ABSTRACT

The chapter addresses the discrepancies that exist between student and faculty perceptions of online courses, specifically differences in beliefs about the quality of online courses and the rigor of online coursework. The authors present data collected from faculty and students before the launch of undergraduate and graduate online programs and over the course of the first four years of online course offerings at a small, Historically Black University (HBCU). The data is used to discuss ways to reduce incongruities in how students and faculty view online courses with a focus on faculty establishing their expectations for student performance in the online environment, measuring course quality, and using student evaluations to enhance course quality. Congruent beliefs and expectations are important to ensure that both faculty and students involved in online courses are satisfied with their experiences, leading to better retention and learning outcomes.
INTRODUCTION

Beliefs about the quality of online courses is one hurdle that institutions of higher education have worked hard to overcome (Gaskell & Mills, 2014). Negative perceptions of online courses may come from college administrators, faculty, and students. If administrators have a negative perception of online courses and programs, they will be less likely to invest time and resources into creating or expanding online offerings. Many colleges and universities that have not ventured into the online space are reluctant to do so because of administrators, presidents and boards that possess negative perceptions or misconceptions about online courses. Faculty reluctance to develop or teach online courses also originates from negative beliefs about online as compared to face-to-face courses (Allen, Seaman, Lederman, & Jaschik, 2012; Lytle, 2012). Students are the least likely population to have a negative view of online courses, but that does not mean they possess accurate perceptions or expectations about online education (Abamu, 2018). The online education industry has done little to dispel misconceptions that swirl around them, and online program marketing tends to create an unrealistic image of online courses as quick, convenient, and accommodating. An examination of online advertisements, both video and print, show that terms such as “fast” or “fast track” appear in over a third of the advertisements often stressing that students could earn credit for work or life experiences. As Smith (2016) notes, cost and time to completion tend to be the biggest decision making factors for potential online students. Online marketing that uses terminology suggesting that a degree can be earned quickly mirror the desires of such students. Phrases like “classrooms come to you” or “a degree in your [own] time” are typical. One university stressed that the online university was created “just for you.” Similarly, programs stressed “built for working adults.” “Faculty are open and reachable” captures a third common advertisement theme. Online program advertising focus on the desires of working adults – a program that is flexible and convenient (Sever & Demiray, 2011). In summary, online universities sell themselves as fast, convenient, individualized, and with a readily available world class faculty. Truly, this is a high set of expectations.

Years of research has shown that there are often differences in student and faculty perceptions of online courses, specifically beliefs about the quality of online courses, teaching effectiveness, and the rigor of online coursework (Osborne, Kriese, Toby, & Johnson, 2009; Slapak-Barski & Edmonds, 2017; Tanner, Noser, & Totaro, 2009). As an example, both students and faculty value social presence, yet students consistently evaluate social presence far less than do faculty (Mathieson & Leafman, 2014). If faculty and students are not aligned in their beliefs and expectations regarding workload, communication, and interaction in the online environment, both are likely to be dissatisfied with the online experience. Student dissatisfaction may lead to
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