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Article 64

A Survey of Online Doctoral Degrees in Counseling as Perceived by Doctoral Graduates by Race and Gender and Recommendations for Online Development

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More and more students are earning their doctoral degrees in counseling from online colleges and universities. Furthermore, the recession has created a major need for re-educating workers who have lost their jobs. It seems likely that demand for online coursework will only increase. According to Benton (2009), while the Department of Education confirmed that online courses can be as effective in achieving measurable learning outcomes as traditional, face-to-face courses, a study from the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities shows that 70% of the 10,000 faculty members surveyed believe that online courses are either “inferior” or “somewhat inferior” to traditional courses. Professors who have taught online courses are more positive about the approach yet 48% are likewise convinced that online courses are not as good as face-to-face teaching (Benton, 2009). Fortunately, a new study contradicts the perception that cheating is more widespread in online classes, finding that students in virtual courses were less likely to cheat than their face-to-face peers (Parry, 2009a). Online instruction is an important tool to assist instructors in accomplishing their goal of preparing skilled and efficient counselors; therefore, it is important to understand what works well for students and faculty and where improvements are needed.

Online learning has been impacted by advancements in technology that permit learning to occur without the boundaries of time or geographic location. The number of online counseling programs has increased significantly. In fact, the number of students taking online classes quadrupled to 7.5 million by the year 2006 (Chandras, Delambo & Eddy, 2005, p. 253). Northern Virginia Community College is training classroom-based

professors in the basics of online teaching as part of its emergency plan to shift large numbers of courses to the web (Young, 2009). Bruce (1999) stated that online learning gives a unique opportunity to those individuals who want to study but cannot attend a residential college because of personal circumstances or work related obligations. He stated that five aspects of education that are being changed by the advancement of technology and online learning are: (1) students, (2) teachers, (3) schools, (4) commercialization, and (5) the curriculum. There are key parameters to online instruction. For example, online program success is dependent on both the students' motivational level as well as their abstract reasoning skills (Carter, 2001; Sankaran & Bui, 2001). Likewise, instructors require a strong technical support system and training in order to be effective as online educators. Online curricula and training modules should integrate learning theory within the program design and implementation. Students are likely to have more positive outcomes when training is based on these theoretical approaches (Hergenhahn & Olsen, 2001).

Online education provides opportunities to learn or complete training programs for those individuals with the type of constraints that prevents attendance within the traditional classroom (e.g., disability, full-time job, geographical region, family, etc.). Bruce (1999) stated that distance education refers to learning through an array of communication technologies, such as e-mail, fax, video, teleconferences, and the web. However, a key barrier may be the learner's technological competence in regard to these technologies (Anakwe, 1999; Piotrowski & Vodanovich, 2000).

Student-faculty relationships exert a major influence over a learner's intellectual and personal growth (Astin, 1993). Student-faculty interactions should positively impact student success during online education. Researchers found that the first few informal interactions with a faculty member have tremendous impact on student learning (Pascarella, Terenzini, & Hibel, 1978). Therefore, it's imperative that such a relationship be formed prior to an online learning class. The lead author of this study utilized Vista and conducted a 45 minute lecture about the online course. The students are guided to the discussion board for question/answer discussions. In addition, each student is given the instructor's email account, fax number, and office phone number.

Academic advising is imperative for online education. The Valdosta State University Academic Advising Committee (2003) noted the importance of academic advisers by stating that a fundamental task is to build a service culture that is student-centered. Academic advising is not just course scheduling, it needs to be a continual process not just a week of advising. Academic advising has an impact on a student's online college experience. Again, the lead author utilizes Vista, email, chatrooms, and the telephone for advisement purposes. Students have access to the instructor throughout the week with this technique. In addition, virtual office hours are set up in the evening and on weekends for those students unable to contact the instructor during her/his traditional university office hours.

Globalization and societal changes require continuous learning and exchange of knowledge and skills for career development, upward mobility, professional and personal reasons, and job security (Eastmond, 1998). Both traditional and nontraditional students may enroll in online courses that allow them to pursue education at their convenience. However, many nontraditional students may lack the technological skills to successfully

complete online instruction. The success of online learning depends on student motivation and the application of technology (Huebner & Wiener, 2001).

