Chapter VII

Evaluating a Distance Education Program

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Abstract

In higher education, distance learning initiatives are very linked to the overall institution’s educational mission. For such an initiative to succeed, a carefully designed distance education evaluation plan is necessary. This chapter describes key distance education program evaluation variables, using the Temple University’s OnLine Learning Program as an example. In addition to describing the purpose of conducting a distance program evaluation and illustrating evaluation methods, the results from surveys and focus groups regarding students’ satisfaction with their distance learning experiences are shared. We consider that a good distance education program evaluation plan should also impact the institution’s general education policies and procedures.
Introduction

Evaluation of any program is a basic part of program development. As discussed in Chapter 1, if you look at distance education program development in terms of developing a business plan for a business, you need to know the program mission and scope and the audience to define the external and internal forces contributing to the program development; to identify exactly what services/courses/degrees/certificates will be offered and the performance (evaluation) measures to be used; to estimate the overall costs (income and outflow) of the program; and to consider future developments. Within the planning process the evaluation design and development are integral. At what point will you determine if the goals and objectives were met? How were they met? If they were not met, what happened to prevent them from being met? Each goal and objective should be assessed in terms of the mission and scope of the program. Evaluation of a distance education program requires attention to the same issues and questions, among others.

This chapter will first discuss basic issues of program evaluation, whether for traditional programs or distance education programs, and then will identify variables important to evaluation of university distance learning/education initiatives, using the Temple University OnLine Learning Program as an example. This chapter also presents the results from the research instruments used at Temple University (T.U.) to assess student satisfaction with two distance education modes (online and videoconferencing) of learning and teaching, and describes each instrument’s advantages and disadvantages.

Basic Program Evaluation

What is the purpose of the evaluation? Who is it for? Once these two questions have been answered, the proper evaluation process, tools, and reporting structure can be selected or designed. There are many forms of program evaluation, including formative and summative, structured and informal, among others. A formative evaluation is intended to gather information specific to the goals and objectives of a program and to turn this information reflectively back to the program. This information provides guidance in refining and rethinking the program to ensure goals and objectives are met. Summative evaluation is used to assess whether the program has met its goals and objectives as defined by time (e.g., by 2002, the program will have at least one degree program
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