Student Satisfaction of Online Courses for Educational Leadership

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Abstract

This survey research was completed at a regional university to determine students' satisfaction of online courses in a principal and superintendent certification program in one educational leadership department. This study explored the students' satisfaction of course components: instruction, communication, assessment, leadership, teamwork, professionalism, and respect/diversity. The findings on the first cohort survey with a hybrid format of course delivery, the 2005 baseline, showed a positive satisfaction with overall means between 3.79 and 4.48 on a five point Likert-scale with a 5 meaning strong agreement with satisfaction. The lowest area of satisfaction was the category of cohort teamwork (M = 3.79) and the highest area of satisfaction was the category of assessment (M = 4.48). The most recent group of students (2009) with a totally online delivery format completed the survey and showed an overall positive satisfaction with overall means between 3.77 and 4.30 on a five point Likert-scale with a 5 meaning strong agreement with satisfaction. The lowest area of satisfaction was the category of teamwork (M = 3.77) and the highest are of satisfaction was the category of instruction (M = 4.30).

Introduction

This paper explores student satisfaction of online courses for distance learning in educational leadership principal and superintendent certification programs at a regional university in East Texas. Further, this paper compares the findings from an initial cohort of students (2005) who completed online courses in a hybrid format with a later cohort of students (2009) who completed online courses in a total online format. Researchers has examined several aspects of online courses such as benefits of online instruction (Berge, 1997; Jiang, 1998; Leonard & Guha, 2001; Matthews, 1999; Richardson & Swan, 2003) , best practices (Beaudoin, 2002; Clark & Mayer, 2003; Portugal, 2006), course environment (Baglione & Nastanski, 2007; Boetchert & Conrad, 1999; Faculty Development Institute, 2006; Faux & Black-Hughes, 2000; Lynch, 2002; Moore, 1991; Navarro & Shoemaker, 2000; Osika, 2006; Thurmond, 2003), learner outcomes (Allen & Seaman, 2006; Swan, 2003; Tallent-Runnels, Thomas, Lan, Cooper, Ahern, Shaw, & Liu, 2006; Tucker, 2001; Warren & Holloman, 2005), learner characteristics (Abdulla, 2004; Allen & Seaman, 2006; Beqiri, Chase, & Bishka, 2010; Sikora & Carrol, 2002; Schneider & Germann, 1999; Tallent, et. al, 2006; Wang, 2004), institutional and administrative factors (Allen & Seaman, 2006; Axmann, 2002; Chaika, 1999; Conceeicao, 2006; Folkers, 2005; Green, 2004; Howell, Williams, & Lindsay, 2003; Levy, 2007; Morgan & Tam, 1999; Osika, 2006; Pankowski, 2003; Poole & Axmann, 2002; Springer & Pevoto, 2001; Tallent-Runnels, et.al, 2006), and student satisfaction (Aman, 2009;

Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996; Drennan, Kennedy, & Pisarski, 2005; Mandernach, 2005; Nakos, Deis, & Jourdan, 2002; Ortiz-Rodriquez, Tieg, Irani, Roberts, & Rhoades, 2005; Quality Matters, 2008; Reisetter, LaPointe, & Korcuska, 2007;Seaberry, 2008; Sloane-C, 2008; Wyatt, 2005; Young & Norgard, 2006). However, there is a lack of research on students' satisfaction with specific components of online courses in educational leadership courses.

The research questions that guided this study were:

1. Are students of an educational leadership program satisfied with their online course experiences on specific program components of instruction, assessment, leadership knowledge, communications, cohort teamwork, professionalism, and respect/diversity?
2. Has student satisfaction of educational leadership online courses changed from the program's initial hybrid format to the current totally online format in an educational leadership program?

Literature Review

The use of distance education, specifically online instruction, has dramatically increased over the last twenty years, due in part, to technological gains in the internet and course management systems (Beqiri, Chase, & Bishka, 2010; Wang, 2007; Wonacott, 2002). Because of this increase usage coupled with the academic emphasis in education leadership courses from completion to competency, there is a greater need for more evaluation of web-based courses and programs. The preparation programs are competing in a new market with students who are very comfortable with technology and expect more from online courses (Fekula, 2010).

