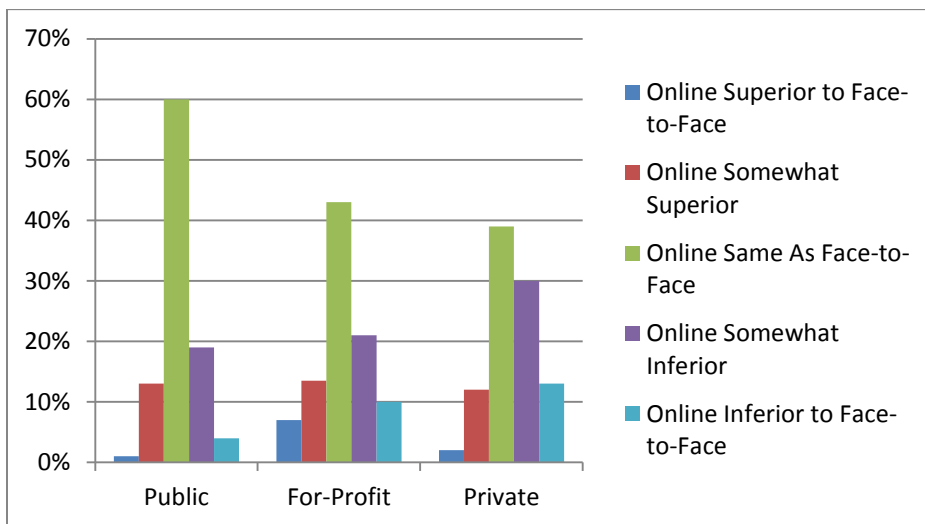
A study completed in 2010 by the Legislative Analyst's Office in California found that the online method of learning helped students learn more than a comparable face-to-face class due to extra learning time and increased faculty interaction (Perez, 2010). However, it concluded that prepared students have better results than underprepared students. Other studies have pointed to the self-discipline required for an online class is what enables success.

Economic Impact

Due to the downturn of the economy beginning in 2007, there has been an increase in demand for online *and* face-to-face courses. (Since 2009 there has been an increase in financial aid applications as well.) From 2007 to 2009, total enrollment at all postsecondary institutions increased by 4.3%, yet the students taking at least one online course increased by 41.7% (Allen & Seaman, 2010, pg. 8). In addition to the fluctuations in the economy, increased technological competence, fast-paced lifestyles, geographic dispersion, and the need for workers to possess new skill sets and credentialing, the demand for online *degrees* has grown over the past decade (Conceição, 2007).

Long term strategic initiatives

Postsecondary institutions have offered online education for a variety of reasons. They see that it addresses insufficient classroom space on campuses and enables them to appeal to new markets. Many working people can pursue a degree or update themselves in career areas with flexibility while not disrupting their work schedule or time with family.

Many schools have decided it is critical for them to pursue online offerings, however only about 50% of traditional private schools provide for-credit online offerings (Mayadas, et al, 2009). Stanford and Johns Hopkins offer courses and some degree programs entirely online. Others like Harvard and UC-Berkley offer for-credit classes but no degree programs. Yet, schools like Princeton, Yale, and MIT offer no online classes for credit. Extension classes may be offered but not for credit. The following statistics highlight some of the findings about the number of schools offering online courses or degree programs and the percentage of the total undergraduate enrollment they educate.

- Of the approximately 800 schools who offer no online possibilities, they make up about 18% of the U.S. degree granting institutions. These schools have less than 5% of the total higher education enrollment (Allen & Seaman, 2010, pg. 20).
- About 1000 schools have some type of online offering and this comprises about 25% of the total higher education enrollment (Allen & Seaman, 2010, pg. 20).
- At the high end of online involvement, there are about 33% of all higher education institutions with offerings and they educate 66% of the online students (Allen & Seaman, 2010, pg. 20).
- Of the fields of study, computer science (27%) and business (24%) have the highest enrollment in online classes. These disciplines also had the highest rate of enrollment in degree programs (Radford, 2011, pg 3).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study seeks to examine several issues related to the successful acceptance of online courses as an alternative to traditional face-to-face delivery. These questions are listed below:

1. Is the online learning environment comparable to the traditional face-to-face environment?

H1a: Faculty members perceive online course instruction to be of lower quality than traditional face-to-face.
H1b. University administrators perceive online course instruction to be of lower quality than traditional face-to-face.
H1c. Businesses perceive online course instruction to be of lower quality than traditional face-to-face.

2. What impact does an online course instruction have on course instructional quality?

H2a. For profit institutions perceive online course instruction to be of lower quality than traditional face-to-face.

H2b. Private non-profit institutions perceive online course instruction to be of lower quality than traditional face-to-face.
H2c. Public institutions perceive online course instruction to be of lower quality than traditional face-to-face.

3. What impact do online courses have on overall academic acceptance by institutions?

H3: More institutions accept the transfer of for credit online classes than face-to-face classes.

4. What impact do online courses have on overall academic acceptance by businesses?

H4: Businesses accept degree programs completed online as often as they accept degrees from mostly face-to-face instruction.

Research methodology

This study will be based on a survey of individuals believed to have relevant experience with and insights into the factors affecting the present and future state of online education. An online survey will be conducted of college instructors, administrators, and employers. Using an online survey service, Qualtrics, we developed an online questionnaire as an instrument for this survey study. The focus of the questions was on current perceptions and acceptance of online courses. The questionnaire also included items regarding predictions of online teaching and learning. The questionnaire used various types of questions, including Likert-type, multiple-choice, and open-ended questions.

CONCLUSION

There are different predictions about the growth potential and future of online learning. Canadian and European attempts at online colleges have mostly met with failure (Mayadas, et al, 2009). Some predictions are that future growth will not come from new programs or institutions but instead from the increase in existing program offerings. Public institutions are feeling some pressure from for-profit schools to continue to offer more courses and degree programs online, however for-profit growth was stunted in 2011 by negative reports and inability of students to transfer to public or private institutions. A variety of political and economic factors could change demand for traditional and online education in the future. This study seeks to provide some potential answers to the role of acceptance of online education.

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