

Chapter 6

Factors Encouraging or Discouraging Students from Taking Online Classes

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ABSTRACT

Advances in communication technologies, such as widespread use of the Internet, have opened new avenues for continuing higher education. These advances have allowed educators to provide for and satisfy individual variations in learning. Generally, online courses are adaptations of traditional courses; some courses are more suitable than others for such online instruction. As the trend to offer online courses continues, understanding the factors that lead to students' preference can be useful. Online courses can be costly to develop and to implement, and inappropriately designating courses for online participation can lead to lower student retention rates. This study focuses on students' perceptions of online courses. The results identify issues that affect students' perceptions, and this study concludes by suggesting ways for universities to design online programs that better suit the desires of students.

INTRODUCTION

Advances in technology have enabled instructors to design online courses that better meet the needs of students. Colleges and universities around the world are now able to offer higher education courses to students online. This capability can address certain issues students may develop in pursuit of their education goals, such as resolving issues with commuting to and from campus, and communicat-

ing with others. Because of the advantages to both students and the university, enrollment growth is considerable, from 1.6 million students (9.6% of total enrollment) in 2002 to 3.9 million students (21.9% of total enrollment) in 2007 (Allen & Seaman 2008).

The increase in online course offerings and enrollment can be tied to necessity. Higher education institutions have faced changes in their student demographics in recent years as more and more students no longer fit the traditional profile of a young, full-time, in-residence student. As the demograph-

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ics change, so do the education needs. There is a higher demand for more flexible and convenient methods in obtaining a higher education. Also, there is a demand by contemporary society for a more technologically savvy workforce. Even if traditional methods are preferred, there is a need to teach students to incorporate technological proficiency into their everyday education.

With these types of considerations, educational institutions are looking into incorporating online capabilities into their courses. However, there are questions regarding the ability of institutions to afford the cost of successfully implementing and coordinating online courses, and the appropriateness of online learning in meeting institutional goals. Furthermore, the benefits that online courses can provide may be dependent on the individual; what may be beneficial to one student may be a hindrance to another. For example, some students may not find online courses beneficial to their education needs and prefer the person-to-person interaction of a traditional course. Others may find the convenience of online courses as an important factor in their course format decisions. These and other factors can be highly influential to decisions.

Since students have perceptions about online courses that influence their subsequent decisions whether or not to take online courses, it is important to understand the factors that surround perceptions of benefit toward an online course setting. Designers of higher education courses can better create course options and curriculum for their students that address higher education needs. The purpose of this paper is to understand the factors that affect a student's perception of online courses as well as the factors that are perceived as important for online courses. In pursuit of this objective, this paper first discusses prior studies that address issues related to online courses and students' perceptions. This is followed by the study's methodology. Next, an analysis of the factors that were found to be significantly different between subjects who prefer online and those

who prefer traditional class setting are discussed. In conclusion, the usefulness of the significant factors which can be utilized by those in higher education is discussed as well as future research development in this area.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online Courses

Online learning has been recognized as a technique that concentrates more on students than traditional classroom learning as students are expected to actively involved in building their learning process (Benefits & Compensation Digest 2008). As such, online courses demand that students take more charge in their learning, and as it is an individual determinant, this increases the individual learning experience level. The main concern of the higher learning institution is to ensure that they offer sound online courses so that students and faculty are best able to participate and gain an appropriate learning experience (Lam 2005).

Online courses are growing in number, both in the number offered in universities and in the number of students participating in the classes (Lee, Tan, & Goh 2004). These courses can be tailored in several ways, with varying degrees of video, web-material and participation of faculty members based on the student population, the course, and the time-frame. No one format for a course is best for every participant, students and educators, or for every course. Prior studies have shown that online courses must meet certain standards like those required for in-class courses. For instance, all online courses should initiate with clear learning objectives that will give shape to the development of the course in which all the listed expectations for the attendants are clearly defined (Dykman & Davis 2008). Other important standards are the constant interactions that must be enabled, and therefore take place, among students and professors. This constant

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