AN EVALUATION OF A MODEL MULTIPLE SITE DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAM FOR NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

Dale E. Thompson

Betsy Orr

Kit Brooks

Cecelia Thompson

The University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR

Index: Human Resource Development, Distance Learning

Abstract: The purpose of the evaluation was to determine student's perception of the effectiveness of a multiple site distance education program. Part 1 evaluated the distance education process. Students reported a positive experience with distance education. Many were apprehensive at first but after a class or 2, most began to like the process and preferred it to traditional classes. Part 2 evaluated program incentives & barriers, class structure and application of course content. Students responded that evening and weekend scheduling was the greatest incentive to participation in the program while lack of access to the advisor/instructor was the greatest barrier.

INTRODUCTION

Many working adults without a baccalaureate degree are denied access to responsible workplace positions and frequently have limited opportunities for career advancement. These limitations are especially significant for adults working in remote or rural areas. These workers face issues such as lack of availability of higher education, many family obligations, and constraints of time and finances. These keep them trapped in their current occupational situation.

To provide opportunities for working adults, a degree program was developed in the department of vocational and adult education at the University of Arkansas. Graduates earn a Bachelor's of Science in Education in vocational education with a Human Resource Development (HRD) concentration. It is available only to adults who are working full time, have worked at least 5 years and have 40 to 60 college credits which are transferable to the University of Arkansas.

The program has 125 credit hours of class requirement. Fifty-six credits are general studies such as English, science, social studies, fine arts/humanities, math, health/ wellness, and media/computers. Thirty-three credits of technical requirements include coursework in a specialty area. Students have a choice of transferring business or HRD coursework, testing out of requirement through the National Occupational Competency Testing Institute (NOCTI) and receiving credit for work experience or industry training through the development of a portfolio based on guidelines developed by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, the American Council on Education and the National Program on Non-Collegiate Sponsored Instruction.

Thirty-six credits of HRD coursework are required in the degree program. The following courses are required as part of the 2-year cohort plan.

- Skills and strategies in HRD
- Theory and principles in needs assessment/evaluation

- Communications in HRD
- Strategic design of HRD
- Theory and principles in adult education
- Theory and principles in team building
- Strategies in professional development
- Leadership in HRD.

A 12 credit work-based project/internship is also required. The internship is a work related project built around the HRD coursework.

The degree program, which began in the fall of 1996, was structured as a partnership between the University of Arkansas and community colleges throughout the state. The students completed their general studies and many of their technical requirements at the local community college. After students finished most of their general studies, they began the University of Arkansas cohort component of the program by interactive audio/video. The human resource content courses were offered in an accelerated format meeting 9 weeks rather that the standard 15 weeks and meeting on weekends to accommodate working adults. Each course was offered at 1 host site and 3 or 4 remote sites. There were a total of 10 sites throughout the state of Arkansas with a current enrollment of 175 students. The students enrolled in this program were non-traditional students ranging in age from 25 years to 60 years.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to determine student's perceptions of the effectiveness of a multiple site distance education program, which leads students to a Bachelor of Science degree with an emphasis in human resource development. Part 1 evaluated the distance education (interactive audio/video) process. It consisted of equipment use, interaction between sites, and instruction by distance education vs. regular classroom. Part 2 evaluated program barriers, incentives, and class scheduling.

Methodology

Ninety students participated in this study over a 2-year period. Data for Part 1 was collected with 6 open-ended questions. Each question asked for general feelings/attitudes about an aspect of the process. Thirty-five students who had completed 4 distance education courses responded to the questionnaire. Data for Part 2 was collected from 55 students randomly assigned to ten focus groups. All ten groups addressed 9 open-ended questions. Participants in this part of the study had completed 2 distance education courses.

Data Analysis

Content analysis was used to analyze the responses. Content analysis is an objective and systematic technique to describe the content of any form of communications. In education, content analysis is aimed at producing descriptive information by answering questions directly related to the material analyzed and identifying educational problems (Borg & Gall, 1989). Entries were analyzed by documenting key words and phrases in the text. Two researchers read the entries independently and then compared results.

Frequencies of responses to each item were compiled.

FINDINGS

Part One

Item 1 asked participants to comment on their perceptions of the use of the equipment in distance education. Results in rank order from high to low were rough beginning but then things worked well; equipment worked well, liked the use of technology; would like to see more use of video and other equipment; and the instructor was good with the equipment.

Item 2 asked learners to comment on their perceptions of the interaction with other students at other sites. Comments ranked from high to low were good to excellent interaction; were skeptical, but after a couple of classes warmed up to the type of class; liked group meeting in which all site students could meet each other; had a problem with class at beginning but became more comfortable with other sites as time went on, and instructor did well in including all students from each site.

Item 3 asked for perceptions of the effectiveness of instruction with the use of distance education verses regular classroom instruction. Results from highest to lowest were liked distance education classes better that traditional classes even if there were a few technical problems from time to time; distance classes were not much different from traditional classes; the instructor was the main factor in the success of the distance learning class; and technical problems made communicating more difficult and the use of the equipment made lecture difficult to follow.