Benefits of Online Instruction

Several benefits for students of web-based instruction have been confirmed in the literature such as: (a) accessible to students at locations often far from the source, (b) flexibility in program structure to accomplish students' work schedule, and (c) cost effectiveness. (Leonard & Guha, 2001; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Vaughn, 2007). Other student benefits include (a) opportunities offered by the "anytime, anywhere" accessibility, (b) ability to work at one's own pace and (c) allows students to reflect on materials and their responses before responding (Berge, 1997; Jiang, 1998; Matthews, 1999). However, the quality and substance of web-based course content and delivery have come under attack. Some faculty members believe that building a relationship with their web-based students is impossible, and that this delivery mode results in less student-teacher interactions and student-student interactions (Rovai & Barnum, 2003). Other researchers conclude that it is the course content and method of delivery that determine the quality of web-based instruction (Clark, 1983, Owston, 1997). Much disagreement continues to exist with regards to the quality of content and delivery model used in web-based instruction (Manocheheri & Young, 2006; Picciano, 2002; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2001;

One of the major advantages of web-based courses in the colleges and universities as a delivery method is the need to remain competitive. Clark and Mayer (2003) state that almost 90% of all universities with more than 10,000 students offer some form of distance learning, nearly all of which use the Internet. However, college and university web-based professors continue to be concerned about the quality of this delivery method.

Best Practices for online Courses

The research on best practices for web-based courses is limited (Beaudoin, 2002; Portugal, 2006). Research has established that there are several components that need to be considered for web-based course design and delivery. These components are course environment, learners' outcomes, learners' characteristics, and institutional and administrative factors (Tallent-Runnels, et. al, 2006). Other researchers have categorized competencies for web-based instructors into different roles: administration and managerial, facilitation and pedagogy, and technical (Abdulla, 2004; Berge, 1995; Thach, & Murphy, 1995; Williams, 2000).

Bailey (2008) studied the best practices for web-based teaching and identified several components:

timeliness, organization, relationships, technology, engagement, flexibility, high expectations, and communications. These best practices could also be matched to the categories identified by other researchers as technical roles, social roles, facilitative roles, and pedagogy (Berge, 1995).

Additionally, other factors identified as indicators of quality online courses as 1) institutional context and commitment, 2) curriculum and instruction, 3) faculty support, 4) student support, and 5) evaluation and assessment (Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications, 2005). Quality Matters (Kane, 2004) identified the following indicators: 1) learning objectives, 2) assessment and measurement, 3) learning resources, 4) learner interaction, and 5) course technology.

A meta-analysis on web-based teaching and learning was completed in 2006 with a summary of 76 studies (Tallent-Runnels, et. al., 2006). This literature review divided the 76 studies on course environment, learners' outcomes, learners' characteristics, and institutional and administrative issues. These four divisions are further discussed in the next section.

Course environment

The course environment components in educational administration include instruction, assessment, leadership course context, communication, cohort teamwork, professionalism, and respect for diversity of the web-based course. The social aspects of interactions and a sense of classroom culture have been identified as crucial to students' success (Faculty Development Institute, 2006; Faux & Black-Hughes, 2000; Lynch, 2002; Osika, 2006; Thurmond, 2002). The development of a sense of community needs to be designed as part of web-based courses for students to express satisfaction (Davis & Quick, 2001; Poole & Axmann, 2002). Research has further explored the interaction and communication between participants in synchronous learning environment with communication between participants in real time such as chat rooms (http:www.aln.aln.org/alnweb/aln.html) or asynchronous learning environments with communication between participants having a gap in time such as email and discussion boards. Moore (1991) found that the quality of dialogue among students and between the students and the instructor had the potential to increase for online courses over traditional courses. Navarro and Shoemaker (2000) reported that students felt that web-based learning actually increased communication because students were more comfortable speaking out. Students who were comfortable writing comments allowed a more equitable distribution of participation between students (Baglione & Nastanski, 2007).

Researchers identified facilitation as an important component that relates to communication and interaction in the course environment (Anderson, Rouke, & Garrison, 2001; Berge, 1995; Conceicao, 2006; Conceicao, Strachota, & Schmidt, 2007; Easton, 2003). Zane L. Berge (1995) further identified the importance of the understanding the adult learner and how to develop questions so that students would learn the major concepts in a web-based environment. Abdulla (2004) found similar results as Thach (1994) and Williams (2000) in that facilitation and interpersonal skills of instructors were ranked the highest of importance by students in the course environment. Berge (1995) stated that successful interpersonal interactions did not require synchronous communication, however, interaction with the course content and other people needed to promote higher order learning. Roblyer and Ekhaml (2000) also identified the need for a highly interactive environment that built the social rapport and included quality reflections.

