Developing an Effective Online Evaluation System

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INTRODUCTION

As with any new program, the chance of failure runs high and distance education, in comparison with the longevity of traditional education, is considered relatively new. Still, distance education appears to be here to stay. In fact, a 2000 market survey found that over 94% of all colleges were either offering or planning to offer distance education courses (Twigg, 2001). With this much interest and popularity, the need for policies to regulate distance education program practices should be recognized by all participating institutions of higher education (Czubaj, 2001). While students appear to be more focused on the conveniences that distance education provides, universities are more attentive to the need for offering a valid learning alternative. Higher education enrollments have shown upward movement and this has, to a degree, been attributed to the adult learners' interest in, and availability of, distance education (Boettcher, as cited by Worley, 2000). Change in the enrollment demographics and the offering of distance education programs stimulates the need for new decisions by academic administrators for quality and accreditation purposes (Shea, Motiwalla, & Lewis, 2001; Tricker, Rangecroft, Long, & Gilroy, 2001).

One of the first steps toward ensuring success of distance education programs is identifying the requirements of all those involved. Student needs are to receive a quality education; faculty needs are to have at their disposal (and to use) the knowledge and means to provide this education; and institution needs are to assess that students receive a quality education and to provide faculty with the resources for student educational needs to be met. One of the problems that could harm distance learning or prevent it from being all that it can be is the lack of a good evaluation system. The focus of this article will be to identify and describe, from the literature, the components of an effective evaluation system. Armed with this information, administrators will be able to make better program decisions.

BACKGROUND

The need for information in any decision-making process is crucial. The newness of distance education makes the need for related information even more critical. One of the most popular methods for amassing information in higher educational settings is by performing evaluations. According to Patton (1997), education has a long history of using evaluations. Users of this data have their own purposes in mind. Students are seeking affirmation that the course contains relevant content, the instructor teaches effectively, and the course will help them reach their long-term goals (McKeachie, 1996; Spencer & Schmelkin, 2003; Willis, 1993). Faculty will have access to feedback that can help guide them in their teaching. Job performance reviews can be gleaned from either an administrator or student evaluation of faculty (Algozzine et al., 2004; Chen & Hoshower, 1998; Halpern & Hakel, 2003; McKeachie, 1996; Spencer & Schmelkin, 2002; Willis, 1993). Critical to institutional administrators is the collection of information that relates to whether or not institutional strategic goals are being accomplished. Decisions as to the potential development of a distance program (Willis, 1993) and changes to support programs (i.e., bookstore, tutoring, etc.) that support this program can be made. Academic administrators use evaluation data as one means to judge teaching performance (Emery, Kramer, & Tian, 2003; Neumann, 2000; Willis, 1993). Whether appropriate or not, decisions on tenure and promotion are frequently based on this information (Algozzine et al., 2004; Chen & Hoshower, 1998; Halpern & Hakel, 2003; McKeachie, 1996; Spencer & Schmelkin, 2002; Willis, 1993). Regardless of the reason for information collection, quality information can be gathered only with the use of a quality instrument. Reliability and validity of the information is always in the forefront of concerns when conducting an evaluation (Scanlan, 2003; Griffin, Coates, McInnis, & James, 2003; Marshall, 2000; Regalbuto, 1999; Achtemeier, Morris, & Finnegan, 2003). To fur-

ther perpetuate this problem, unless faculty believe in the validity of the information collected, change is not likely to occur (Reid & Johnston, 1999); unless students believe their responses will provide a reward, less-than-valid response may be supplied (Chen & Hoshower, 1998). Differences associated between distance and traditional courses can hinder the desired outcome of validity, emphasizing the evidence that an alternate evaluation instrument is required. Despite the distinctiveness of distance education, many universities continue to use traditional course student evaluation instruments to evaluate distance learning courses (Achtemeier et al., 2003). To increase the reliability and validity of evaluation data, an evaluation instrument designed to represent distance education uniqueness would be required (Henckell, 2007). At the very least, alterations or amendments are required to take a well-designed traditional evaluation instrument and make it valid for evaluating distance education courses (Holcomb, King, & Brown, 2004; Shuey, 2002; Willis, 1993). A system contains parts that, when placed together, represent and share a relationship to the whole or what Marshall (2000) describes as a model. As with traditional courses, student evaluations are a vital part of the system for assessing distance education programs. Information collected from student evaluations should not stand alone. Administrative reviews are also necessary to provide a more accurate picture of performance. With each type of evaluation, there is the need to review the components of the evaluation process and what can positively or negatively affect these events. With the recommendations provided in this article, changes can be made to perfect the components used in an evaluation system. Improvements to current evaluation systems will hopefully lead to a greater buy-in of the system by students, faculty, and administrators.

COMPONENTS OF A COMPREHENSIVE DISTANCE EDUCATION EVALUATION SYSTEM

Involved in the building of an evaluation system is an evaluation plan. This plan must recognize purposes and rationale of an evaluation and identify how, what, and when to evaluate (Henckell, 2007). Evaluation methods, styles, and strategies can then be determined (Robson, 2000). University administrators, academic administrators, faculty, and students are the four parties that should be included in all evaluation systems of distance education courses (Willis, 1993).

How to Evaluate

First and foremost, the purpose of the evaluation must be identified in order to know the right information for decision making will be present. The cynosure of an evaluation, according to Patton (1997), is its intended use. Data gathered

Figure 1. Intended use
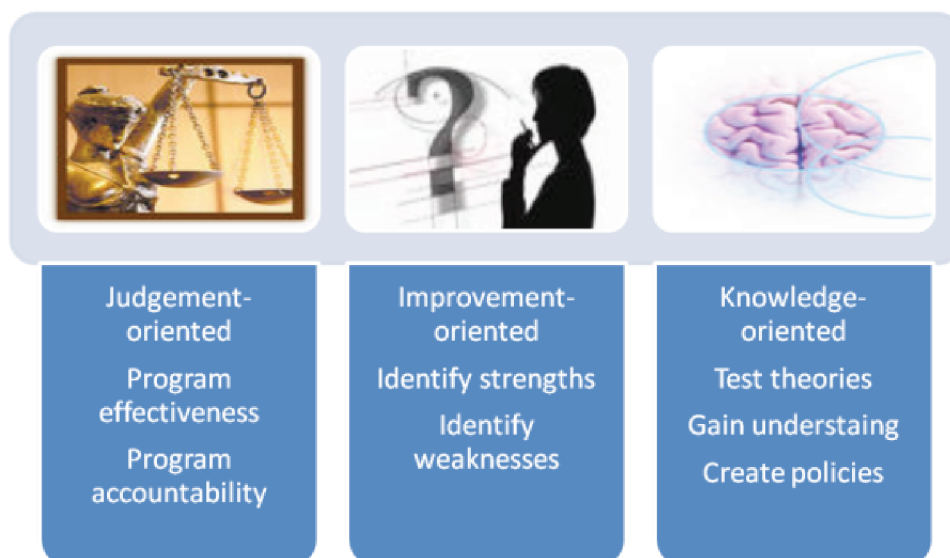
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