

Faculty Perceptions Of Distance Education Courses: A Survey

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Abstract

This paper discusses the results of a study of the perceptions of a national sample of business faculty members from various business disciplines regarding distance (online) education and teaching distance education courses. In the past few years, distance learning programs have become very popular, and the number of offerings continues to increase. However, distance learning courses offer significant differences from the classic classroom environment. The results of this study suggest that the offering of online courses in business is still in the early or developmental stages, and that only a small percentage of the respondents indicate that they would teach online courses in the future.

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

This study analyzes the perceptions of a national sample of business faculty members from various business disciplines (including accounting, economics, finance, management, management information systems, and marketing) regarding distance (online) education and teaching distance education courses. In the past few years, distance learning programs have become very popular, and the number of offerings continues to increase. The growing popularity of this medium for instruction may be due to a combination of several factors. Technological advances have made the availability both economical and practical. The economic advantages of distributing scarce resources, geographically and temporally, to students in remote locations provide a broader market for distance education. Additionally, the increasing demand from students to acquire education at times that are convenient given their busy schedules and personal commitments makes distance education attractive to working learners (Roberts, 1998). The new opportunities distance learning has provided have enabled students to create an atmosphere for learning in an environment which is different from the traditional college classroom.

The distance debate usually focuses on issues related to student learning and outcomes, in addition to student attitudes, as compared to traditional classroom-based settings (Phillips, 1998; Webster and Hackley, 1997). This study assesses **faculty** perceptions of the distance learning experience, particularly with respect to advantages and disadvantages, and possible changes which might be made to improve this type of teaching/learning experience.

The increasing emphasis on developing a better understanding of the role of the instructor in distance learning, as it might be similar to or different from traditional instruction, is one that continues to draw interest by those in the academic community. In one study (Easton, 2003), interactions among lead faculty, online mentors, and their students were explored. The conclusions of the Easton (2003) study are twofold: (1) online courses are highly labor-intensive, both for students and instructor; and (2) clarification of roles is very important.

Another study, which compared the attitudes of (non-business) instructors and students at several community colleges, revealed an interesting dichotomy in terms of points-of-view (Inman, 1999). Specifically, in this study, the

instructors rated the quality of their online courses as equal to or lower than their traditional counterparts, whereas the students felt deeply satisfied with their online experiences.

A study of nursing faculty teaching web-based online courses—a rapidly-increasing trend in the area of nursing education—the emphasis of which was to ascertain and describe experiences of the nursing faculty, focused primarily on the role of the faculty, pedagogies, and lessons learned (Ryan, 2004). The results of the study suggest that support systems, technology partnerships, and policies should be in place in designing courses to fit the distance learning format.

Kanuka (2002) developed a model comprised of nine principles that facilitate higher levels of teaching and learning in Web-based distance learning classes. This was accomplished by using data from: (1) semi-structured interviews with university faculty with prior experience in teaching online courses; (2) a focus group interview with educational technologists; (3) a review of the literature; and (4) a personal reflective journal. Additionally, Kanuka employed a model validation process with help from others in the field by means of a consensus survey.

A unique study, which compared student persistence and performance in online and classroom business statistics courses, suggests that, while significant differences exist between the two groups in terms of persistence, the learning objectives, as evidenced by the final grade in the courses for those students who persist, is not dependent on the mode of instruction (McLaren, 2004).

This research is intended to share faculty perceptions and experiences with administrators, other faculty, and students, in order to give them a realistic expectation of what to anticipate from distance learning courses. It is important that all these parties have a realistic perception of the distance learning experience.

For the institution, initially, distance-learning programs can be expensive and time consuming. For the instructor, the first crucial step is the choosing of a type of instruction that is designed for the new paradigm of distance learning. This is followed by the transformation of traditional education techniques to the new methodology. This process is continually changing with time and experience, and as professors share their experiences with other faculty, it is hoped that the process will continue to improve.

The student must also change his or her focus as a participant in distance education. The students not only need traditional printed material, such as textbooks or other reading, but also must have access to, and a working knowledge of, web-based technology, including the Internet, e-mail, chat rooms, and bulletin boards.

Distance learning courses offer significant differences from the classic classroom environment. There is no face-to-face contact, and no context clues or opportunity for immediate dyadic communication. In the first few weeks of the course, students usually feel high anxiety due to the uncertainty of what the professor really wants and, as a result, the professor is bombarded with e-mails. When both the professor and the student get comfortable with this new environment real learning can take place.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this paper is to determine the perceptions of business faculty members toward online courses. With the increasing interest in online education, such private institutions as the University of Phoenix have become much more appealing to all persons interested in pursuing a college degree, and, according to the University of Phoenix, students can earn degrees whenever and wherever they want, via the Internet (“U. of Phoenix Online” brochure, 2001). Because these institutions have begun to offer more courses online, other universities, both public and private, are showing more interest as well. However, for such programs to proliferate, both faculty and student attitudes toward online course offerings should be assessed. Previous research has focused on student attitudes (Tanner, Noser, Langford, 2003; Tanner, Noser, Fuselier, Totaro, 2004), and this research will focus on faculty attitudes.

