A Comparison of Faculty and Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of Online Courses and Degree Programs

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ABSTRACT

Many colleges and universities are currently offering online courses and even complete online degree programs, and many others are developing or considering plans to do so. The perceptions of those who are potential subscribers to these programs as well as those who will deliver these programs will be critical to their success. This paper investigates the perceptions of current undergraduate students and college business professors toward online courses and degree programs along several dimensions. Perceptions of college professors toward these programs are significantly less favorable than are the perceptions of college students. The dimensions of these perceptions are explored to provide guidance regarding delivery of online programs.

Keywords: Online Course, Online Course Characteristics, On-Campus Course Characteristics, Online Degree Program, Student Perceptions, Faculty Perceptions

1. INTRODUCTION

Many colleges and universities are currently offering online courses and even complete online degree programs, and many others are developing or considering plans to do so (Peltz, 2000; Quigley, 2001; Weil, 2001). Subscribers to these courses and programs have largely been non-traditional students and students that live and work at significant distances from campuses (Accetta, 2001). Their jobs, children, other responsibilities and locations make traditional on-campus matriculation difficult or impractical. But, competition from the large and growing number of schools offering courses and degrees will necessitate expansion of their markets beyond these groups to attain the critical mass to attain success. One obvious market is traditional students, who for a variety of reasons may prefer online offerings.

Another important factor in the offering of programs is faculty. Who will teach these courses?

Planning for successful online courses and degree programs necessitates identifying those things that students expect to find in these programs and their perceptions about them. Also, perceptions by faculty who may be called on to teach these courses need to be identified and addressed. There appears to be a high level of skepticism among business college faculty regarding the quality and integrity of online courses and degree programs. This skepticism appears to be more pronounced than that found in studies from Black, 1993; Pierpoint and Hartnett, 1988; and Ross and Seymour, 1999. The Sloan Consortium, 2003 & 2004, noted that perceptions of "academic leaders," particularly those who have responsibility for delivery of online programs, have a significantly higher regard for online programs than do faculty generally. Perhaps, as with many aspects of the use of technology, the promise is greater than the reality. However, over the 17 years covered by these studies, the negative expectations by faculty appear to have subsided somewhat.

The objectives of the multi-part study described herein were to determine the perceptions of undergraduate students toward online courses, determine the perceptions of college faculty members toward online courses, and to explore similarities and differences between these perspectives. These two subject populations are critically important to the development and future of online course and degree offerings – as consumers and providers. The purpose of the study was to investigate perceptions of these types of programs by the subject populations; the study is not intended to assess any specific program but rather to understand the perceptions of faculty and students toward online courses and degree programs in general.

The following section describes three sets of results of the overall study. First, undergraduate student perceptions from

the study are analyzed. Next, the perceptions of college faculty members are analyzed. Lastly, the results from the two study groups are compared and contrasted. Recommendations are given in the Conclusions section regarding the conduct of online courses and degree programs.

2. METHODOLOGY & RESULTS

Two survey instruments were developed to ascertain the perceptions of students and faculty members toward online courses and degree programs. There were some differences in the nature of the demographic information solicited from the two subject populations. For example, grade level information was collected for student respondents and rank was collected for faculty respondents. The differences in the nature of the demographic data solicited for the two populations are evident in the descriptive statistics shown below. The overall forms of the survey instruments allow for comparison of perceptions across the two subject populations.

2.1 Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of Online Courses and Degree Programs

A survey instrument was pilot tested on multiple student populations to validate subject understanding and interpretation of the survey items. These student populations were found to have properly interpreted the meanings of the questions and to have responded in a fashion consistent with the researchers' expectations for this instrument. The student version of the instrument was developed to ascertain their perceptions of which of 27 items were important to them in course delivery (whether through traditional on-campus courses or through online courses) and also whether each of these items would more likely be a part of an online program or an on-campus program. The instrument also gathered answers to very specific questions regarding the experiences and propensities of these students regarding taking online courses. Demographic data was gathered to facilitate analysis of the study results.