Online courses and programs are increasing in the United States, Canada, and around the world. The Indira Gandhi University in India, Korean National Open University, Universitas Terbuka in Indonesia, and the University of South Africa offer online degrees. The University of Phoenix, Argosy University, Walden University, Capella University, Liberty University, California Southern University and many others in the United States offer bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees online. With internet access and new software, the online classroom fosters team work and individual attention. Students can complete their coursework when and where it is convenient. Students enjoy the intellectual stimulation and benefits of collaboration between the student and the instructor and the fellow students (Symonds, 2001).

National accreditation agencies, such as the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, CACREP (Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs), and Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, agreed that online learning is an educational method to impart knowledge and skills (Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, 2001). Capella University is the first and only online university to receive accreditation for two master's degree specializations in counseling from the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. The mental health counseling specialization was accredited in 2003, and the marital, couple, and family therapy specialization was accredited in 2005 (Capella University, 2006).

Survey of Online Learning and Development

When offering online courses, one should seriously consider the university environment where this type of program could be offered. A descriptive approach was used to examine how doctoral counseling graduates perceive online learning and what factors influenced their online learning experiences as well as what barriers prevented their successful online learning experiences.

The following questions were used to guide the study:

1. What is your level of satisfaction with your online learning experience?
2. Do you have the essential technical skills to use the computer?
3. Do you perform better in a classroom setting as compared to the virtual classroom?
4. Which factor/s positively impacts your online learning?
 - (a) Instructor's positive attitude
 - (b) Student's motivation
 - (c) Available resources
5. Which factor/s negatively impacts your online learning?
 - (a) Instructor's negative attitude
 - (b) Lack of student motivation
 - (c) Lack of resources
6. Do you feel that certain courses should be taught in a face-to-face setting?
7. Would you identify the courses that should be taught in a face-to-face setting?

Statement of the Problem

The problem researched was how doctoral counseling graduates perceived online doctoral degrees, what factors influenced their online learning experiences, and what barriers prevented their successful online learning outcomes.

Research Questions

- 1) Is there a relationship between student motivational level and online performance?
- 2) Is there a relationship between instructor's attitude and students' online performance and outcome?
- 3) Is there a relationship between students' technological competence and performance in an online course?
- 4) Are there certain courses that students feel should be taught via the traditional classroom versus online instruction?
- 5) What motivates students to earn their doctoral degrees in counseling completely online?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested:

- H1: The higher the motivation, the better the performance and positive outcome in online instruction.
- H2: There is a relationship between positive instructor attitudes and better performance by the students in online learning.
- H3: There is a relationship between students' technical skills and better performance in online learning.
- H4: It is easier to earn online doctoral degrees in counseling.

Method

The participants for the study were students who earned their doctoral degrees in counseling from four (4) online universities. The data for the research was gathered over a four-year period.

Procedure

Sixteen doctoral degree holders (46%) were randomly selected from a pool of 35 graduates who completed their online doctoral degrees in counseling. These participants earned doctoral degrees in one of the following counseling programs: human services, counseling studies, criminal justice, social and community services, clinical psychology, clinical social work, counseling psychology, school psychology, counselor education and supervision, and marriage and family therapy. A survey instrument was sent to each participant (see Table 1). The data was collected and analyzed for the results.

Results

There were sixteen graduates (N=16) in the sample, of which 9 were males and 7 females. Races included: 4 African Americans (1 male and 3 females), 10 Caucasians (4 males and 6 females), and 2 others (1 Asian male and 1 Hispanic male).

Doctoral graduates in counseling who were highly motivated and had technological competence performed better in online courses than those with less motivation and technological competence. Not surprisingly, student self-efficacy was reported to be a major variable impacting online success. In addition, being able to work on course assignments on evenings and weekends was instrumental to student success. This way, the virtual classroom did not disrupt either a work schedule or home life. Furthermore, the instructor's positive attitude and availability were deemed as other key variables for student success. Online learning provided opportunities for students to interact among each other and share information. For example, with the professional seminar course, students would discuss ethical dilemmas online and then the instructor would utilize a Socratic method to further the discussion among the cohort of students. Students reported a close bonding with both students and the instructor following these online courses. Most of the students reacted positively to online learning.