With this in mind, a questionnaire was developed to determine the attitudes of business faculty. This instrument was a modification of one previously used to assess student attitudes toward distance education courses (a copy of the instrument is included at the end of this paper). The questionnaire was mailed to a random sample of 1175 business faculty throughout the United States (approximately an equal number in each of the areas of accounting, economics, finance, management, management information systems, and marketing). In addition to demographic questions on gender, rank, years teaching experience, employment status, tenure status, and whether or not the faculty member had ever taught an online course, there are also eighteen (18) Likert-type questions concerning online courses and related statements by which the faculty member could express various levels of agreement or disagreement. Usable questionnaires were returned by 200 respondents, for a response rate of slightly more than 17 percent, which is within the acceptable response rate according to a widely-cited source on survey research (Alreck and Settle, 1985). In an effort to ensure anonymity, no attempt was made to identify the name or discipline of the respondents.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the respondents. As can be seen from the table, more than three-fourths of these respondents were males, and slightly less than 80 percent held an academic rank of associate or full professor. Almost 96 percent were full-time employees, and more than 76 percent were tenured. The average number of years of college teaching experience for all respondents was 18.6 years.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Faculty Respondents

Demographic Characteristic:	Percent of Respondents
Gender:	
Male	75.8%
Female	24.2%
Rank:	
Instructor/Adjunct	4.5%
Assistant Professor	15.7%
Associate Professor	33.3%
Full Professor	46.5%
Employment Status:	
Full-time	95.9%
Part-time	4.1%
Years of College Teaching Experience:	
Range	From 1 year to 42 years
Mean/Standard Deviation	Mean=18.6/Std. Dev.=8.94
Tenure Status:	
Tenured	76.1%
Non-tenured	23.9%
Have you ever taught an online course?	
Yes	30.7%
No	69.3%
If you have taught an online course before, in what discipline was it?	
Accounting	19.2%
Business Law	0.0%
Economics	12.8%
Finance	19.2%
Management	10.3%
Management Information Systems	14.1%
Marketing	18.0%
Production/Operations Management	0.0%
Statistics/Management Science	6.4%
Maximum enrollment for an online class:	
Range	From 0 to 100 students
Mean/Standard Deviation	Mean=30.43/Std.Dev.=17.44

When asked if they had taught an online course before, slightly less than 31 percent of the respondents answered affirmatively. Of this group, the top two disciplines which had been taught online were accounting and finance, closely followed by marketing; however only 19.2 percent of the respondents had taught accounting and finance online, with 18 percent having taught marketing online. Thus, it would appear that the offering of online courses in business is still in the early or developmental stages.

None of the respondents had taught online courses in business law or production management, and only slightly more than 6 percent had taught statistics or management science courses online, which may allude to the difficulties associated with offering quantitative courses in a distance learning environment.

A final important observation in Table 1 is that, when asked what they believed was the maximum enrollment for an online course, responses ranged from 0 to 100 students, with a mean of slightly more than 30 students.

Table 2 presents the results of faculty responses to the 18 Likert-type questions on the survey. The questions have been re-arranged into similar groups by general category. Specifically: statements 1 and 2 are concerned with flexible class times; statements 3, 4, 5, and 6 focus on student-teacher interactions; statements 7, 8, and 9 deal with online course structure; statements 10, 11, and 12 focus on student learning (including the importance of the textbook); statements 13 and 14 address the issue of offering quantitative courses online; statements 15 and 16 are concerned with online testing; and statements 17 and 18 are general topics related to online faculty perceptions. The table shows percent responses in each category, as well as means and standard deviations for each statement.

Regarding statements 1 and 2 in Table 2, more than 87 percent of the faculty felt that **students** liked online course offerings because of the flexible class times, but more than 58 percent of the faculty felt that **faculty** also liked online courses for the same reason.

Statements 3, 4, 5, and 6 in Table 2 deal with instructor-student interactions and student-student interactions. More than 63 percent of the faculty respondents felt that interactions and lectures between students and the instructor are more frequent in a traditional course than in an online class. While few would contest this statement, some faculty may have felt that there could be more interaction in an online class, if students felt more the need to meet with the instructor in his or her office. Additionally, more than 74 percent of the respondents felt that meeting face-to-face with students outside the classroom was important to the faculty member, and more than 80 percent said they would miss these face-to-face interactions with the students. Similarly, more than 67 percent felt that lack of student-to-student interaction in an online class could hinder the students' learning experiences.

