Chapter VI

Case Study: Developing a University-Wide Distance Education Evaluation Program at the University of Florida

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Abstract

To enhance quality, faculty and student satisfaction, and learning outcomes, an academic working group comprising University of Florida faculty members proposed a project to develop a valid, reliable course evaluation tool for distance education courses and programs. Components of the project included institutional benchmarking, stakeholder input, instrument development, and instrument testing. The project resulted in a course evaluation tool that is more reflective of the actual course experience than what was previously being used. The chapter concludes with a brief list of recommendations and lessons learned from the project.
Introduction

According to recent national data on distance education at postsecondary institutions, more than 68% of institutions of higher learning currently offer some form of distance education course or program (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Growth in distance education has led to new opportunities to serve place-bound students who otherwise would not be able to access degree programs. This growth has also introduced new challenges. One major challenge is in addressing the need to reassess how distance education courses and programs are evaluated. Distance education courses, by their nature, incorporate instructional and technological components of instruction at a more synergistic level than traditional, live classes. This creates challenges for those academic units and the institution in terms of evaluation of faculty, since the technology component adds complexity to standard course evaluation techniques. As a result, academic unit administrators across the globe have been wrestling with the following questions:

1. Should student evaluations for distance education courses include items measuring the technology component?
2. How should evaluations be disseminated in a distance education course where instructors may not meet with students face-to-face?
3. Given that such courses may include diverse elements, such as multiple delivery technologies, remote sites, and use of facilitators and co-instructors, should evaluations be specific to the individual course situation? Should they be separate from the traditional class evaluations but be otherwise generic? Or should distance courses share the same evaluation form as traditional, live classes?

At many major institutions around the country, the current approved course evaluation form has been in place for many years, and as a consequence may not evaluate technology other than by a series of items focused on laboratory instruction (Roberts, Irani, Lundy, & Telg, 2004). Further, most course evaluation forms do not include questions to assess important distance education concepts, such as level of interaction, support, and facilitation. As a result, some academic units have developed their own instrumentation to evaluate their own distance education courses. From an academic and institutional standpoint, however, the utility, validity, and reliability of these instruments are questionable, and data from these instruments have typically not been reported by instructors seeking tenure and promotion.

Case Study in Course Evaluation

In December 2001, an academic working group at the University of Florida, composed of a distance learning administrator and two faculty members, proposed a project to develop a new university-wide distance education course evaluation instrument. This was in
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