This instrument was administered to 179 undergraduate business students at a large urban university. The instrument was distributed and collected in classrooms so 100% were collected. The responses of one participant were determined to be unusable, resulting in 178 usable responses. These students are assumed to be likely customers for college-level online courses and represent a large potential target market.

2.1.1 Demographics: Information was gathered regarding the grade levels and the majors of the student participants. The participants represented all departments in the business school and all undergraduate classifications. These results are not reported in more detail here since no statistically significant differences were found along these demographic dimensions.

All but one of the survey respondents indicated their gender. There were approximately an equal number of female and male students, as shown in Table 1.

All but one of the survey respondents indicated their grade level. Student grade level distribution is shown in Table 2. In

a standard U.S. undergraduate program; Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, and Senior equate to first, second, third, and fourth year respectively.

Gender	Percentage of Respondents
Male	50.28
Female	49.72

Table 1. Gender of Undergraduate Student Participants (n = 177)

Grade	Percentage of Respondents
Freshman	2.81
Sophomore	33.71
Junior	45.51
Senior	17.98

Table 2. Grade Level of Student Participants (n = 178)

2.1.2 Current Status Regarding Taking Online Courses: Students were asked to describe their current status regarding taking a course online and were allowed to select more than one response. One male subject did not respond to this section, and one subject who did respond to this section did not specify gender. As shown in Table 3, fewer than one-fifth of the respondents indicated that they would not take an online course. Not surprisingly, very few had already taken or were currently taking a course online. The percentage of females who indicated that they "would not take a course online" is almost double the percentage of males who indicated this choice. And the percentage of females who indicated that they "would like to take a course online" is less than two thirds the percentage of males. This same pattern of bias among females away from online courses (or bias of males toward online courses) is shown in responses to "I plan to take a course online." Oddly, the number of females who have completed a course online is double the number of males in this sample, and this gap is increasing based on the relative number of females to males who are currently taking a course online. An analysis of variance was conducted to determine whether these observed differences in means are significant. The results of the ANOVA are shown in Table 3. Only one issue, "I would not take a course online" was significant at the 95% confidence level. The implications of this apparent gender difference warrant further study.

2.1.3 Ratings of Issues' Importance: The remainder of the survey had two parts, each with a listing of the 27 issues for students to consider. In the first section, students were asked to indicate how important each identified issue was to them in deciding whether to take a course online or in an on-campus environment. A Likert-type scale was used, with 1 representing "not at all important" and 5 representing "extremely important." A mean was calculated as a basis for determining which issues were considered rather important (defined as a mean of at least 4.0). A majority of the issues had means below 4.0, but only one had a mean below 3.0 (opportunity for communication between faculty and students outside normal class times). The five issues of highest importance are shown in Table 4.

Status Regarding Online Courses	Percentage of All Respondents (n = 178, one respondent did not specify gender)	Percentage of Male Respondents (n = 89)	Percentage of Female Respondents (n = 88)	Significance of difference in means between Genders
I would not take a course online.	19.10	14.61	27.27	.045*
I would consider taking a course online.	52.81	57.30	48.86	.361
I would like to take a course online.	37.08	44.94	29.55	.111
I plan to take a course online.	19.10	22.47	15.91	.485
I am currently taking a course online.	3.37	1.12	5.68	.243
I have completed a course online.	8.43	5.62	11.36	.375

Significant at the .05 level.

Table 3. Current Status Regarding Online Courses

Issue	Mean	Standard Deviation
Timely feedback to questions	4.35	.762
Accreditation of the institution offering the courses	4.33	.921
Access to information (resource materials)	4.26	.868
Organized and systematic presentation of materials	4.23	.866
Schedule flexibility to accommodate work responsibilities	4.21	1.040

Table 4. Top Five Issues Considered Important in Making Course Environment Decisions

Issue	Mean	Standard Deviation
Opportunity for live interaction/discussion between faculty and students	4.23	1.081
Opportunity for live interaction/discussion among students	4.22	1.122
On-campus exams	4.22	1.149

Table 5. Issues That Are <u>Much More</u> Characteristic of an On-Campus Course

Issue	Mean	Standard Deviation
Higher travel costs	3.98	1.221
Accreditation of the institution offering the courses	3.97	3.824
More commuting time to and from classes	3.97	1.306

