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A Survey of Online Counseling Course Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction of Graduates by Race and Gender and Recommendations for Online Course Development

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Online learning is one important tool to help instructors accomplish their goals of developing skills and knowledge, and promoting both an independent and creative thinking student. Online learning has been impacted in recent years by advancements of technology that permit learning to occur without the boundaries of time or geographic location. The number of online participants has increased significantly over the past 10 years. Drake (2000) stated that the number of students taking classes online will triple to 2.2 million by the year 2002. Four-year colleges offering online programs will increase to 8% by the same year. More and more learners are exclusively utilizing online education. There are parameters to online instruction. For example, in order to be successful in online programs, motivation and abstract thought are key variables which students should possess (Carter, 2001; Sankaran & Bui, 2001). Research has indicated that online learning gives a unique opportunity to those persons who are interested in further education but cannot attend a residential college because of personal circumstances or work-related obligations (Bruce, 1999). Instructors require a technical support system and training in order to be effective as online educators (Seaman, 2002). This is further supported by the fact that the number of students taking online classes will quadruple to 5.5 million by the year 2004.

Online education will provide opportunities to learn or complete programs for those students with disabilities or those working full time. One's place of residence does not pose a barrier for educational access. Bruce (1999) noted that distance education refers to learning through an array of communication technologies, such as e-mail, fax, video, teleconferences, and the Web. However, one barrier may be the learner's technological competence (Anakwe, 1999; Piotrowski & Vodanovich, 2000).

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). Online learning allows students, both traditional and nontraditional, to pursue education at their convenience. However, the problem to be considered mostly is nontraditional students. That is, these individuals 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 at educational institutions throughout the United States, Canada, and other parts of the world such as at the Indira Gandhi National Open University in India, Korean National Open University, Universitas Terbuka in Indonesia, and the University of South Africa. The University of Phoenix's online revenues increased 76% (Symonds, 2001). The United States Army is expecting enrollment in its e-learning program to be 80,000 by the year 2005, more than doubling its current numbers (United States Distance Learning Association, 2002). The Massachusetts Institute of Technology had high expectations by putting course materials online (Carnevale, 2002c). The University of Wisconsin at Madison had plans to develop online advanced placement courses, primarily to help rural and inner-city students attend high schools where the courses are unavailable (Carnevale, 2002b). Kentucky added online tools for high school students preparing for college by expanding the use of online tools, such as advanced placement courses and a math test administered over the Internet (Carnevale, 2002a). The new resource, called the National Depository of Online Courses, will be developed by the Monterey Institute for Technology and Education, in California, which plans to announce the efforts soon (Carnevale, 2004a).

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (2000) and the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (2001) agreed that online learning is an educational method in which the majority of the teaching occurs

when the instructor and student(s) are not located in the identical place. Capella University offers a fully online mental health counseling master's program approved by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) (Patrick, 2003).

Survey of Online Learning

When offering online courses, one should seriously consider the environment where this type of program could be offered. In this study, WebCT was utilized to deliver the online counseling courses. Students enrolled in the online counseling courses for the last 3 years numbered 625.

A descriptive approach was used to examine the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of online counseling graduates. The following research questions were used to guide the study:

1. Are you satisfied with online learning experience?
2. Does your background influence your performance in online learning?
3. Do you feel that some courses should be taught in a classroom in a face-to-face setting?
4. Would you identify the courses that should be taught in a face-to-face setting?
5. Did you learn through online experience?
6. Do you perceive any barriers to online learning?
7. Would you provide specific information about the barriers?

Hypothesis

The following hypotheses were tested:
H1 The higher the motivation, the better the performance in online instruction.
H2 There will be no difference in learning among students who belong to different racial and gender groups.

Method

The subjects selected for this study were graduate students enrolled in online counseling courses at a predominantly African American state university. The dniversity was selected for investigation because no similar studies were available as to satisfaction or dissatisfaction of counseling graduates who took online courses. Graduate students who took at least two online counseling courses were selected for the study. The information for this research was gathered over a 3-year period.

