Project Management Education in Online Environments: A Study of Accredited Programs in the USA

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory case study included a mixed methods approach using both qualitative and quantitative methods to review project management education programs in online environments in the United States. Accredited education programs through the Project Management Institute’s Global Accreditation Center formed the basis of the research. The focus of this study was on the project management content used by online colleges and universities to teach project management to students. The findings help to provide recommendations for project management education to improve its delivery to students.

KEYWORDS

Accreditation, College Programs, Knowledge Areas, Online Education, Online Environments, Process Groups, Project Management

INTRODUCTION

The increase in the availability of online education has enabled many students to obtain college credits through the Internet (Li & Irby, 2008; Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003). Schools such as the University of Phoenix, that offered online education through the Internet as early as 1991 (Kentnor, 2015), to the current number of colleges and universities are offering courses online. Although schools such as the University of Phoenix, Capella University, Walden University, and Kaplan University primarily offer online courses to students, traditional universities such as Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology have begun to provide online instruction to students (Long, 2013).

Online education is becoming more accepted as many groups of students find they cannot attend traditional on-campus courses due to various factors, such as physical disabilities or the distance they must commute to an appropriate college. With many working adults going back to school to complete degrees, job demands may not allow these students to attend physical classrooms during regular college schedules. Working students in shift-work occupations, such as the police and fire services, the medical field, the military, and other round-the-clock type jobs, could not attend college courses that meet at specific times each week. Similarly, students who travel for work may find online courses more accessible while on the road. Ginder and Stearns (2014) estimated 25.8% of college students were enrolled in at least one distance education course, such as online offerings, in the fall of 2012. As more programs become available online, students who cannot attend traditional classroom environments will fill the virtual seats of college classrooms.

Project Management is a discipline related to the leading of temporary endeavors with defined objectives and set starting and ending times. Projects have been around since ancient times with the
building of pyramids, bridges, coliseums, buildings, roads, aqueducts, and other structural marvels. Projects of the 20th century have included the Manhattan Project to build an atomic bomb and the project that sent astronauts to the moon (LenFl& Loch, 2010; Seymour & Hussein, 2014). Projects can be found in nearly all types of organizations. This increased popularity in the project management discipline has led to more project management programs in the educational arena.

The discipline of project management as an academic area within college programs is fairly new. The number of colleges and universities teaching project management courses has increased as the popularity of the project management profession grows. Twenty-four universities in the United States have accredited project management degree programs through the Project Management Institute’s Global Accreditation Center (Project Management Institute, 2016b). Collectively, these schools offer combinations of bachelor’s, postgraduate (master’s), and doctoral level programs in project management. According to Peterson’s (2016), 281 online colleges offer degrees in project management.

Within most colleges and universities, a hierarchy of project management exists in educational programs. At the lowest level, formal project management courses do not exist; however, the school could work with local project management association chapters to offer training in project management practices. These schools could also have project management concepts integrated within the courses; however, formal courses specific to project management do not exist. At the next level, colleges and universities offer courses in project management but not a degree program specific to the discipline. As project management evolves within schools, the next step would be to offer degree programs in project management. The degree programs could be at the associate, bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral levels. Finally, the colleges and universities can go through the accreditation process and have their degree programs accredited by such organizations as the International Project Management Association (IPMA) or the Project Management Institute (PMI). The Association for Project Management (APM), the United Kingdom member of the IPMA federation, lists 28 schools with accredited degree programs (APM, n.d.a). DelGrosso (2016, January) stated PMI’s Global Accreditation Center (GAC) had 103 college degree program at 56 institutions at the end of 2015.

The purpose of this study is to describe the online project management degree programs in the United States based on course content as listed in the names of project management courses. The focus is on the accredited programs through PMI’s GAC, a worldwide accreditor of project management education programs. Databases such as EBSCOhost and ProQuest were the primary sources of scholarly material related to online education and project management degree programs. Other Internet sites, such as PMI’s GAC and the websites of specific colleges and universities, helped to determine the data for the study.

**METHODS**

The method used for this study was a mixed methods approach, using both quantitative and qualitative data (Cameron, 2011; Cameron, Sankaran, & Scales, 2015; McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). The qualitative portion of the study was the primary focus. The quantitative portion of the study focused on determining answers to the following quantitative research questions:

- Is the number of PMI GAC accredited degree programs offered at the institutions statistically significant among the schools?
- At what program level (bachelor’s, master’s, doctoral) do PMI GAC accredited degree programs lie?
Critical Analysis of Expansion Strategies of SAP, IBM, Oracle and Microsoft in the area of Business Intelligence
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