Does Online Outshine?
Online vs. Campus-Based Degree Withdrawal and Completion Rates within an MBA Program

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ABSTRACT
This study examined how the method of instructional delivery, face-to-face or online, affected withdrawal and persistence/completion the rates of students who matriculated in either the campus-based or online track of the same Master’s of Business Administration program. A quantitative investigation was conducted to analyze the academic and demographic characteristics of degree-seeking students at a large university in the United States. Demographic variables included age and gender. Academic-related variables included program delivery mode, undergraduate grade point average, admission test scores, and grade point average at time of withdrawal or completion.

Keywords: Degree Completion, Degree Withdrawal, Graduate Students, Masters of Business Administration, Online Classes, University

INTRODUCTION
The rationale of this study was to determine how the mode of instructional delivery, traditional face-to-face or online, affects withdrawal and completion in a Masters of Business Administration (MBA) program relative to students’ demographic and academic characteristics at a major research university in the southeastern United States. The study population consisted of cohorts of students admitted and matriculated in both face-to-face and online format of the same MBA program. A longitudinal study utilized a graduate degree database to track the enrollment patterns of these cohorts through the Spring 2006.

The authors examined individual student records from the database to determine student enrollment status. The study looked at two areas (1) withdrawal – students initially admitted and enrolled at the beginning of the study but who were not enrolled at the conclusion and who had not been enrolled for two consecutive academic terms and (2) completion/persistence – the count of students who obtained degrees within the time frame or were still enrolled at
the conclusion of the study. Persistence was defined as continuous progress toward degree completion with uninterrupted enrollment from one academic term to academic term (e.g., Fall, Spring, and Summer) to another. Dropout was defined as a student who was initially admitted and enrolled during the time of the study but was not enrolled in the final term of the study or who had not been enrolled for at least two consecutive academic terms, excluding Summer terms.

For the purposes of the current study, students were classified as online students if more than 50% of their completed courses were delivered online. Students were classified as campus-based if more than 50% of their courses were traditional face-to-face classes. If a student had an equal number of classes in each format, the number of credit hours attempted in each was used to determine the primary campus of enrollment.

The face-to-face and online formats of the MBA program were, for the most part, identical regarding the content with the exception of the delivery method. The campus-based and online formats of the MBA program under consideration utilized the same teaching staff, curriculum, assignments, educational technology (Blackboard course management system) and other infrastructure as well as campus academic support services; thereby, offering some degree of control for program, instructional, and institutional variables. The data analysis involved descriptive and inferential statistical analysis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the fastest growing online fields of study is the Master’s of Business Administration. Of 2,577 institutions responding to a survey on online education, business programs continued to experience the highest online penetration rate at 33% (Allen & Seaman, 2008b). Online MBA programs constitute a new market comprised of both traditional and nontraditional students who work full-time and are often sponsored by their employers (Smith, 2001). Organizations are utilizing more online business courses, which professionals view as a viable alternative to campus-based face-to-face options (Kyle & Festervand, 2005).

Students and institutions alike are beneficiaries in the growth of online business education programs and classes. For students, online learning offers greater convenience, flexibility, and, in some cases, reduced educational costs. The constraints of time and distance are alleviated for professionals with family and job responsibilities, as well. For many institutions, online programs enhance efforts to fulfill their missions regarding educational access and outreach while increasing program inventory, enrollment, and, in many instances, university funding (Moore & Kearsley, 2005). Yet, with the proliferation of online education programs come questions of their effectiveness and quality. The online mode of instructional delivery, together with its accelerated growth rate, raises concerns among educational leaders and faculty about assuring the value and success of online MBA programs.

To provide increased educational access for students and to meet marketplace demands, institutions of higher learning are adopting online delivery of instruction for both degree programs and non-degree courses at an ever-growing rate. Offering benefits to both students and teachers, online instruction has become an attractive choice for both teaching and learning. Online learning has grown significantly over the past ten years within higher education. Due to the rapid acceptance of communication technology platforms, many universities are delivering a large portion of their courses online. Allen and Seaman (2009) reported that online enrollment increased 17% versus a 1.2% increase for the total student population within the same time frame. Over 4.6 million students enrolled in an online course in the Fall 2008. It is expected that online enrollment will further increase in all sectors of higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2009). Clearly there will be a limit on the growth of online enrollments; however existing data demonstrates that this frontier has not
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