Item 4 asked for learner suggestions for changes for distance education classes. Comments ranked from highest to lowest were most responded there was no need to change anything; would like more group time and less use of overhead transparencies; less lecturing; updated equipment such as better microphones; and more breaks.

Item 5 asked for learner perceptions of class components to leave the same. From highest to lowest comments were like to keep the instructors the same (not switch to new instructors for the next class); learning environment; class schedule; interaction between students from site to site; discussions; and demonstrations.

Item 6 asked for general comments regarding the use of distance education. The most common comment was that they liked the may the instructor related to them and included them in the class participation. Other comments included were liked the schedule (9 weeks of class rather that the standard 15 week semester) and were grateful to earn a degree without a commute to the home campus.

DISCUSSION

Part One

Overall students reported a positive experience with their distance education program. Many of the students encountered difficulties in the beginning of the class with use of the equipment. Some students reported difficulty interacting with students at other sites but became more comfortable as the course progressed. Students preferred the distance-learning mode of instruction when compared to instruction by traditional learning.

FINDINGS

Part Two

Data for Part 2 were analyzed by recording the written comments from the open-ended questions. The first question was "What incentives were there for you to enter the program?" The majority of the responses (66%) indicated that scheduling was the major reason for participation in the program. This included comments such as time of day and day of week courses were offered; location of classes, convenience of classes, and flexibility of program. This was followed by 13% who indicated that they received tuition reimbursement from their employers. Next, 10 % of the responses indicated that the reason for being in the program was for personal growth and the chance for pay raises or increasing their marketability. Also 10% of the respondents liked the program component that allowed them to earn college credit for work experience.

Question 2 "What barriers did you experience with the program?" revealed the following responses: First was lack of contact or accessibility of on-campus advisors/instructors (57%). Included in this category were items such as lack of understanding of overall program, transfer credit problems, lack of understanding of assignments, inability to receive class feedback and lack of updated advising information. The second item identified as a barrier was cost of the program (24%). The last was 19% were miscellaneous comments such as travel, time, lack of access to computers and student disruption in class.

Question 3 was "To what extent did the topic of Human Resource Development affect your decision to enter the program?" Sixty percent indicated a strong interest in Human Resource Development while 40% were just in the program to get a degree.

Question 4 was "How did the Friday/Saturday scheduling affect your decision to enter the program?" Ninety percent indicated that the scheduling was positive. Comments were made such as: "this is the major reason I am in the program" and "the scheduling is very convenient." Ten percent indicated that the scheduling made no difference in their decision to participate in the program.

Question 5 was " How did the number of class meetings affect your decision to enter the program?" One hundred percent of the responses were positive. Comments included "wonderful," "great" and "very convenient."

Question 6 was "How have you benefited professionally from this program?" Sixty nine percent of the responses were positive with comments like "knowledge learned has been applied" and "we have formed networks." Thirty one percent of the responses indicated that they had no opportunity to apply new knowledge learned in the classes.

Question 7 was "What factor of distance education has been the most positive experience for you?" Fifty six percent of the responses indicated that class interaction was the best part of distance education. The most frequent comment was learning from others in class. Forty four percent indicated that the location of the class in their area of the state was the best part of the program. Comments were "less travel time," "chance of earning a degree from the university without coming to class on the home campus" and "good schedule time."

Question 8 was " What factor of distance education has been the most negative experience for you?" Forty six percent indicated that the use of the distance education equipment was the most negative part of the program. Comments included "needed updated equipment," "delay of transmission on equipment effected class" and "there was a need for training on the use of the equipment." Thirty six percent indicated that the lack of an instructor on site was the most negative

part of the program. Eighteen percent said that the class was too large for good class participation due to the number of distance education sites.

Question 9 was "What do you perceive as the major significant difference between regular classes and distance education classes?" Sixty six percent indicated that the major difference was they were treated like adults in distance education classes. Seventeen percent indicated that access to class instructor was a different. Also, 17 percent said that the convenience of scheduling was different.

DISCUSSION

Part Two

Students reported that they entered the program because of location, weekend class schedule, accelerated course of study, and professional benefits (salary enhancement, networking, job advancement). Less travel time and group participation provided positive experiences for the students. The greatest barriers reported were accessibility of on-campus advisors/instructors, inaccessibility to computers and financial constraints. Some students reported problems with the delay in compressed video time and lack of an instructor at the remote site.

CONCLUSIONS

Since the program was implemented, approximately 40 students have entered each year. Ninety-five percent of the students completed the HRD cohort courses by distance education. The high retention rate indicates satisfaction with the program.   Approximately 30 percent of the students have completed all graduation requirements. Overall, students reported the distance learning experience as being more relaxed than traditional classes.

REFRENCES

Borg, W.R., & Gall, M.D. (1989). Educational research: an introduction. New York: Longman.