A majority of graduates indicated limited barriers to online learning. Those few students that had anxiety toward technology tended to perform lower than those with technological competence. These individuals reported that the positive instructor support both eased their anxiety as well as increased their online performance. Fortunately, students could complete assignments on the weekend and in the evening hours. Instructors were always available to encourage and assist the students in the use of computers as well as the WebCT, Vista, and other online programs.

The data indicated that there was no significant difference in learning among students who belong to different racial and gender groups. Both genders as well as students from different races claimed that they performed well in online courses due to assistance from the instructors, self motivation, self-efficacy and technical skills in using the computer programs. In addition, students reported that the majority of courses can be taught online as long as there is the necessary motivational level as well as technological and instructor support. Video cameras can be used to allow the one-on-one interaction between instructor and the students.

Discussion

Graduates from doctoral programs in counseling felt that their knowledge and skills in the use of technology helped them to achieve their goals and perform successfully in online courses. Only a small percentage of students, who had some difficulty in using computers, felt that they could have done better if they had competent technical skills in the use of computers. However, most of them were able to perceive online learning as rewarding and satisfying.

Most of the students stated that certain courses should be taught in a face-to-face setting rather than online due to their complexity, personal interaction, and values of face-to-face interaction. They have identified these courses as counseling theories, group

counseling, statistics, research methods and supervision. Online chat rooms have limited usefulness when dealing with these courses.

Table 1. Survey of Students' Perception of Online Learning Experience

Research Questions	M=1 F=3 African Americans Male % Female %		M=4 F=6 Caucasians Male % Female %		M=2 F=0 Other Male % Female %	
What is your level of satisfaction with your online learning experience?	85	95	95	100	100	
Do you have the essential technical skills to use the computer?	90	95	100	100	100	
Do you perform better in (1) a classroom setting or (2) a virtual classroom?	95 (1) 5 (2)	95 (1) 5 (2)	100 (1)	100 (1)	100 (1)	
Which factor/s positively impact your online learning						
(a) Instructor's positive attitude	95	100	100	100	100	
(b) Student's motivation	90	95	98	100	100	
(c) Available resources	98	100	100	100	100	
Which factor/s negatively impact your online learning?						
(a) Instructor's negative attitude	5	2	0	0	0	
(b) Lack of student motivation	20	15	2	1	0	
(c) Lack of resources	0	0	0	0	0	
Do you feel that certain courses should be taught in a face-to-face setting?	90 (yes) 85 (yes)		92 (yes) 100 (yes)		100 (yes)	
Are there certain classes which students feel should be taught via the traditional classroom verses online instruction?	100 (yes) 100 (yes)		100 (yes)		100 (yes)	
Why do students want to earn their doctoral degrees completely online?	100 100		100 100		100	
(a) Full time employment	100	100	100	100	100	
(b) Convenience	100	100	100	100	95	
(c) Advancement and salary increment						

The success of online learning is due to their motivation, persistence, familiarity with technology, instructor attitudes, and access to computers and other related resources (Bolliger, 2004). A small percentage of students indicated that some of the barriers to online learning were work environment, lack of access to computers, lack of motivation, limited computer skills, and limited time to work online (Chandras et al., 2005). They

were satisfied with online learning and instruction and would like to continue with more online courses.

Conclusion

According to the findings, doctoral students surveyed generally favored online courses and programs. The main variables for success were computer skills, motivation of students, attitudes of instructors, available resources, and time available to work on the computer. Online learning provides unique opportunities for students to work at their own pace, time, and setting. Instructors may have to set up virtual office hours that allow students to ask specific questions and then receive immediate feedback. Particular attention should be paid to online ethics and etiquette. Online instruction has the potential to reach students all over the world regardless of their race, religion, socioeconomic level, nationality, gender, ethnicity, or disability.

Successful learners should have developed basic computer skills to pursue online courses. Some of the needed skills relate to general internet usage, search engines, chat rooms, electronic sources, and how to access and evaluate the online materials.

The results of the study have important implications for online education of students. Successful completion of online courses depends on the computer skills of the students, the number of previous online courses the students had taken, and the maturity of the students. Ethnicity was not a factor in successful completion of online courses.

Higher educational institutions should increase their understanding of how certain academic variables influence successful completion of online programs. They should enhance their student support services to overcome barriers which may hinder students' success in online courses. Online instructors must be trained to teach online courses, and students must be trained to learn in the online environment.

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