Table 6. Issues That Are <u>More</u> Characteristic of an On-Campus Course

2.1.4 Ratings That a Characteristic is More Likely True for Online versus On-campus: For the second section, students were asked to consider the same issues as in the previous section but to indicate the likelihood that each issue was a characteristic of an online versus on-campus course, with 1 representing "much more likely in an online course" and 5 representing "much more likely in an on-campus course." A mean was calculated to identify which issues were considered much more likely in an online course (defined as a mean of no greater than 2.0) and which were considered much more likely in an on-campus course (defined as a mean of at least 4.0). The three issues that are perceived to be much more characteristic of on-campus courses are shown in Table 5. Three additional items with means very close to 4.0 are shown in Table 6. Issues that are perceived to be more characteristic of online courses (defined as a mean between 2.0 and 3.0) are shown in Table 7. None of the issues were perceived to be much more likely to be characteristic of online courses.

Issue	Mean	Standard Deviation
Submitting assignments electronically	2.16	1.321
Schedule flexibility to accommodate work responsibilities	2.77	1.422
schedule flexibility to accommodate social activities	2.81	1.521

Table 7. Issues That Are More Characteristic of an Online Course

A cluster plot or "scatter diagram" was developed to illustrate the results for all the variables used in the study. As shown in Figure 1, the majority of the items were clustered in the upper right corner, which represents the section for higher importance and higher likelihood that the characteristic would be in an on-campus course. This indicates that students perceive that they will experience the

things that matter most to them in an on-campus course rather than in an online course.

2.2 Faculty Members' Perceptions of Online Courses and Degree Programs

The faculty version of the instrument was developed to ascertain faculty members' perceptions of the likelihood that items would more likely be a part of an online program or an on-campus program. The instrument also gathered answers to very specific questions regarding the experiences and propensities of these faculty members regarding delivery of online courses. Demographic data was gathered to facilitate analysis of the study results. This instrument was distributed to 80 business college faculty members at a large urban university. Both subject populations of this study were affiliated with the same institution. These faculty are assumed to be likely providers of college-level online courses. The response rate for this subject group was 67.5%.

2.2.1 Demographics: Academic rank and department information were gathered for the faculty members. All departments of the college were represented, as were all academic ranks. This information is not reported in further detail since no statistically significant differences were found along these demographic dimensions. The percentage of male respondents was greater than the percentage of female respondents, as shown in Table 8. One subject did not specify gender. The authors believe that this sizable disparity between the number of male and female faculty members is similar to what would be found in many university business schools.

The rank of the respondents overall and by gender, is shown in Table 9.

