Chapter 20
Perspectives of Online Doctoral Students in Educational Leadership

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the perspectives of adult learners in an online Educational Leadership doctoral program. A qualitative survey research instrument was used to elucidate and explore phenomenological themes connected to student attitudes and perspectives regarding the experience of adult online education, the perceived challenges of an online doctoral program, the perceived benefits of an online doctoral program, student or teacher-connected strategies for success within online graduate education, the on-ground residencies in connection with the asynchronous aspects of the program, the perception of an online doctoral degree within their fields, and recommendations for online doctoral programs in the future. The findings suggest that strategies to increase student success in doctoral online programs should include a recognition of differentiated instruction toward multiple intelligences, increased communication of the dissertation or program timeline, an examination of how online students meet the contact hour requirements through teams, residencies, and individual time management, and an exploration of the social aspect of online learning.

INTRODUCTION

Leaders, scholars, and educational practitioners must investigate the role online learning can have on adult learners in graduate degree programs in order to create effective programs and successful graduates of these programs. One of the difficulties with attempting to analyze the pedagogy and effects of online learning and adult learners is that the perspectives can be subjective: online faculty may be well-versed in the theories behind their content-delivery and explication strategies, but they may have difficulty understanding how the online environment affects or alters learning styles of students; online adult students, although immersed in the online learning experience, may not have the
pedagogical or academic awareness to appropriately analyze the educational environment.

Exploring the perceptions of recent graduates and final-stage doctoral candidates of an online for-profit Educational Leadership program takes advantage of the opportunity to gain qualitative data from available participants still close enough chronologically to their personal online experiences as adult learners to give reflections unaltered by time, who also have the professional and scholarly awareness of pedagogy to objectively analyze advantages as well as internal and external barriers inherent in the online environment.

The objective of this chapter is to elucidate and explore themes that emerged from the use of a qualitative survey instrument from doctoral candidates and recent graduates of an online doctorate of education program in Educational Leadership through a for-profit university. A secondary objective is to analyze those emergent themes in relation to how educators in the online environment can better provide opportunities for adult student learning, officials in online education can limit barriers to online learning, and students within online educational environments can fulfill their potentials as learners.

BACKGROUND

In the last decade, the topic of online education has fueled the creation of various scholarly analyses and debate. Multiple studies exist about pedagogical strategies in the online environment (Bullen, 1998; Howell, Williams, & Lindsay, 2003; Young, 2006), primary benefits of online education (Dykman & Davis, 2008), possible pitfalls of asynchronous learning (Berge, 1998), and perspectives of stakeholders within distance education programs (Braun, 2008; Powell, 2007; Tello, 2007).

Transitioning to the online environment takes preparation from both the teacher and the student. Teaching and learning in the online classroom requires different techniques than teaching and learning in the regular classroom (Maddux, 2004). Educators have to be engaged differently, use alternate cues to understand students and their concerns, and provide feedback through diverse avenues (Dykman & Davis, 2008). In addition, the educator’s role is altered when in an asynchronous situation, and educators can face internal as well as external barriers to self-efficacy in the position as an online instructor (Berge, 1998). As Freeman et al. (2004) note, “the new technology shifts the responsibility of the learning from the instructor to the student. The role of the instructor then changes from that of an information-provider to one of a facilitator, organizer, and monitor” (para. 4). Online educational environments have to be crafted to allow the student to fulfill the responsibilities necessary in self-directed asynchronous learning while educating instructors in differently utilizing educational strategies.

Mupinga (2005) notes that “given the challenges of technology, the need for student self-direction and motivation, and the inexperience of many faculty members with the demands of Web-based instruction, adequate student and faculty preparation is essential” (para. 17). An understanding of the technological requirements from students and teachers is necessary for effective instruction. Problems with technology create more student and teacher frustration in distance learning than lack of subject-area comprehension (Blackstock & Exton, 2005). Technological elements, situation-specific teaching strategies, and the importance of the student-centered classroom ensure that online learning requires more than subject-area expertise and dissemination.

Because students look for courses and programs that “meet their schedules and circumstances,” an examination of the perspectives and experiences of late-stage students and degree recipients from online programs is necessary (Howell, Williams, & Lindsay, 2003). Exploring the perspectives of stakeholders within online learning environments