

Chapter 5.29

Online Program Assessment: A Case Study of the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign Experience

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ABSTRACT

Through case study, this chapter lends insight to ways online assessment can facilitate a holistic approach to the evaluation of distance education programs. In 2001, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign transitioned from program evaluation methods that relied heavily on data gathering by postal mail to online instruments.

While the transition was spurred by the need to evaluate the campus' first online degree program, online assessment methods are now used to review all off-campus degree programs. Results of this new assessment strategy have proven beneficial for continuous quality improvement across all modes of delivery.

INTRODUCTION

A holistic approach to program evaluation can be facilitated by online assessment as exemplified by the experience of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). The need to assess online graduate-level degree programs led the campus to rethink and revitalize its longstanding approach to evaluation strategies of off-campus degree programs, replacing data gathering by mail with online assessment tools. Initial experience with the revised approach suggested that response rates were significantly higher than the postal-based method and participant response was received more quickly than in the past. In addition, meaningful interaction with stakeholders was more likely to occur, and online assessment enhanced the possibility of using results for continuous program improvement. Online program assessment may be applicable in the evaluation of a variety of off-campus programs (both site-based and online), and has implications for program reviews conducted by accrediting bodies and other entities. Furthermore, once the basic infrastructure to administer online surveys is in place, the method is a more economical way to gather and analyze responses to the assessment instruments.

This chapter takes a multiple-case-study approach, drawing most heavily on the first online master's degree program formally reviewed at UIUC, the Master of Science (MS) in Library and Information Science LEEP option, and comparing and contrasting the evolution of the online assessment instruments to the former approach that relied heavily on instruments sent and returned via postal mail. Although the focus of this chapter is on assessment strategies related to off-campus (including online) degree program assessment, it is important to note that during the period of the evolution from postal to online program-assessment strategies, the campus also developed and implemented an online course-assessment

instrument. Used together, these online assessment instruments may provide a powerful vehicle for program evaluation and development.

The objectives of this chapter are to share what has been learned and gained through this transformation, the potential for using the generic assessment instruments in other settings, significant issues that emerged and how they were handled, and assessment issues on the horizon. By emphasizing a specific context, this case offers an opportunity for readers to consider the topic in depth and understand the complexities inherent within this authentic situation. The position of this chapter is that online program assessment, combined with interview data, provides an effective approach to evaluation of all off-campus programs (e.g., off-campus site-based, print-based by mail, video, online) because it encourages a holistic approach to program evaluation and lends itself well to continuous quality improvement. The UIUC experience and instruments presented in this chapter offer a model to other institutions interested in incorporating online program assessment.

BACKGROUND

The University of Illinois was established in 1867. It is a state-supported institution with a threefold mission of teaching, research, and service with three campuses: Urbana-Champaign, Chicago, and Springfield. As of Fall 2003, the largest campus, UIUC, has a student body of 38,864, of whom 9,210 (23%) are graduate students. UIUC is "one of the nation's great research universities, known for its distinguished faculty, its outstanding resources, and the breadth of its academic programs. It is deeply committed to educating its large, diverse student body and to engaging critical societal and scientific issues" (University of Illinois, 2004, p. 8).

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