POLICY BRIEF: Improving Distance Educational Opportunities for the Adult Student

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Addressing the challenges of online education for a diverse student body

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Executive summary

The United States Government Accountability Office (GAO), in 2007-2008, stated that the age and diversity makeup of the average distance education students differed from the other postsecondary students in being older, more likely to be employed full-time, and attending school part-time. These findings ranged across public, private nonprofit, and private for-profit higher education institutions. Academic quality of distance education courses is of concern to the federal government as higher education institutions are expected to validate student identities and "ensure enrolled students are engaged in academic activities given the limited or no face-to-face contact with distance education students." (GAO, 2011)

Statement of the Problem

The Higher Education Act (United States Government Printing Office, 2008) defines distance education "as an educational process where the student is separated in time or place from the instructor and support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor, synchronously or asynchronously" (p. 3087). As more adult students enter the distance education market to upgrade their skills or seek after greater educational and career opportunities, the need for federal financial aid in the form of grants, loans, and work study wages becomes a concern as the cost of colleges and universities continue to increase faster than the rate of salaries and cost of living (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Higher Education institutions must ensure curriculum standards are consistent for online and blended courses as is maintained by face-to-face courses. As adult students seek student loans, grants, and other financial aid support, online distance educational programs must show effectiveness in adult student success rates and affordable cost of education especially for these students in online distance education course offerings. In an effort to get into the market of offering online distance education programs, higher education institutions are proposing online degree programs without first ensuring their infrastructure and institutional culture can support the increasing demands (Berge and Schrum, 1998). Aside from the investments which must be made in technology, expert faculty, and support staff, these institutions must address how to handle reduction of face-to-face interaction between faculty and adult students while maintaining the course integrity An institution's ability to authenticate student access to online courses is paramount to the security and validity of their programs.

Significance of the Problem

As stated in the United States Government Printing Office, Higher Education Opportunity Act (August 14, 2008), the ability of any higher education institution to receive accreditation and federal aid monies in online

distance education courses depends on the use of technology to support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor, synchronously or asynchronously (p. 3087). This calls for institutions to have the proper oversight and accountability procedure and policies to ensure student identification and course integrity. Wider course offerings could lead to lowering of academic rigor and standards, resulting in lowering of educational standards and integrity. As government is the largest provider of financial aid in higher education (about $134 billion in Title IV funds in fiscal year 2010: Department of Education), they have a substantial interest and investment in ensuring quality of distance education (GAO, November 2011). The increase in adult students entering postsecondary education adds another challenge in a student body with complex schedules, longer time to complete college, often struggling to balance school, work, and family, and bringing a divergent learning style compared to younger students (Phillip, 2011). Higher education institutions are being challenged by public and private sector to develop sustainable online distance education programs which will ensure academic success for adult students while providing the various job sectors the qualified workforce which is desperately needed in a technology-driven market.

Brief Background

Online distance education is growing at a fast pace across public, private nonprofit, and private for-profit higher education institutions (Allen & Seaman, 2011). Ranging from single courses to degree courses, a mix of blended or hybrid (mix of face-to-face and online instruction) to full online courses are being offered to meet the needs of adult students who want the flexibility these courses offer as well as the ability to seek an education at their own pace. With states decreasing the funding support to higher education, universities are seeking increases in tuition and enrollment to supplement these decreases funding while keeping their work force numbers the same and offering greater number of courses with the same number of expert faculty and support staff. The cost of technology which supports online distance education

programs is a challenge with faster networks needed to support the increase in student demand, software technology to support synchronous or asynchronous learning, learning management systems which provide the security and learning environment for faculty and students as found in face-to-face class experiences, plus accountability in standards and integrity. These developments lead to increase in costs which are passed onto students as increases in tuition. The past two years have reported (Allen & Seaman, 2011) a 10% increase in distance learning enrollments (p. 4) which comprises adult students from community colleges who are reentering the educational market to upgrade their skills or seek a new occupation. White and Weight (2000) noted that, "Working adults may be self-directed, but they also value the exchange of ideas and meaningful relations" (p. 43).The adult or non-traditional student brings a different need and behavior to learning and education that challenges higher education institutions to change their culture and course offerings to meet their needs.

