Chapter 6

Assessing the Quality of Distance Education at a University

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports the findings of an investigation into the experiences of undergraduate and graduate distance education students at a state educational institution in the United States. Current distance education students at the university were surveyed using an online questionnaire. The purpose of the study was to identify areas of weakness in the distance education program in general and develop recommendations for improving the program. The survey was primarily quantitative, but also allowed for participants to provide qualitative feedback. Results of the study are outlined in terms of distance students’ perceptions about the institution’s distance education program. Recommendations for improving the program are provided.

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INTRODUCTION

The plight of distance students who typically enroll in online courses to complete their university studies has been reported at length over many years (for example, Cochran, Baker, Benson, & Rhea, 2016; Crampton & Ragusa, 2015; Gaskell & Mills, 2015; Smith, 2006). Similarly, the difficulties encountered by these students have been investigated and debated in varied contexts (for example, Davis, 2001; Niari, Manousou, & Lionarakis, 2016; Tyler-Smith, 2006). While the general benefits and limitations of online education continue to be topics of debate among educators across the higher education sector, the localized needs of distance education within specific higher education institutions are sometimes overlooked in favor of a more generalized set of recommendations. The purpose of the study reported in this chapter was to determine the areas of strength and weakness within distance education at one specific institution, by giving the students within different programs an opportunity to voice their views about their past and current distance education experiences, with the view to modifying distance education courses in the future. In the past, the distance education courses at a state university in the northeastern United States had only been evaluated using the institution’s generic end-of-semester evaluation survey and, to date, an in-depth evaluation of the students’ experience of these distance courses across multiple programs and years had yet to be conducted. The study outlined in this chapter reports on the first investigation at this institution, which has specifically targeted distance students.

BACKGROUND

Distance education courses provide a convenient way for busy people to learn. This premise has resulted in the number of distance programs being offered and, consequently, an increase in the number of students learning through distance education. In 2006, approximately 3.5 million students were enrolled in at least one online course, which was approximately a 10% increase from 2005 (Allen & Seaman, 2007). In contrast, in 2011, the number of students enrolled in an online course was 6.7 million, almost doubling the number of students taking distance courses in 2006 (Allen & Seaman, 2013). The percentage of universities and colleges offering online programs increased from 34.5% in 2002 to 62.4% in 2012 (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Simonson, Smaldino, Albright and Zvacek (2014) report that distance education has become an important part of many universities’ long-term planning.

When it comes to the quality of distance education courses, the record has been mixed. Allen and Seaman (2013) reported that in 2003 “57.2 percent of academic leaders rated the learning outcomes in online education as the same or superior to
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