Students' Perceptions of Online Courses

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INTRODUCTION

An increasing number of traditional colleges and universities, responding to marketplace pressures, are offering online courses and degree programs. According to Weil (2001), 54% of U.S. higher education institutions offer e-learning courses. Many AACSB-accredited business schools provide courses and complete degree programs online. New schools have been created that exist solely in cyberspace (Peltz, 2000). Students can complete undergraduate online degree programs in fields as diverse as nursing, business, engineering, and technology.

Possible reasons for schools offering online courses and degree programs include: increasing revenues and credit hour production; better utilization of limited resources; serving an expanded geographic area or student population; and serving the existing student population differently. Students may take online courses due to their perceptions of location convenience, time convenience, cost, and quality.

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, that is, students. The study described here was developed to identify students' expectations and current perceptions of online courses and degree programs. The results are expected to facilitate effective planning and development of these courses and programs in the future. The intent is to study the next generation of online learners. This group's perceptions of online coursework are important for course providers as they consider ways to maintain and enlarge their programs, perhaps expanding to meet the needs of younger, more traditional students.

BACKGROUND

Online courses are a form of distance education. Today's widespread availability of the Internet has made online courses and degree programs available to students around the globe. Many traditional colleges and universities have decided to add online coursework so that they can be competitive with the large number of programs now available from private enterprises set up for this purpose. Several issues have emerged related to this instructional delivery format, and studies are now being reported related to advantages and disadvantages of this type of education.

As with other forms of distance education, convenience has been widely quoted as a primary reason for students taking online courses. Another reason is the self-paced nature of many online courses, which allows for a variety of student schedules and comprehension rates. Availability of coursework regardless of the student's physical location is another reason it is used; it would be possible for students in remote locations to take these courses as long as they had the necessary technology. It is also possible that online courses provide more up-to-date materials than that found in some traditional courses and textbooks, due to the ease of making changes to Web sites rather quickly (Accetta & Wind, 2001). Another factor that may make online courses an appealing option is that a person's age or physical limitations may be less likely to prevent the person from succeeding in this format (Brown, 2000).

Faculty who teach online courses may find it rewarding if they enjoy using new technology and also enjoy the challenge of adapting to a different form of course delivery.

Critics of online courses 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. Representatives of some elite universities claim that it is impossible to replicate a classroom environment with online courses. Harvard University's Professor W. Earl Sasser indicated that Harvard does not plan to offer an MBA degree online because it would distract from the residential experience (Symonds, 2001). Kumar, Kumar and Basu (2002) cite "strong evidence that students perceive interaction, stu-

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dent-to-student and student-to-instructor, to suffer as a result of virtual education" (p. 140). But some information technology professionals argue that there is little difference between getting a degree on-campus or over the Web. Robert Baker, a systems consultant, observes that students taking online courses are not isolated and can get to know faculty and other students by using online discussion boards (Dash, 2000). Schooley (2001) states that online university courses facilitate communication with the instructor and among classmates.

Another concern is that online coursework may worsen the so-called "digital divide" between students in higher-income versus lower-income families, as those with higher incomes will have more Internet access (Accetta & Wind, 2001). However, libraries and schools have increased Internet access availability to people at all income levels and at locations worldwide.

Some questions also exist about the cost of taking online courses. Some students believe that an online course is a less expensive method, and some course providers believe it to be a cost-effective method of course delivery. As a point of comparison, Duke University's Fuqua School of Business offers MBA degrees that provide about 65% of the work online and about 35% of the work in residency. Duke charges up to $90,000 for the program versus $60,000 for its traditional on-campus MBA degree program (Symonds, 2001).

One critical indicator of program success or failure is the extent to which graduates are accepted in the job market. Quigley (2001) cites a *BusinessWeek* magazine survey reporting that most recruiters are skeptical of skills of graduates of online business schools. Many executives do not feel that online degree programs have been offered long enough to prove themselves with on-the-job performance of MBA degree graduates.

Some educators are concerned about the rapid growth of online degree programs. Others have questioned the superiority of online courses when compared with classroom-based courses. Online courses may be developed by curriculum specialists with little or no participation from the faculty member who will conduct the class. Much e-learning is self-directed and not led directly by faculty members. A fear is that faculty members will no longer be curriculum developers and participants in intellectual debates within their disciplines. Accetta and Wind (2001) suggest that "faculty will become mere shepherds herding their passive sheep through pre-prepared fields of outdated and insubstantial information."

Faculty members are also concerned that students will not get the same campus experience that is provided to students who are enrolled in traditional on-campus degree programs. Some schools require that students check in online for a specified number of times each week. Many programs also require some amount of on-campus time, as well as meetings via conference calls. Some programs incorporate team projects that require students being together during specified points during the course. Some programs require one or more retreats in a traditional lecture/seminar format.

Many faculty members are skeptical about the quality when the time period required to obtain a degree is very short. For example, the American InterContinental University-On-line (2002) advertises that a Master's degree can be earned in as little as 10 months.

There are also concerns about technical, administrative, and pedagogical issues that arise as faculty consider moving from a traditional classroom environment into a Web-based environment. Logistical concerns relate to providing students with the same level of support (e.g., library, bookstore, advising) in both environments. Pedagogical considerations involve issues relating to management of course quality and control over the learning environment.

Wonacott (2000) states that instructional design should be the primary factor in implementing online coursework rather than the appeal of technology. He also mentions that students and instructors need appropriate training and guidance if this type of instruction is to be effective.

STUDIES OF EXISTING ONLINE COURSES AND PROGRAMS

Many reports have indicated typical students are "adult learners". Typical participants are between 25 and 50 years of age and are taking online courses either to learn something new or to update their skills (Grill, 1999).

Studies have also indicated that students were more satisfied with online courses when there was more interaction with the course instructor. Interaction with other students was also a factor leading to more student satisfaction (Fredericksen, Pickett, Shea, Pelz & Swan , 2000).

Several comparison studies have been conducted between online and traditional on-campus courses, and most have found no statistically significant difference in test performance and grades. A greater degree of active learning in both settings increases performance and student attitude (Hall, 1999).

Studies of online coursework are being conducted in several countries. For example, one study compared "Anglo-Saxon" students in five countries to "Asian" students in nine countries to see if cultural differences existed related to the use of the Web as a learning environment. Some differences existed in the comfort level of various instructional formats. More Asian students liked the Web environment because of the innovative learning possibilities, while Anglo-Saxon students were more com-

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