Learners' Outcomes

Tallent-Runnels et.al (2006) found in their literature review that most of the research studies compared learners' outcomes between traditional and web-based courses. Their review showed mixed results as both delivery methods were found to be adequate. Other researchers found similar mixed results on the adequacy of learner outcomes between traditional classrooms and online courses (Swan, 2003; Tucker, 2001). According to Allen and Seaman (2006), there has been improvement in the rating of learning outcomes in web-based courses. In 2003, 57 percent of academic leaders surveyed rated web-based learning outcomes the same or higher than face-to-face learning outcomes. This has increased to 62 percent of surveyed academic leaders in 2006. Warren and Holloman, Jr. (2005) found similar results for student outcomes between students in online courses and traditional classrooms.

Learners' Characteristics

Web-based learners' characteristics identified in research found that the majority of students were Caucasian (Tallent-Runnels, & et.al, 2006,). Sikora and Carrol (2002) further reported that students enrolled in web-based courses tended to be employed full time. The majority were also focused and motivated to achieve on specific learning goals (Tallent-Runnels, et. al, 2006). However, there are mixed results on the most prevalent age of web-based students. Some researchers found that students between the ages of 35 and 55 preferred the web-based study (Abdulla, 2004; Allen & Seaman, 2006; Eduventures, Inc., 2008), while other researchers identified the majority of web-based students between the ages of 25 and 30 (Schneider & Germann, 1999; Tallent-Runnels, & et.al, 2006; Wang, 2004). Abdulla (2004) found a difference in students' gender related to their perceptions of important instructor's skills. Female web-based students ranked their instructors' intellectual skills as highly important while male web-based students ranked their instructors' managerial skills as highly important (Abdull, 2004; Fredricksen, Pickett, Shea, Pelz, & Swan, 2000). However, Kim and Moore (2005) and Walker and Kelly (2007) found that there was no impact on satisfaction of online courses based on age or gender of students.

Institutional and Administrative Factors

The institutional and administrative factors for successful web-based courses include comprehensive policies, training and support for faculty, and student support (Axmann, 2002; Chaika, 1999; Folkers, 2005; Poole & Axmann, 2002; Tallent-Runnels, et.al, 2006). Sixty five percent of higher education schools that offer graduate face-to-face courses also offer web-based graduate courses (Allen & Seaman, 2006). The U.S. Department of Education (2006) also identified that faculty need support in the design and delivery of web-based courses. Further, the U.S. Department of Education (2006) stated that students needed orientation and timely service in web-based courses. Faculty have also identified that it takes more time to design and teach web-based courses (Allen & Seaman, 2006; Conceicao, 2006). Additionally, the faculty must also be comfortable with technical skills (Levy, 2007), as well as have easy access to technology (Morgan & Tam, 1999) and be motivated to teach web-based courses (Springer & Pevoto, 2001).

The majority of institutions have a single course management system (Green, 2004). Osika (2006) stated that the ease of using the management system was important for faculty and students. Other infrastructure requirements mentioned were staff hired to administer the course management system and the provision for faculty training (Osika, 2006). The training of faculty needs to be done prior to faculty designing and teaching web-based courses (Green, 2004; Howell, Williams, & Lindsay, 2003; Pankowski 2003). This helps faculty transition from traditional teaching to web-based teaching since different skills, such as technology, pedagogy, social, and managerial aspects are needed for web-based teaching (Abdulla, 2004; Berge, 1995; Thach, 1994). Knowledge of how the course operates as well as how to help students with their technical problems is important skills for the faculty.

Student Satisfaction

Student satisfaction and outcomes are excellent indicators to determine the quality of programs delivered online. According to Keller (1983), student satisfaction relates to the perceptions of being able to achieve success and feelings about the achieved outcomes. There is a growing body of literature on student perceptions of satisfaction with web-based programs (Banks & Faul, 2007; Debourgh, 1998; Dibiase & Rademacher, 2005; Enockson, 1997; Heiman, 2008; McCabe, 1997; Summers, Waigandt, & Whittaker, 2005; Walker & Kelly, 2007). Several other studies focused on student and teacher interactions and perceptions of learning (Heiman, 2008; Rovai & Barnum, 2003); and social presence (Richardson & Swan, 2003) as part of students' satisfaction.