Statements 7, 8, and 9 address course structure. Interestingly, while a majority of respondents felt that students and faculty consider flexible class times an advantage, only 12.5 percent of respondents liked the fact that there was no structured classroom environment. This finding may be due to such issues as: lack of instructor-student and student-student classroom interaction; the increased significance of the textbook; and the perception by faculty that students effectively teach themselves the course material. Slightly more than 51 percent of respondents felt that students like online courses because there is no required classroom setting.

Regarding faculty perceptions of the learning experience associated with online courses/distance education (statements 10, 11, and 12), more than 62 percent of the respondents agreed that the textbook is more crucial to the learning experience in an online course than in a traditional course. Moreover, more than 76 percent felt that online courses require students to teach themselves the material more than they felt students would have to in a traditional course. Along these same lines, almost 74 percent of the respondents felt that more self-discipline is required of students taking online courses than in traditional courses. These findings are in line with the fact that web-based distance learning classes contain a minimal amount (if any) of lectures, and, as we have already discussed, no substantive instructor-student/student-student interaction.

Table 2: Faculty Perceptions of Online Course Offerings

Likert Statement	Percent of Respondents					Mean*	S.D.*
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree		
1. One of the advantages, for the student, of taking an online course is that “class times” are flexible.	65.1%	22.0%	4.6%	2.1%	6.2%	1.62	1.09
2. One of the advantages, for the instructor, of taking an online course is that “class times” are flexible.	32.6%	25.5%	18.9%	13.3%	9.7%	2.42	1.32
3. The interactions/lectures with the instructor are more frequent in a regular classroom setting than in an online class.	43.7%	19.5%	16.3%	11.6%	8.9%	2.23	1.35
4. Meeting face-to-face with students outside the classroom is important to me.	45.6%	28.5%	11.4%	8.3%	6.2%	2.01	1.21
5. I would miss the face-to-face interaction with students in an online class.	54.3%	26.1%	6.7%	6.7%	6.2%	1.84	1.19
6. The lack of student-to-student interaction in an online class would hinder their learning experience.	36.8%	31.1%	15.5%	13.0%	3.6%	2.16	1.16
7. The online course format allows students to study at their own pace.	27.3%	35.1%	18.6%	11.3%	7.7%	2.37	1.22
8. The fact that an online course has no structured classroom-type environment appeals to me.	3.1%	9.4%	20.8%	37.0%	29.7%	3.81	1.06
9. Online courses appeal to students because there is no required classroom setting.	22.6%	28.5%	33.3%	10.8%	4.8%	2.47	1.10
10. The textbook is more crucial in an online class than in a traditional class.	22.6%	0.0%	4.7%	7.4%	5.3%	2.33	1.07
11. Online courses require the students to teach themselves the material more so than in a traditional in-class course.	34.0%	42.4%	14.2%	7.3%	2.1%	2.01	0.98
12. Online courses require the student to be more self-disciplined than in traditional courses.	42.7%	31.2%	14.6%	6.3%	5.2%	2.00	1.14
13. Quantitative courses in an online setting are among the most difficult for college students.	31.9%	16.5%	36.2%	8.5%	6.9%	2.42	1.21
14. Non-quantitative business courses should be offered online.	12.8%	21.8%	35.1%	15.4%	14.9%	2.98	1.22
15. Tests in an online course are more difficult for students.	4.8%	11.3%	53.5%	23.8%	6.5%	3.16	0.89
16. Tests in an online course are more difficult to administer.	27.6%	28.1%	24.9%	12.4%	7.0%	2.43	1.22
17. The technology required to take an online course increases the educational value of the experience.	6.3%	22.6%	31.6%	23.7%	15.3%	3.18	1.15
18. In the future, I will teach as many online courses as possible.	4.6%	6.2%	12.4%	18.6%	58.2%	4.20	1.16

*1=Strongly Agree; 2=Agree; 3=Neutral; 4=Disagree; 5=Strongly Disagree

Faculty respondents were somewhat less united with respect to quantitative courses online (statements 13 and 14). While more than 48 percent felt that quantitative online courses are among the most difficult for college students, more than 36 percent neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement. When asked if non-quantitative business courses should be offered online, only a bit more than 34 percent agreed with this statement, and more than 35 percent

were neutral, with more than 30 percent showing some level of disagreement. (Recall from Table 1 that only about 6 percent of respondents had taught statistics or management courses online.) This may be an indication of some resistance on the part of business faculty members to offer any type of distance learning course.

When asked about testing online (statements 15 and 16), only about 16 percent felt that online tests were more difficult for students, with more than 53 percent neutral responses. Also, when asked about the difficulty of administering tests online, more than 55 percent felt that online tests were in fact more difficult to administer, which would suggest that a comprehensive plan for administering tests online should be developed prior to offering an online course.

