

WHO SHOULD BE TARGETED FOR ONLINE EDUCATION

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Abstract

The significance of the question of who should be targeted for online education is increasing as fast as the importance of online education. The number of institutions of higher education adopting courseware technologies to facilitate online learning is rapidly growing, and therefore it is essential to understand who should be targeted for this form of teaching. The purpose of this study is to investigate the question of who might be first in line to embrace online education.

Keywords: Online education, courseware, target student population

Introduction

Online education has become one of the major topics on campuses across the nation as well as in research. In 2002, 1.6 million students were enrolled in online courses in the US, with the number expected to have grown to 1.9 million in 2003 (Allen & Seaman, 2003). One estimate suggests that by 2025, most college courses will be available in an online format (Dunn, 2000).

One of the widely held assumptions regarding online education is that part time students are the major target market for that form of teaching (Shea, Motiwalla & Lewis, 2001). A study was conducted to investigate this assumption and further evaluate the degree of interest of students in online education. The findings of this study suggest a reevaluation of this conjecture might be necessary.

Literature Review

Higher cost of education, the need for increased academic productivity (Hanley, 2002; Shea, Motiwalla & Lewis, 2001), life style requirements of large populations of adult and part time learners, competitive pressures (Shea, Motiwalla & Lewis, 2001) as well as increased effectiveness and cost efficiency of technological delivery methods (Vogel & Klassen, 2001) are turning many campuses into 'dual mode' institutions of education (Cookson, 2002).

The increase in online education or elements thereof requires thorough research on the pedagogical effectiveness of remote teaching, the cost-benefit ratio (Sjogren & Fay, 2002), as well as a proper framework for adopting such technology. One major issue that needs to be addressed is the question if part time students, who are generally assumed to be the major target group for online education, should really be regarded as that (Shea, Motiwalla & Lewis, 2001).

Research Method

A self-administered survey was distributed to 90 graduate students. A valid response rate of 85.6% (77 surveys) was obtained. The surveys, which had gone through various stages of pre-testing and modifications, were administered to entire classes/courses. The classes surveyed were stratified based on their level (core, foundation or elective). Within these three groups, the sampling of the classes was random.

The questionnaire consisted of three major parts: Demographic questions were followed by a set of questions aimed at obtaining information about which courses should be made available in an online format. Respondents were asked to indicate in which field of studies and at what level a course should be offered online. The last block of questions asked respondents to rate their computer skills and the quality of their equipment, indicate previous experiences with online education and express their perception about the institution's capability to provide productive online education.

Research Results

The results showed an overall reservation towards online courses. The majority of respondents indicated they would try one-three lower level or foundation courses with an average online content of 25% percent. Courses with an online component of about 25% are generally considered as supplement courses (Allen & Seaman, 2003).

The most interesting result of this study lay in the attitudes of part-time students towards online education. Part time students, who were considered the primary target market for the intended online courses, were much more reluctant to enroll in online courses than their full time counterparts.

Conclusions and Further Direction of Research

Future studies should include a broader range of institutions of higher education to further expand the results of this study. In addition, future studies should include undergraduate students as well. It is important to know which group of students, undergraduate and graduate, favors online learning and what courses they prefer in an online format. Determining who wants online education should benefit institutions both with regards to planning marketing efforts and also for the development of online courses.

Providing online education to those who embrace it first should be a good transition until the more reluctant groups are ready to come on board. This approach should ease the shift from in-class teaching to online teaching, and should increase the success of online education.

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