Researchers have studied student satisfaction with online courses based on different factors. Aman (2009) examined five factors of quality instruction and student satisfaction with each area: 1) outcomes, 2) assessment, 3) resource materials, 4) student interaction, and 5) technology. He found that students' overall satisfaction of an online course on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) through 5 (strongly agree) was a mean of 4.21 (SD = .96). He further measured each of the factors and found the highest rating of satisfaction was on outcomes with a mean of 4.24 (SD = .69), followed by resource materials with a mean

of 4.12 (SD = 0.73). The third factor was assessment with a mean of 4.08 (SD = 0.71), and technology with a mean of 4.05 (SD = 0.77). The factor with the lowest satisfaction was interaction with a mean of 3.93 (SD = 0.84). This interaction included the student to student interactions as well as the instructor to student interactions. Assessment was a significant factor for overall student satisfaction and has also been identified by other researchers (Kane, 2005; Ross, Batzer, & Bennington, 2002). Resource materials such as study guides, additional reading material and resources, and material that is relevant to the subject has been identified as predictors in student satisfaction (Aman, 2009; Mandernach, 2005; Nakos, Deis, & Jourdan, 2002; Quality Matters, 2008). Interactions were ranked low by Aman (2009) while others have indicated the importance of interactions with students' satisfaction with online courses (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996; Mandernach, 2005; Sloane-C, 2008, Wyatt, 2005).

Other factors have been identified by researchers as important components of online courses that impact student satisfaction. Ortiz-Rodriques, et. al (2005) found that student satisfaction with online courses was linked to 1) communication and timely feedback, 2) good course design with rich media for course materials, 3) administrative issues including good software, and 4) support service. Wyatt (2005) determined that over half (54%) of students surveyed felt that good interactions between students and with the instructor were important factors for student satisfaction. This finding was similar to other researchers (Bouras, 2009; Evans, 2009; Ortiz-Rodriques, et. al, 2005). Seaberry (2008) concurred that the majority of students were satisfied with online courses and further found that scheduling flexibility was a major factor for their satisfaction. Evans (2009) examined which of the factors for online courses related to student satisfaction. He found the following factors related to student satisfaction: 1) faculty involvement, 2) curriculum, 3) student engagement, and 4) flexibility. Technology has also been identified as a significant factor in student satisfaction (Kane, 2004; Mandernach, 2005; Sloan-C, 2008).

Methods

Participants

Students who completed online courses in the principal and superintendent program from an east Texas regional university were asked to participate and complete a survey. Twenty students completed the survey from the first cohort (2005) and 36 completed the survey from the later cohort (2009).

Instrument

A survey was developed that addressed the components of quality programs as identified from the literature review. The instrument was composed of two parts. The first section had demographic information. The second part of the survey was composed of seven sections including, instruction, assessment, leadership, communication, cohort teamwork, professionalism, and respect/diversity. Each section had several statements. Prior to the initial use of the survey, the instrument was field tested with professors of educational administration and research associates. They made recommendations to improve the clarity of the statements. The respondents chose agreement or disagreement on a Likert-scale of one to five with 5 being "strongly agree" and 1 being "strongly disagree". The survey was administered to students after final grades were issued after they had completed their last course of the program. The completion of the survey was voluntary and had no affect on their grades.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze students' satisfaction on statements for specific components of online courses with an educational leadership department. Frequencies and means were established for each of the statements with an overall mean for each of the major components on the survey.

Findings

The first research question explored the students' satisfaction with seven components of educational leadership courses offered online. Students completed an online survey of 29 statements that were prompts for the seven components. Using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) respondents were asked to gauge their satisfaction with online courses taken during their principal or

superintendent preparation program. Statements were indexed according to the following areas: instruction, assessment, leadership, communication, cohort teamwork, professionalism, and respect/diversity.

