Chapter V

Distance Education: Satisfaction and Success

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ABSTRACT

• Almost 3.5 million students were taking at least 1 online course during the fall 2006 term.
• The 9.7% growth rate for online enrollments far exceeds the 1.5% growth of the overall higher education student population. (Allen and Seaman, 2007)

By 2006, the distance education industry was well beyond $33.6 billion (Merit Education, 2003). As with most markets, 1 of the keys to taking advantage of this growing market is customer satisfaction. Therefore the greater the student satisfaction in a distance program, the more likely that program will be successful. This paper identifies 5 key components of satisfaction for distance education programs through a student satisfaction questionnaire and factor analysis. A questionnaire was developed using these variables and administered to 341 distance students. The results revealed 5 constructs for student satisfaction in a distance education program (Martz and Reddy, 2005; Martz and Shepherd, 2007). Using these factors as guidance, this paper extends those findings to provide some operational and administrative implications.
INTRODUCTION – WHY DO WE CARE ABOUT SATISFACTION

The education industry is being transformed by the ever-growing presence of distance education. The industry has many segments and ancillary components, including higher education, corporate training, and IT infrastructure. The distance education industry has several market drivers that educators, colleges, and businesses must take a serious look at to successfully implement distance education programs and courses. Howell et al. (2003) posit that those interested in distance learning education must be well informed about the trends within the industry. One overriding concern is that the interest in distance education is driving a huge investment without an understanding of what will make a distance education program successful.

The first market driver is the significant market potential. International Data Corporation sets the worldwide value of the e-learning market at $23 billion for 2004. Over 90% of all colleges are expected to offer some form of online courses by 2004 (Institute of Higher Education Policy, 2000). Over 3.5 million students took at least one online course in fall 006 (Allen and Seaman, 2007). The corporate segment of this industry is growing substantially as well. Corporations envision online training warehouses that will save large amounts of training dollars. Estimates have this training warehouse market segment at $11 billion in 2003 (Kariya, 2003). At the same time, major corporations are expanding their corporate university / distance learning programs. AACS International (1999) offers that there are more than 1600 corporate universities with their eyes on a distance learning component and further predicts there will be more corporate than traditional universities by 2010.

The corporate market growth is being driven by the profit potential. Corporate managers and college administrators envision significant cost reduction (Traupel, 2004) and significantly higher demand (Sausne, 2003) for training/education, both of which can create higher profits. For example, elective classes that do not have enough students enrolled in on-campus classes may pick up enough distance students to make teaching the course more feasible (Creahan and Hoge, 1998). The college or school’s mission or charter represents another driver to implement distance education programs. As most educational institutions serve a geographical region, either by charter or mission, a distance-learning program may be a practical method to help satisfy this strategic mission (Creahan and Hoge, 1998). The distance education model can be seen as a way to improve profits and improve the ability to provide education to students who may have trouble coming to a certain geographic location.

A second major driver is the dramatic change in career expectations by both employers and employees. These changes are being seen in the concept of life-long learning (Howell, et al. 2003). Today, employees are not expected to stay in the same job for long periods of time. Careers today encompass jobs in multiple industries, combinations of part-time work in multiple jobs, telecommuting, leaving and re-entering the full-time work force and switching jobs more often than in the past. Today’s employee readily envisions the need to maintain a level of knowledge current with the career demands (Boyatzis and Kram, 1999).

In contrast to the market drivers, the “commercialization” of education also raises concerns about the basic process of learning (Noble, 1999). By definition, distance education changes the basic paradigm of the education environment. In turn, this means that students will probably respond differently to this environment than they do to the traditional classroom. Some of the responses will be intended and some will be unintended. For example, what are some inhibitors to learning or fundamental problems caused by using a distance learning environment?

One problem identified is the lower student retention found in distance programs. Students