Procedure

One hundred twenty-five graduate students (20%) were randomly selected from a pool of 625 students who took online counseling courses. These participants were pursuing a master's degree in one of the three counseling programs: school counseling, mental health counseling, and rehabilitation counseling. All the participants consented to participate in the study. Each student participant was interviewed to elaborate on his or her responses to the research questions.

Results

There were 125 (N=125) students in the sample, of which 29 were males and 96 females. Race included 104 African Americans (20 Males, 84 Females), 15 Caucasians (5 Males, 10 Females), and 6 others (4 Males, 2 Females: 3 Asians, 2 Hispanics, and 1 Middle Easterner). The following table provides the responses from the participants relating to their satisfaction/dissatisfaction about online counseling courses.

Table 1. Survey Results of Online Course Satisfaction by Race and Gender, N=125

Research Questions	M=20, F=84 Satisfaction **African Americans**		M=5, F=10 Satisfaction **Caucasians**		M=4, F=2 Satisfaction **Others**	
	Male % Yes	Female % Yes	Male % Yes	Female % Yes	Male % Yes	Female % Yes
Are you satisfied with online learning experience?	85	92	100	100	100	100
Does your background influence your performance in online learning?	95	98	100	100	100	100
Do you feel that some courses should be taught in a classroom in a face to face setting?	98	98	98	97	98	98
Did you identify the courses that should be taught in a face to face setting?	85	92	100	100	100	100
Did you learn through online experience?	95	95	100	100	100	100
Do you perceive any barriers to online learning?	90	95	100	100	100	100
Would you provide detailed information about the barriers.	98	95	100	100	100	100

Students who were highly motivated performed better within these online courses. They claimed that they chose the online courses because they were highly motivated and worked harder to achieve good grades. They used learning strategies in online courses similar to those that they have used in classroom settings. Motivation, as they reported, was a driving force that

influenced their performance in online courses.

Two specific areas that needed further elaboration were barriers to online learning and factors that influenced a successful online learning environment. Online instruction is a relatively recent undertaking, and research is needed to determine its effectiveness on learning. More studies are needed to determine if online instruction can be used for all instructional environments.

According to the statements by students, there was no difference in learning among students who belong to different racial and gender groups. Both men and women students said that they performed well in online courses.

Discussion

Students felt that their background in the use of technology helped them to achieve their goals and perform better in online courses. A small percentage of students who had difficulty in using technology felt that they could have done better if they were equipped with better technical skills. However, most of them were able to do well in online courses.

Most of the students indicated that certain courses should be taught face-to-face rather than online due to their complexity and the values of face-to-face interaction. They have identified courses such as counseling theories or group counseling, and research methods that should be taught in face-to-face settings other than online. They have indicated that even chat rooms have limited usefulness when dealing with such courses.

As reported by these students, the amount of learning achieved by students online was perceived to be due to motivation, persistence, familiarity with technology, online instruction, and access to computers and other resources. Some of the barriers for learning were work environment, lack of access to computers, lack of motivation, limited computer skills, and limited time to work online.

Nevertheless, students felt that they were satisfied with online instruction and would like to enroll in more online courses. However, they felt that certain courses should be taught face-to-face rather than online, for example, statistics and internship supervision.

Conclusion

Online instruction encourages an interaction and depth of sharing among participants. For online faculty, concerns such as content, design, assessment, and technical support are important to consider. Support from the institution is critical for the success of the online programs. One of the issues facing the online instructors 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. Online instructors must be trained to teach online courses, and students must be trained to learn in the online environment. Particular attention should be paid to online etiquette. Online instruction has the potential to reach large numbers of students regardless of students' economic status, race, gender, ethnicity, or disability. Instructors need to utilize assistive technologies that are available for making online instruction more accessible to students with disabilities.

Students involved in online learning need to develop some basic skills in order to be successful learners. Some of the needed basic skills are how to use the search engines, how to take notes, how to cite electronic sources and how to access and evaluate the online materials.

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