Gender	Percentage of Respondents
Female	24.53
Male	75.47

Table 8. Gender of Faculty Participants (n = 53, one subject did not specify gender)
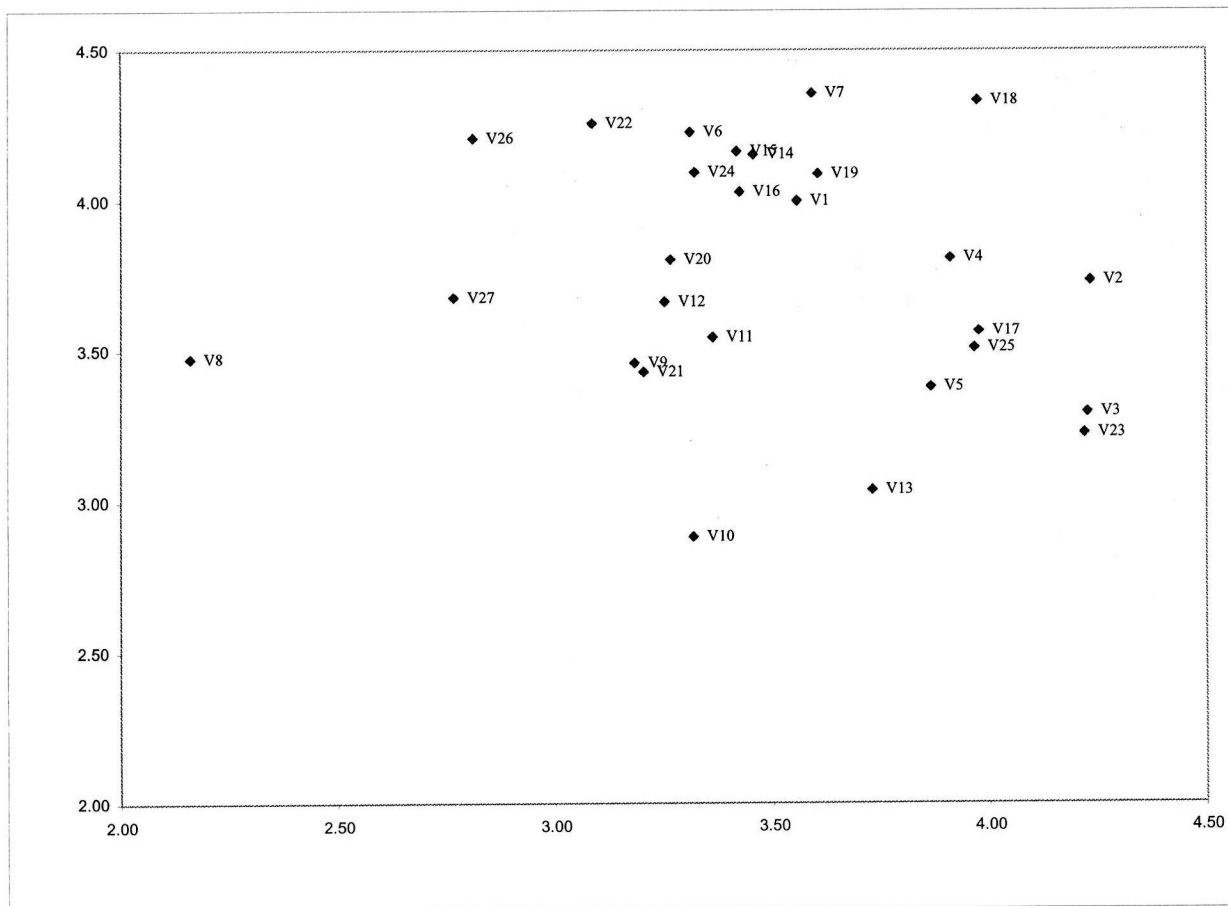

Figure 1. Comparison of Importance with Likelihood of Being On-campus versus Online

Rank	Percentage of Respondents (n = 54)	Percentage of Female Respondents (n = 13)	Percentage of Male Respondents (n = 40)
Professor	40.74	30.77	45.00
Associate Professor	27.78	15.38	30.00
Assistant Professor	31.48	53.85	25.00

Table 9. Rank of Faculty Participants

2.2.2 Perceptions Regarding Teaching Online Courses:
Faculty were asked to describe their perceptions regarding teaching a course online and were allowed to select more than one response. The results, overall and by gender, are shown in Table 10. Overall, about one-fourth of the respondents indicated that they would not teach an online course. Not surprisingly, very few had already taught or were currently teaching a course online.

Status	Percentage of All Respondents (n=54)	Percentage of Male Respondents (n=40)	Percentage of Female Respondents (n=13)
I would not teach a course online.	29.63	30.00	23.08
I would consider teaching a course online.	55.56	52.50	69.23
I would like to teach a course online.	11.11	12.50	7.69
I plan to teach a course online.	7.41	10.00	0
I am currently teaching a course online.	0	0	0
I have taught a course online.	9.26	7.50	15.38

Table 10. Perceptions Regarding Teaching Online Courses

2.2.3 Faculty Perceptions That an Issue is More Likely to be Characteristic of an Online or an On-campus Course:
Faculty were asked to indicate the likelihood that each of the 27 issues was a characteristic of an online versus on-campus course, with 1 representing "much more likely in an online course" and 5 representing "much more likely in an on-campus course." A mean was calculated to identify which issues were considered much more likely in an online course (defined as a mean of no greater than 2.0) and which were considered much more likely in an on-campus course (defined as a mean of at least 4.0). The four items that faculty perceived to be much more likely to be characteristic of on-campus courses (with means of 4.0 or greater) are shown in Table 11. The two items that faculty perceived to be much more likely to be characteristic of online courses (with means of less than 2.0) are shown in Table 12.

