

Implementing and Assessing Distance Education: A Five-year Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Distance learning has the potential to deliver a quality product at a profit. Based on five years of trial and error experience with a sponsored MBA program, we make recommendations for implementing and assessing a sponsored distance education program..

In times of constrained academic budgets, distance learning partnerships between universities and businesses are being created with an eye on financial benefits as well as on opportunities for penetrating new market segments (Webster & Hackley, 1997). This is not surprising since online courses are already offered by more than 60% of colleges and universities in the U.S. (Green, 2002). Note that a majority of college administrators believe that distance learning courses are at least of equal quality to those offered face-to-face (Read, 2003).

As distance education courses grow in number, educational institutions strive to develop effective implementation and evaluation methods for online instruction. The purpose of this paper is to review the effectiveness of a hybrid, distance learning MBA program offered at the University of Georgia in partnership with a large corporation. Based on a five-year evaluation of this program, we offer insights for evaluating and assessing programs of this nature.

As with any education program, the first step in an effective evaluation process is to designate learning outcomes. Here, we focus on learning that is provided in real-life contexts (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Two phrases currently found in education theory are "situated learning" and "communities of practice." Students enrolled in our MBA program work within the same company, providing the situational comradeship and socialization found in communities of practice. The sponsor firm for this program situates the students in a common, though geographically dispersed, work setting, allowing instructors to center coursework around daily work activities.

Given this educational setting, what are the appropriate implementation and assessment processes for our hybrid distance-learning program? Based on the research of Wlodkowski and Jaynes

(1990), it is useful to assess education programs in seven areas: (1) achievability, (2) believability, (3) measurability, (4) desirability, (5) focusing, (6) motivation, and (7) commitment. These seven areas provide a direct and systemized method for assessment and evaluation.

In addition, the Institute for Higher Education Policy (2000) offers a series of benchmarks as measures of success in distance learning programs. For each of these benchmarks, the Institute delineates practical application components that had been identified through an extensive literature review. These benchmarks serve as a starting point in our assessment in that they appear to coincide with Wlodkowski and Jaynes' seven aforementioned criteria. We collapsed the Institute's benchmark areas into a three-step process covering planning, implementing and then assessing distance learning programs.