Appendix A: Research Methodology

The original research data presented in this book are from two separate efforts: a Fall 2000 research involving the collection of both national data from higher education institutions, and a Winter 2001 survey of students enrolled in distance learning courses.

2000 AND 2001 SURVEYS

Some academics writing about research methods suggest that studies may benefit from a combined quantitative and qualitative approach (Campbell & Stanley, 1966; Gorden, 1975). The benefits are that data sets can be compared for consistency, and the interviews can allow some insight into the causal processes, while the surveys can provide indication of the prevalence of the phenomenon. Consequently, the methodology for the 2000 study consists of two parts: a quantitative questionnaire sent to administrators of distance learning programs and qualitative interviews of representatives at a sample of institutions.

For the purposes of this study, distance learning format courses are defined as having at least a 50% reduction in seat time through use of any technology or medium. Three primary lists of distance learning providers were used for the quantitative part of the study: Peterson’s Guide to Distance Learning Programs (UCEA, 2000), Peterson’s Independent Study Catalog (UCEA, 1999) and Campus-Free College Degrees: Thorson’s Guide to Accredited Distance Learning Degree Programs (Thorson, 1999). The lists were combined and duplicates eliminated.

In the first mailing, 1,114 emailed surveys were sent out. However, only 623 of the email addresses were sent directly to individuals; the rest went to generic department or university information addresses. Of those emailed surveys, 295 were returned non-deliverable. Five institutions responded that they did not have distance learning courses as defined in the study; four others declined to participate for various reasons. The final number of completed surveys returned was 176. If the returned emails are excluded, this constitutes a response rate of 21.5%. As this original list was quite comprehensive, including virtually all the higher education institutions in America using distance learning to any significant degree, this response is quite good. Additionally, in comparison to other national surveys of distance
learning that are based on smaller samples (such as the ITC, NEA, and Primary Research Group surveys), this response is deemed sufficient.

In addition to this quantitative sample, representatives from 17 institutions were interviewed. The decision on choice of institutions for interviews was made based on two seemingly contradictory factors: first, to get a cross-section of types of institutions (two-year, four-year, rural, urban, research one, comprehensive, HBCU, religious, distance learning only, proprietary), and second, uniqueness in terms of being leaders in the field. Additionally, the choice of institutions to study through interviews followed the return of the survey in order to identify representative institutions and further probe issues identified through the quantitative data.

The survey for the quantitative part of the 2000 study was completed through the Internet. The benefits of this approach were that the Internet is widely used in higher education, is more convenient than regular mail, and allows for much faster response time (Heflich & Rice, 1999). The process was to send an introductory email that answered basic questions about the project, handled fears of confidentiality, and motivated people to participate. The email was linked to a URL (uniform resource locator) where a computer form was used to collect the data on a remote server. The surveys were coded so that responses were tracked (except for a few who thwarted the coding system). A follow-up email was sent two weeks later to remind those who had not responded to complete the survey.

For the interviews, potential subjects were contacted by email. The interview instrument itself consisted of main questions, probes, and follow-up questions. The questions focused on more in-depth probing of the primary and secondary questions of the study. The interviewees were asked to reserve 60 minutes for a single interview. Bernard (1988) suggests that in situations in which the researcher will have only one chance to interview, semi-structured interviewing is best. Accordingly, while there was a set of standard questions for each subject, it was intended that there would be flexibility to pursue other questions as indicated by the on-the-spot responses.

A survey of students who had completed distance learning format courses at Chapman University was conducted in early 2001. These included primarily professional development courses for K-12 teachers, and some individual undergraduate credit courses. The undergraduate courses were all videotape based, and were mostly “meet degree” requirements. The K-12 professional development courses were delivered online and through CD-ROM, and most were generally not required for a degree. A random sample of 659 students enrolling in distance learning courses over a five-year period (including computer-based, video, and correspondence format courses) were mailed surveys. 221 surveys were returned undeliverable due to expired addresses. 129 completed surveys were returned and processed. When the undeliverable surveys are excluded, this represents a 29.4%
response rate. The survey (Appendix J) centered on key questions brought forth from the research literature review. Additionally, because the respondents were taken from a sample of different types of distance learning delivery formats (videotape, CD-ROM, online), attitudes of students towards different distance learning methods were probed, and a section specifically for students taking computer-based courses was included to isolate those responses.

ANALYSIS

The quantitative data for the 2000 and 2001 surveys were tabulated and analyzed to describe current practices and approaches to distance learning in higher education. The population of higher education institutions in America offering distance learning credit courses is to a large extent known. However, because survey responses were depended upon for the data, inferential statistical methods were used to generalize about the whole population from the sample of respondents (Bernard, 1988; Healey, 1999). SPSS software was used to tabulate and analyze the data to identify significant descriptive patterns and relationships among the variables. For the 2001 survey, simple comparisons of totals by delivery method were primarily used. SPSS software was also used to analyze the data from the survey.

LIMITATIONS OF THE DATA

In regard to the 2000 study’s limitations, it is important to note that those both surveyed and interviewed were primarily administrators. For the survey, 78.2% of respondents reported that they are classified as full-time administrators. While the interviews revealed that many full-time administrators had been faculty members at one time—this is likely also true of many completing the survey—the respondents’ administrative backgrounds need to be recognized in evaluating the results.

The first limitation of the 2001 student survey is that the sample is rather small (129 respondents). Additionally, the respondents came from a pool of over 30 courses taken at different times, using different delivery methods and instructors. The use of different instructors certainly contributed to the different experiences reported by the students. Furthermore, as these are degree and continuing education courses aimed at adult students, the responses do not necessarily reflect attitudes of traditional undergraduate students or primary and secondary students. Nevertheless, this survey is useful particularly in understanding the learning styles and preferences of students choosing to enroll in distance learning courses.