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for the baseline cohort's (2005) responses to the educational leadership components.
Table 1: Baseline Cohort (2005) Satisfaction in Components of Educational Leadership Online Courses

Components	N	Mean	Std Deviation
Instructional	20	4.26	0.984
Assessment	20	4.48	0.790
Leadership	20	4.06	1.307
Communication	20	3.88	1.274
Cohort Teamwork	20	3.79	1.674
Professionalism	20	3.85	1.666
Respect/Diversity	20	3.97	1.615

The students in the baseline cohort (2005) expressed the strongest agreement of satisfaction with the components of assessment (M = 4.48) and instruction (M = 4.26) with hybrid online educational leadership courses. The third ranked component of satisfaction was leadership (M = 4.06). The component with the lowest ranked satisfaction was cohort teamwork (M = 3.79).

Table 2 shows the frequencies, means and standard deviations for the students (2009) who took online educational leadership courses without the face-to-face part of the course.

Table 2: Cohort 2 (2009) Satisfaction of Components of Educational Leadership Online Courses

Components	N	Mean	Std Deviation
Instructional	36	4.30	0.772
Assessment	36	4.27	0.657
Leadership	36	4.10	0.952
Communication	36	3.93	1.057
Cohort Teamwork	36	3.77	1.079
Professionalism	36	4.27	0.854
Respect/Diversity	36	4.13	0.833

The students in the later cohort (2009) showed the strongest satisfaction with the components of their educational leadership courses of instruction (M = 4.30), assessment (M = 4.27) and professionalism (M = 4.27). The least satisfaction was the component of cohort teamwork (M = 3.77).

Overall, the students were satisfied with their online course experiences on specific program components in an educational leadership program with a mean range of 3.77 to 4.48 on a five point Likert scale. The components of instruction and assessment were rated the highest between student satisfaction with groups in an initial hybrid delivery format and a later group with a total online delivery format.

Conclusions and Implications

Data gleaned from this study showed a preponderance of satisfaction with components of educational leadership courses for both cohorts of students. The participants from both cohorts agreed that they were satisfied with online instruction and web-based course assessments. The mean scores for the seven components ranged from 3.75 to 4.48. Communication and cohort teamwork were slightly lower in measures of agreement, ranging from a mean of 3.77 to 3.93. Taken as a whole, this study indicated that students were satisfied with their web-based course experience.

The later student cohort (2009) survey showed that students rated "Cohort Teamwork" the lowest with a

mean score of 3.77; however, “Instruction” was rated the highest with a mean score of 4.30. This differs from the baseline cohort (2005) of students who rated “Assessment” as the highest with a mean score of 4.48. Both cohort groups rated “Leadership, Communication, and Respect/Diversity similarly with mean scores between 3.88 and 4.14. The area of “Professionalism” was rated with the widest range between the groups showing a mean score of 3.85 with the baseline group and a 4.27 for the later cohort (2009).

Cohort teamwork which consisted of interactions between students ranked the lowest on both cohort groups. This finding was consistent with some researchers (Aman, 2009; Davis & Quick, 2001; Poole & Axmann, 2002) but inconsistent with other researchers who found that interactions were a major factor in student satisfaction (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996; Mandernach, 2005; Nakos, Deis, & Jouran, 2002; Roblyer & Ekhaml, 2000; Sloan-C, 2008).

Communication was also ranked very low by both cohort groups. This is also inconsistent with other researchers who found that communication was an important practice for quality online instruction (Baglione & Nastanski, 2007; Bailey, 2008; Moore, 1991; Navarro & Shoemaker, 2000).

While this research examined student satisfaction of online educational leadership course at one university in Texas, further research is suggested that includes student satisfaction of online educational leadership course at other universities in Texas and other states. Further studies could also compare student satisfaction of online educational leadership programs and traditional face-to-face educational leadership programs.

University faculty is asked to develop online courses as a response to the growing demands of students for increased access and flexibility of online courses. Further, faculty is encouraged to use the online format to increase the number of students in the programs. As university faculty are encourage to increase this growth of programs and students want the convenience of online courses, there is still a need to keep online courses rigorous with high quality instruction that is aligned with standards for educational leadership. There is a need for course evaluations of online courses and student satisfaction with those courses. Faculty responsible for the development and design of online educational leadership courses should assess their students’ satisfaction with the courses as part of the program evaluation. Student satisfaction and evaluation of online courses could result in increased quality of educational leadership programs and consequently increased student enrollment in the programs. This study verified that students are strongly satisfied with the components of quality online courses in an educational leadership department at one university.

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