Faculty respondents were asked to provide narrative responses to the following questions.
- o How would you characterize your opinion of online courses?
- o What do you believe will be the future of education regarding the methods and mechanisms of online course delivery?
- o What do you believe is the most important factor in motivating people to take online courses?
- o What do you believe is the most important factor in motivating people to not take online courses?

Issue	Mean	Standard Deviation
On-campus exams	4.58	.663
Opportunity for live interaction/discussion between faculty and students	4.54	.745
More commuting time to and from classes	4.50	.927
Opportunity for live interaction/discussion among students	4.44	.793

Table 11. Issues That Faculty Perceive to be Much More Characteristic of an On-Campus Course

Issue	Mean	Standard Deviation
Schedule flexibility to accommodate work responsibilities	1.76	.970
Schedule flexibility to accommodate social activities	1.91	1.086

Table 12. Issues That Faculty Perceive to be Much More Characteristic of on Online Course

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Representative examples of responses to these questions are given in Appendix 1. Consistent with the statistical data, these responses show an overall negative perspective by faculty toward online courses and degree programs.

No narrative responses are provided for student participants. Although students were given the opportunity to add comments, they were not forthcoming. Perhaps students do not feel they have as great a stake in this topic as is true of faculty.

2.2.4 Differences between Faculty Members' and Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of Online Courses and Degree Programs: The two subject groups being compared were drawn from the same institution. This was done to remove regional or other differences that might be a function of specific institutional factors.

A main focus of this study was to determine similarities and differences in perceptions of faculty members and undergraduate students. Consequently, a multivariate analysis of variance test was conducted to determine if there was a difference between faculty and undergraduate student perceptions of the likelihood that any of the issues would be more characteristic of an online or an on-campus course. This analysis shows a significant difference at the .01 level. Follow-up tests were conducted to determine which of the 27 items were statistically significantly different between faculty and undergraduate students. Thirteen of the 27 items were found to be significantly different at the .05 level. These items along with the means for both faculty and students are shown in Table 13.

The magnitude and direction of some of these differences warrant further evaluation. Faculty perceptions of "highly

structured presentation of material" as more characteristic of online courses is in strong opposition to student responses that this same issue is perceived to be more characteristic of on-campus courses. This same type of difference is evidenced regarding the issue of "organized and systematic presentation of materials."

Faculty overall perceive little difference in the costs of tuition and fees between online and on-campus courses whereas students perceive higher costs to be more characteristic of on-campus courses. Preliminary investigation indicates that in many cases, the costs of online courses are greater than the costs of on campus courses.

Faculty perceive "schedule flexibility to accommodate work responsibilities" and "schedule flexibility to accommodate social activities" as being significantly more characteristic of online courses than do students. Additional study is needed to determine if students are being more realistic or pessimistic regarding the time required to do the work regardless of the delivery mechanism.

Both faculty and students were asked to respond to the summary item,"My overall attitude toward online courses is:" on a five point Likert-type scale with 1 being "very favorable" and 5 being "very unfavorable." The means for the two sets of respondents are shown in Table 14.

A t-test determined that overall attitudes of faculty and students are significantly different at the .001 level. Faculty attitudes toward online courses are less favorable than are student attitudes.

