



Chapter XII

Establishing Successful Online Distance Learning Environments: Distinguishing Factors that Contribute to Online Courses and Programs

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This chapter looks at factors that promote development and implementation of successful online distance learning environments from the perspectives of educators and learners. It provides an overview of current tensions between the requirements of the faculty, the needs of the students, and the forces driving the development of online programs. The work is based on the authors' current research as well as past experiences in the design, development, and delivery of online distance learning environments.

INTRODUCTION

Today's learners are demanding "anytime and anywhere education," and institutions are responding by committing substantial resources to providing

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online distance learning through courses and full degree programs at the post-secondary and high school levels. Such courses and programs may include some face-to-face interaction, but the teacher and student are separated for the majority of activities. One or more forms of technology are used to mediate the teaching, and several forms of technology may be used for communication.

Distance education has long been viewed as a way in which to offer lifelong learning to those who are geographically separated from traditional institutions, have obligations that limit their ability to attend regular courses, or prefer to learn in new ways. One challenge has been to balance the need for intense and personal interaction with the reality of limited financial and other resources. Organizations and universities have turned to technology that has evolved to the point where it can provide the needed experiences through electronic networks and groupware (Gerencer, 1998; Mangan, 1999; Schrum, 1998). This chapter presents a review of the trend towards online distance learning environments by identifying challenges to faculty, students, and program planners.

BACKGROUND EXPERIENCES

Several previous studies were analyzed and amalgamated in this chapter. Schrum and Benson (2000a; 2000b; 2000c) investigated the first two years of a collaborative effort between a large financial corporation and a large southeastern university College of Business's MBA program to provide expanded learning opportunities for the corporation's professional workers who wished to further their education while maintaining full-time employment. In a qualitative case study of a distance learning consortium launched by the university system of a southeastern state, Benson (2001) described and analyzed the planning and implementation of the consortium's first online degree programs from the perspectives of the primary stakeholders: the consortium planning committee, the administrators at the universities providing the courses, the instructors developing and delivering the courses, the students enrolled in the courses, the university system administration, and the business community with workforce needs. Schrum (1998; 2000) identified characteristics of successful online learners, based on literature and interviews. In a qualitative case study of students enrolled in two online school library media courses at a large southeastern university, Benson et al. (in press) and Tallman and Benson (2000) investigated the effectiveness of online course delivery for the university's school library media program. From these four studies and the relevant literature, the authors have identified

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