

Chapter 19

Choosing a Path for Doctoral Studies in Educational Leadership: A Look at the Online Format

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ABSTRACT

Current indications (U.S. Department of Education, 2003; Zandberg & Lewis, 2008; Picciano & Seaman, 2009) are that distance learning, in particular online learning, will continue to expand into the foreseeable future. There are some completely online doctoral programs presently operating, but many students continue to flock to the non-traditional executive type leadership cohort-based, on-ground programs at colleges and universities. However, this trend may change. Erickson, Howard, Borland, and Baker (2004) have noted the advent of the virtual university has actually changed the expectations of doctoral students. The focus of this study is to examine the perceptions of doctoral students at a small, private university toward the online format. The findings of this study indicated a less than favorable support among doctoral students to a completely online format for the non-traditional executive management/ leadership doctoral program. However, there was support given to a hybrid model for the program.

INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about the benefit of online learning at all stages of schooling. In fact, Allen and Seaman (2005) in their research of the data from the Sloan-C snapshot of the status of

online education in the U.S. noted that the online format is becoming increasingly apart of the long term goals and strategies of many institutions. As colleges and universities embrace the reality that online education is becoming popular in academe, they are also finding themselves to be in an increasingly competitive environment

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(Timmons, 2002). From the research of Yang and Cornelious (2005), the controversies relative to the quality of online instruction have not diminished but rather have intensified over the past few years. If the choice is to move toward the online format, then what steps should be taken to insure quality instruction. The quality of online instruction is constantly being compared to the face to face or traditional method of instruction (Shelly, Swartz, & Cole, 2007; Johnson, Rivera, & Rice, 2002; Hauck, 2006). It is also well supported by the literature (Dhanarajan, 1998; Hanna, 1998; Latchem & Hanna, 2002; Reid, 1999) that distance learning technologies will change the structural and organizational models of higher education as perspective candidates are now beginning to “shop” schools to find the best program offerings, while at the same time the pool of schools has increased with the emergence of the totally online university. But perhaps a more compelling question for these colleges and universities in transition should be the question of whether or not online instruction or traditional face to face learning is their future market. If it is, in fact, online learning, then consideration should be given as to what steps should be taken to provide the most effective online instruction. The investment in human capital and monetary capital are just too great to not examine the most effective online instruction. The purpose of this paper is to look at the perceptions of doctoral students as to their preference toward online delivery or on-ground meeting for their doctoral coursework.

LITERATURE REVIEW

From the review of the related literature, there is an abundance of research on the perceptions of undergraduate and sometimes masters degree students about online education (Thomas, King, & Cetinguc, 2004; Kortemeyer, Hall, Parker, Minaei-Bidgoli, Albertelli, Bauer, & Kashy, 2005; Meisner, Hoffman, Strickland, Christian,

& Tlitus, 2000; Loving, 2000, Harmes & Barron, 2001; McDonald, Yanchar, & Osguthorpe, 2005). However, the available body of research fails to address the perceptions of doctoral students relative to their views toward the online learning format and online degree programs. It is well established in the literature that the average institution has doubled its investment in information technology (Office of Higher Education, 2001). In a study by Schiffman, Vignare, and Geith (2006), the authors surveyed students at various degree levels in higher education to examine the reasons institutions embrace online learning formats. According to their findings, these institutions are primarily focused on attracting new students and contributing to extension efforts by introducing online programs. However, these efforts are more in line with the goals of the institution with little interest in how students may view this online format. Instead, as suggested by Christo-Baker (2004), the importance of this technology (online) in education should be determined by its effectiveness in facilitating the accomplishment of the education goals. Hence, the educational goals ought to be as Groves and Zemel (2000) argued as valued for their contribution to teaching and learning and not by using computer delivery systems as ends in themselves and especially as marketing tools. Other issues according to Cookson (2000) include tradition, consensus, governance, roles, and responsibilities.

As we review our doctoral program in Instructional Leadership/Management here at Robert Morris University, we are considering many of these factors along with future enrollment. In a study by Schiffman, Vignare, and Geith (2009), the authors lauded the online programs for their ability to penetrate new geographic regions and new markets of students. Considering our program, it was important to look at all of these issues and, as previously mentioned, to look through the lens of the students who are or who will be a part of the program.

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