Issue	Mean for Faculty (n=54)	Standard Deviation for Faculty	Mean for Undergraduate Students (n=169)	Standard Deviation for Undergraduate Students
highly structured presentation of material	2.28	1.106	3.56	1.382
opportunity for live interaction between faculty and students	4.54	.745	4.23	1.081
organized and systematic presentation of materials	2.63	.977	3.31	1.220
objective tests	2.81	.913	3.25	1.070
more knowledge gained	3.87	.856	3.46	.982
higher costs of tuition and fees	3.02	.918	3.43	1.119
State Department of Education approval of the institution offering the courses	3.25	.731	3.60	1.051
privacy of communication between students and faculty	2.89	.824	3.27	1.391
on-campus exams	4.58	.663	4.22	1.149
more time to required complete coursework	2.87	.810	3.32	1.213
more commuting time to and from class	4.50	.927	3.97	1.306
schedule flexibility to accommodate work responsibilities	1.76	.970	2.81	1.521
schedule flexibility to accommodate social activities	1.91	1.086	2.77	1.422

Table 13. Items Whose Likelihood of Being More Characteristic of Online or On-Campus Courses is Perceived Differently by Faculty and Undergraduate Students

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Issue	Mean for Faculty	Standard Deviation	Mean for Students	Standard Deviation
My overall attitude toward online courses is:	3.44	1.110	2.82	1.279

Table 14. Overall Attitude toward Online Courses by Faculty and Undergraduate Students

A t-test determined that overall attitudes of faculty and students are significantly different at the .001 level. Faculty attitudes toward online courses are less favorable than are student attitudes.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The relatively negative faculty attitudes toward online courses and degree programs could hamper efforts to successfully deliver quality programs. Institutions planning to or currently delivering these programs will need to address the core of these concerns. If the faculty perceptions identified in this study are accurate, then a great deal needs to be done to insure the quality and integrity of online course delivery. If they are inaccurate, then the institutions need to fully communicate with the faculty regarding how these issues are or will be addressed.

While students have a generally better opinion than do faculty of online courses, students are not without concerns. For example, they perceived "opportunities for live interaction/discussion between faculty and students" and "opportunity for live interaction/discussion among students" to be much more characteristic of on-campus courses. They also found "accreditation of the institution offering the courses" to be more characteristic of on-campus courses.

Hopefully, this paper will provide guidance on the areas of concern, of both faculty and students, so that they can addressed. Ignoring these issues will not be in the interest of the students or the institutions developing and delivering online courses and degree programs

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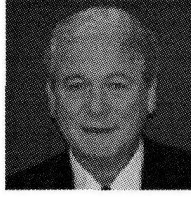
Appendix 1. Faculty Comments

Question: How would you characterize your opinion of online courses?

Answer: The advantages for a few students is more than offset by the losses incurred from the lack of institutional controls and the lack of interaction between students and faculty in the traditional academic environment.

Answer: Using online courses might be a way to offer introductory courses, refresher courses, or non-credit continuing education courses that we would not be able to provide otherwise. Communication is a critical part of the educational process. The online mode greatly restricts the quality of interactions among students and between students and the instructor.

Answer: Uninformed. The subject is not one that I've given much thought to. I should note that when I said that I'd never teach an online course I meant "voluntarily." I would do so if my chair ordered me to. It's my fervent hope that such will never come to pass.

Answer: I think online courses are almost the equivalent of the old correspondence courses, with more bells and whistles. Particularly in economics, delivery of online courses is very problematic. Personally, I don't understand how a professor could be willing to give up the interaction that can only occur in the classroom. I got into this business because I enjoy the relationships with my students--the looks on their faces when they get something, the looks on their faces when they don't--no amount of technology will replace that. Efficiency of delivery is no substitute for the heart-driven activity of being in the classroom with your students.

Answer: I believe they can work well if sufficient time and effort is invested in course preparation. I believe they also help universities reach non-traditional students (e.g., married students in small cities and rural areas).

Answer: favorable.

Answer: Guarded -- I am not impressed with what I have seen, thus far.

Answer: Online courses as I understand them are probably best suited for the more able students who have the discipline to work independently. I expect that the newness of the technology and lack of experience in using it will lead to some weak courses being offered until we have more experience with this approach.

Question: What do you believe will be the future of education regarding the methods and mechanisms of course delivery?

Answer: The future will be a modest but steady erosion of the traditional academic delivery mechanisms and the quality of academic programs overtime.

Answer: The traditional method will remain popular, but some aspect of online instruction will become the norm--for example, some parts of the course being offered online. For training programs where persons are highly motivated because the course is job related, online instruction will become very popular.

