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A Survey of Online Learning as Perceived by Graduate Counseling Students by Race and Gender and Recommendations for Online Teaching

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Online learning is an important tool to assist instructors accomplish their goal of developing counseling students' skills and knowledge, and promote both an independent and creative thinking student. Online learning has been impacted by advancements in technology that permits learning to occur without the boundaries of time or geographic location (Chandras, DeLambo, & Eddy, 2005, p. 253). The number of online counseling programs has increased significantly. In fact, the number of students taking online classes has quadrupled to 7.5 million by the year 2006 (chandras, Delambo & Eddy, 2005). Bruce (1999) stated that online learning gives a unique opportunity to those individuals wanting 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: (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 (Seaman, 2002). Online curricula and training modules should integrate learning theory within 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 some type of constraint (e.g., disability, full-time job, geographical region, family, etc.) that prevents attendance within the traditional classroom. 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 (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 (Hibel, 1978). Therefore, it's imperative that such a relationship be formed prior to an online learning class. The lead author of this study utilizes as Vista and conducts a 15 minute lecture about himself and the online course. Then the students are guided to the discussion board for question/answer discussions. In addition, each student is given the instructor' email account as well as office phone, etc.

Academic advising is imperative for online education. Academic Advising Committee (2003) noted the importance of academic advisers by stating a fundamental task is “. . . building a service culture that is student-centered” (p. 1). Academic advising is not just scheduling, and it needs to be a continual process consisting of more than 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 through-out the week with this technique. In addition, virtual office hours are set up in the evening and 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, the nontraditional students may lack the technological skills to successfully complete online instruction. The success of online learning depends on motivation and 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 degrees online. The University of Phoenix offers bachelors, masters and doctoral degrees online. With internet access and simple software, the online classroom fosters team work and individual attention. Students can complete their coursework when and where it's 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 Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and School agreed that online learning is an educational method to impart knowledge and Skills (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 Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). 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

When offering online courses, one should seriously consider the university environment where this type of program could be offered. In this study WebCt was utilized to deliver the online counseling courses (i.e., Case Management, and Seminar in Professional Practice) Three-hundred and twenty five students enrolled in the online counseling courses for the past two years.

A descriptive approach was used to examine how counseling graduate students perceive online learning and what factors influenced their online learning experiences and 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 impact your online learning?
 - a. Instructor's positive attitude
 - b. Student's motivation
 - c. Available resources
5. Which factor/s negatively impact 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 to find out how counseling graduate students perceive online learning and what factors influenced their online learning experiences and what barriers prevented their successful online learning experiences.

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?
- 3) Is there a relationship between students' technological competence and performance in an online course?
- 4) Are there certain classes which students feel should be taught via the traditional classroom verses online instruction?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested:

- H1: The higher the motivation, the better the performance 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.

Method

The participants for the study were graduate counseling students enrolled in online counseling courses at a HBCU (Historically Black College/University), a predominantly African American State University. Graduate students who completed two online courses (i.e., Case Management, and Professional Seminar) were selected for the study. The data for the research was gathered over a two-year period.

Procedure

Eighty-two graduate students (25%) were randomly selected from a pool of 325 students who

completed the online counseling courses. These participants were pursuing a master's degree in one of three counseling programs: school counseling, mental health counseling, and rehabilitation counseling. Each participant was interviewed using the questionnaire depicted in Table 1. The data was collected and analyzed for the results.

Results

There were eighty-two students (N=82) in the sample, of which 16 were males and 66 females. Races included: 69 African Americans (10 males and 59 females), 9 Caucasians (2 males and 7 females), and 4 others (2 Asians, 1 Middle Eastern, and 1 Hispanic).

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

| Research Questions | M=10 F=59 African Americans Male % Female% | M=2 F=7 Caucasians Male % Female % | M=4 F=0 Other Male % Female % |
|--|---|---|--|
| What is your level of satisfaction with your online learning experience? | 95 98 | 98 100 | 100 |
| Do you have the essential technical skills to use the computer? | 85 91 | 100 100 | 100 |
| Do you perform better in a classroom setting or a virtual classroom? | 95(yes) 95(yes) | 100(Yes) 100(yes) | 100 (yes) |
| Which factor/s positively impact your online learning | | | |
| (a) Instructor's positive attitude | 92 98 | 100 100 | 100 |

| | | | | | |
|---|----------|----------|---------------------|-----|-----------|
| (b) Student's motivation | 85 | 90 | 98 | 99 | 100 |
| (c) Available resources | 98 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Which factor/s negatively impact your online learning? | | | | | |
| (a) Instructor's negative attitude | 2 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | 15 | 10 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| (b) Lack of student motivation | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| (c) Lack of resources | | | | | |
| Do you feel that certain courses should be taught in a face-to-face setting? | 95(Yes) | 96(yes) | 99(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) |

Graduate students who were highly motivated and had technological competence performed better in online courses than those both 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 working on course assignments on evenings and weekends were instrumental in 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 program 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 instructor following these online courses. Most of the students reacted positively to online learning.

The majority of graduate students 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. An instructor deemed approachable was vital to student online success. Fortunately, students could complete assignments on the weekend and in the evening hours. Instructors were always available to encourage and assist them in the use of computers as well as the WebCT program staff.

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 the 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. In addition, students reported that the majority of course can be taught via 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 student.

Discussion

Graduate students 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 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 the courses such as counseling theories, group counseling, statistics, research methods and supervision. Online chatrooms have limited usefulness when dealing with those courses.

The success of online learning is due to their motivation, persistence, familiarity with technology, instructor attitudes, and access to computers and other related resources. A small percent of students indicated that some of the barriers to online learning are work environment, lack of access to computers, lack of motivation, limited computer skills, and limited time to work online (Chandras, DeLambo & Eddy, 2005). Students stated that they were satisfied with online learning and instruction and would like to continue with more online courses.

Conclusion

According to the findings, students generally favor online courses and programs. The main ingredients for success are computer skills, motivation of students, attitudes of instructors, available resources, and time to work on the computer. Online learning provides unique opportunities for students to work at their own pace, time and settings. For online faculty, concerns such as content, design, assessment, and technical support are important to consider. One of the issues facing the online faculty is keeping up with communication. They 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 technical skills to pursue online courses. Some of the needed skills are how to use the internet, search engines, how to use the chatrooms, how to cite electronic sources, how to take notes, and how to access and evaluate the online materials.

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