The Impact of Distance Learning on Graduation Rates for Information Systems Students

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ABSTRACT

The study examines a 10-year history of undergraduate students majoring in information systems at a Midwestern public university. The results are useful to faculty and administrators interested in evaluating the role of distance learning with respect to graduation rates. The research investigates whether students that have taken various amounts of distance learning courses persist to graduation. In addition, the analysis looks at the role of gender in those students who graduated. The findings clearly indicate that students taking distance learning courses persist to graduation and that there is a relationship between gender and the amount of distance learning courses taken to persist to graduation.

Keywords: distance learning; graduation rates; retention

INTRODUCTION

Student retention and success in persistence to graduation are significant measures for assessing programs. The graduation rate of students in a program is an important measure of success or indicator of potential problems. While a number of measures for course efficacy are used, the number of students persisting to graduation is a measure of the program. Using distance learning to deliver courses may impact that graduation rate and ultimately contribute to the success or failure of a program. The use of distance learning methods to deliver post-secondary education has grown in the last decade (American Council of Education, 2004). The number of students desiring this format, the increase in distance learning course offerings, and the number of institutions offering distance learning formats to deliver their curricula raises the question of how distance learning factors into graduation rates.

Graduation rates are used as criteria when evaluating colleges and universities. The use of graduation rates as a measure of success was approved by Congress in 1990 when they passed legislation requiring colleges to make these rates public (Burd, 2004). In a 2003 brief, the American Council of Education (ACE) stated that graduation and persistence rates are critical performance measures for institu-
There is a national conversation on student persistence and graduation rates. There is a need to determine whether or not distance learning plays a role. The ACE notes that there is a high attrition rate in online courses and questions whether these courses are meaningful given the low completion rates (ACE, 2000). The debate over how to calculate graduation rates should include an investigation of the role of distance learning.

The attempts to look at performance over time varied from examining a single course (Ury, 2005) to analyzing a series of distance learning courses within a curriculum over a period of years (Ury, McDonald, McDonald, & Dorn, 2006). Although only a series of courses, this latter case is closer to approximating a program than the others. In this example, the authors combined a series of smaller studies, looking for significant differences in online versus classroom performance. They found a significant difference in three courses that served a large number of students in a variety of majors, no significant difference in four upper-level computer science courses, and then indicated a number of possible reasons, with no conclusive results as to cause. The conclusion was that effective learning could take place in both modalities, in the classroom and online, but they deferred to future studies to determine causality for their findings. Both of these studies focused on courses in information systems or computer science, where students might be expected to be more comfortable with interacting online. Conclusions include a further need for examination of the effect of distance learning on persistence to graduation, if any.

Other research focused on the factors of work and family and a student’s ability to persist. A report for the U.S. Department of Education reports that full-time work and part-time attendance, in combination with family responsibilities, are barriers to completing a postsecondary credential (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). While there is not a direct link in this study to distance learning, many students use distance learning to address family and work issues by removing the require-
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