Positions on the Problem

As higher education institutions have seen reductions in state and federal monies, they have had to address dealing with problems affecting student retention, online distance education course quality, and accreditation-based assessments.

On the issue of adult students, course and college retention is an issue of concern for the higher education institutions (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). For the government, the ability for students to complete their education while taking on student loans is important for ensuring an educated workforce able to acquire a competitive career and this able to pay off their loans. For the higher education institutions, it is one of maintaining and retaining students who are able to add to tuitions and keep the institution viable. To do this higher education institutions see online distance educational programs as critical to their long-term strategy towards increasing the number of online degree programs and courses so as to increase enrollments and stabilizing retentions while lowering the cost of having a brick-and-mortar classroom.

Those who are against this increase in online programs, site the number of for-profit institutions who have profited greatly from online distance education courses because the vast majority of their students depend on federal monies.

Online distance education course quality can be guided by learning outcomes in online courses being comparable to face-to-face courses (Zhang, 2005). Academic leaders believe that the level of student satisfaction is about the same for both online and face-to-face courses. This covers presentation of course materials, student-to-faculty communications, and support for students with varying learning styles. Those who disagree contend that online courses which simply convert paper-based multimedia instruction into a digital format will not lead to effective learning (Zhang, 2005) and thus contribute to a lower of educational standards and student failure.

Higher education accreditation ensure universities and colleges abide by standards in an effort to ensure consistency in programs and ability of students to succeed in their education. Improvement in knowledge retention within online course can be maintained and increased if frequent testing and spaced practice are incorporated. On the competing side there are those who feel the accreditation standards as it deals with online course offerings need to be more stringent as the rigor and quality of assessments in online courses are less than traditional or face-to-face courses. Especially with adult students, as institutions begin to offer self-paced courses and online testing, the ability of the institutions to authenticate these students may become weaker resulting in greater prevalence of academic dishonesty.

Research Evidence

Shin (2001) found that the perceptions of psychological presence a distance student holds in relation with teachers, peer students, and institution can be significant predictors of learning outcomes. An institution's transactional presence may be relatively more important than teachers and peer students transactional presence (the degree to which a distance student perceives the availability of, and

connectedness with, other parties involved in a given distance education setting" (2002, p.121).

Tallent-Runnels et al. (2005), proposed that faculty members who teach online should provide relevant study aids for online students.

Macdonald and Twining (2002) looked at the relationship between assessment, student participation, and the development of skills. They suggested key issues for assessment of activity-based learning: assessment must reflect course philosophy, assessment is essential in creating learning opportunities at critical points, assessment provides a vital opportunity for feedback, helping to complete the reflective learning cycle.

Zhang (2005) noted that simply converting "paper-based multimedia instruction into its digital equivalent and making it available on the Internet will not lead to effective learning due to a lack of an appropriate mix of content richness, interaction, and engagement" (p. 160).

Wisher, Curnow, and Seidel (2001) looked at knowledge retention in two distance learning course sections for the military and found it comparable with other classroom training. They conclude that distance education offers the potential of improving knowledge retention if frequent testing and spaced practice are incorporated.

Vandergrift (2002) identified the concept of a faculty member's 'restrained presence' in an effort to facilitate students' personal responsibility for their own learning and for community building in an online learning environment." Restrained presence of the instructor might encourage self-directed learning.

Recommendations

For online distance education to be viable for adult students while ensuring accreditation standards or state specification are maintained, actions need to be taken via policies that ensure adequate student and academic service support for adult students beyond regular service hours. Additionally, higher education institutions must provide professional academic

development support for faculty to embrace the new paradigm of teaching and learning in the online format. Finally, academic integrity of assessments can be reduced through educators facilitating effectively as learner-centered educators, while actively promoting academic integrity (Cavico & Mujtaba, 2009).

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An Argument for

Growing Online Distance Education programs in higher education for Adult Students

www.onlineadultstudent.org/