The final two statements in Table 2 (statements 17 and 18) are somewhat general in nature, and deal with faculty perceptions about technology requirements associated with online course offerings, and the faculty member's predisposition about teaching online courses. When asked if they agreed that the technology required to take an online course increases the educational value of the experience, only about 29 percent exhibited some level of agreement, while 39 percent disagreed. Lastly, when asked if they would teach as many online courses as possible in the future, only about 11 percent said they would, while almost 77 percent said they would not. As before, this points out a possible reluctance on behalf of business faculty to become involved with distance education.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study suggest that the offering of online courses in business is still in the early or developmental stages, and that only a small percentage of the respondents indicate that they would teach online courses in the future. Indeed, the reasons for this less-than-enthusiastic outlook regarding teaching distance-learning classes are likely plentiful; however, referring back to our discussion of the literature, the faculty perceptions identified and discussed in this study are not altogether surprising. It is likely that the combination of factors—labor-intensive requirements of online teaching (Easton, 2003), the view that quality of course material is lower than comparable traditional courses (Inman, 1999), the requirement that support systems, technology partnerships, and policies be in place prior to online course deployment (Ryan, 2004)—contributes to the apparent reticence by business faculty to embrace distance learning.

Based upon our analysis of the respondents' attitudes, clearly faculty perceive that students find distance-learning courses very desirable, in spite of shortcomings perceived by faculty themselves; namely, the lack of instructor-student/student-student interactions; no structured classroom environment; students tend to teach themselves the material; challenges associated with teaching quantitative courses online; and, the difficulty of administering exams online.

Regarding future work, it would be both interesting and helpful to compare business faculty perceptions of distance learning against perceptions of students enrolled in business courses. Without question, university administrators, faculty, and students must become aware of all that distance learning entails, not the least of which includes perceptions by both faculty and students, before offering online courses. Additionally, the need for orienting faculty and students prior to engaging in an online course situation is paramount.

In conclusion, given the nearly exponential growth of online courses offerings, it appears that distance (online) learning is here to stay. The objective for administrators and faculty, therefore, is to develop courses for which the level of quality is not sacrificed. This means, by implication, that, given the different delivery mode of online courses relative to their traditional counterparts, a flexible pedagogy must be present, and continuous improvement based upon student and faculty feedback should become the norm.

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FACULTY ONLINE COURSE QUESTIONNAIRE

Gender: Male Female

Employment Status: Full Time Part Time

Rank: Instructor Assistant Professor Associate Professor Professor

Years of College Teaching Experience: _____

Tenured: Yes No

Have you taught an online course before? Yes No

If Yes, what area(s)? (Check all that apply):

<input type="checkbox"/> Accounting	<input type="checkbox"/> Finance	<input type="checkbox"/> Mgmt Info Systems
<input type="checkbox"/> Business Law	<input type="checkbox"/> Management	<input type="checkbox"/> Prod. & Op. Management
<input type="checkbox"/> Economics	<input type="checkbox"/> Marketing	<input type="checkbox"/> Statistics/Management Science

What is your maximum enrollment for an online class? _____

Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements, using the following numbering system:

- 1 = Strongly Agree
- 2 = Agree
- 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree
- 4 = Disagree
- 5 = Strongly Disagree

-
1. One of the advantages, for the student, of taking an online course is that “class times” are flexible. 1 2 3 4 5
 2. One of the advantages, for the instructor, of teaching an online course is that “class times” are flexible. 1 2 3 4 5
 3. The interaction/lectures with the instructor is more frequent in a regular classroom setting than in an online class. 1 2 3 4 5
 4. Quantitative courses in an online setting are among the most difficult for college students. 1 2 3 4 5
 5. The online course format allows students to study at their own pace. 1 2 3 4 5
 6. Non-quantitative business courses should be offered online. 1 2 3 4 5
 7. Meeting face-to-face with students outside the classroom is important to me. 1 2 3 4 5
 8. The fact that an online course has no structured classroom type environment appeals to me. 1 2 3 4 5
 9. Online courses appeal to students because there is no required classroom setting. 1 2 3 4 5
 10. In the future, I will teach as many online classes as possible. 1 2 3 4 5
 11. I would miss the face-to-face interaction with students in an online class. 1 2 3 4 5
 12. The lack of student-to-student interaction in an online class would hinder their learning experience. 1 2 3 4 5
 13. The textbook is more crucial in an online class than in a traditional class 1 2 3 4 5
 14. Tests in an online course are more difficult for students. 1 2 3 4 5
 15. Tests in an online course are more difficult to administer. 1 2 3 4 5
 16. Online courses require the students to teach themselves the material more so than in a “traditional” in-class course. 1 2 3 4 5
 17. The technology required to take an online course increases the educational value of the experience. 1 2 3 4 5
 18. Online courses require the student to be more self-disciplined than in traditional courses . 1 2 3 4 5