Answer: There will likely be too much online education until the faculty rebel and there are fewer people who want to do it. At one point a behavior modification approach was the rage, with step-by-step learning modules. It didn't last, because there was little opportunity to develop the richness of learning that comes with human interaction - both with faculty and fellow students. Online learning will last longer because there are too many people tied to a computer as a major part of their lives. It will peak and plateau though as more and more employers realize what they get with students who only learn through a computer - people who lack imagination and the ability to interact socially with other people (like their customers).

Answer: I think this technology has a limited potential. It is a poor substitute for the classroom and university environment. In my view, an active, demanding learning process is necessary for students to really grasp the material. Passive learning does not work. Use of online courses has the potential to reduce education to a commodity. It is not a thing, it is a process. Increasing use of online courses could be very bad for university teaching as a profession. Under pressures to reduce costs, universities might be tempted to use syndicated courses from the top professors in a field and reduce the role of other faculty members to grading papers and filling out paper work. These duties usually do not require a Ph.D., so universities could hire almost anybody. After all, wouldn't students be better off taking a course from Michael Porter, Peter Drucker, Detmar Straub, Allen Dennis, etc., than any of our Management of MIS professors?

Answer: I believe that more and more online courses will be utilized, but that education, though perhaps delivered more conveniently, will be the worse for it. I do not dispute that online courses would be convenient, but I can see no other advantage. Of course, my opinion is that the future of any kind of education appears pretty bleak. We will, of course, continue to confer degrees, which I suppose has become the goal.

Answer: Given current technology, I believe the overwhelming majority of instruction will continue to be in a traditional classroom environment. Like many of the dot COM initiatives, I am not sure the online model makes economic sense for most students and/or universities. Also, there is more to a college education than just coursework.

Question: What do you believe is the most important factor in motivating people to take online courses?

Answer: It is too easy to do it at their convenience and to do it without coming to campus. One of the problems is that no institutional loyalty is ever developed online.

Answer: Ease of taking the courses in terms of offering times--particularly for persons in remote areas and for persons who travel as part of their jobs.

Answer: I personally wouldn't ever want to motivate people to take on line courses. But if I did I would make them cheap and easy (well developed).

Answer: CONVENIENCE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! But then, we're in the business, it seems, of accommodating students, and I think they're learning less, not more, each semester.

Answer: For some I do think it is a matter of not being able to get a course any other way. In rural areas that are underserved, online courses can represent the difference between getting needed courses and not. However, I doubt that that situation is the norm. I think a lot of people take online courses because they don't have to come to class--although they could if they were so motivated. I wonder about the self-selectivity involved with these courses.

Answer: Tell them there are no exams! Make them feel good. Hug them electronically.

Answer: Convenience. Full or unavailable sections on campus. My DL students are largely there because on-campus sections were full.

Answer: Convenience will get them interested quality will keep them.

Question: What do you believe is the most important factor in motivating people to not take online courses?

Answer: A lack of information.

Answer: Boring nature of online instruction along with lack of motivation and initiative to participate in this mode of instruction.

Answer: Tell them the truth. This is a good way to possibly develop skills in rote memory - the lowest form of learning. But there aren't too many jobs out there for people who are good at only memorizing information. Imagine getting a degree in veterinary medicine on line. How you gonna handle it when faced with operating on your first dog. Likewise how are you going to handle an irate customer who is screaming at you when you have never practiced good listening in a role-play in a class.

Answer: The recognition that the material is not always easy to understand and that the presence of instructors and other students makes it more accessible. A prospective student's awareness that he/she needs help to stay motivated and persists when things are difficult. Another problem might be distrust of colleges that are located in a different state or part of the country. The same sort of "bricks versus clicks" problem that has affected Internet businesses may affect them.
The Internet seems best suited for selling well-understood products, rather than services. Before people purchase a service they need to develop a certain amount of confidence in the service provider.

Answer: Not recognized as a valid measure of knowledge or ability.

Answer: Wanting to have a live person in front of them. Again, self-selectivity has to be a factor in students' choices here, and therefore, the outcome of the courses.

Answer: The need for face-to-face interaction with the instructor to facilitate the learning experience.

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