

# ***PERCEPTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION FACULTY MEMBERS ON THE VALUE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION***

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Perceptual differences among higher education faculty members regarding distance education were examined. It is noteworthy that only the perceptions were measured rather than actual learning outcomes and quality of distance education. The results suggested those faculty members with experience responded favorably to questions about distance education, while those without experience were less receptive. This research could be used by the administration of institutions of higher learning exploring the possibility of adding distance education. Distance education is a dynamic area; the results of this study of higher education faculty members' perceptions may impact the higher education culture. Further research is needed to compare learning outcomes for distance and traditional college and university courses.

## ***INTRODUCTION***

While more colleges and universities across the nation offer or require distance education courses, many institutions must still make this important transition (Broady-Ortmann, 2002; Hochmuth, 2002; Merisotis & Phipps, 1999; University of Idaho, 2003; Zuzolo & McCallister, 1996).

Faculty members and administrators of some institutions of higher education argue that the problem appears to lie in the misconception that distance education sacrifices quality (Keuy, 2003). There are those who

argue distance education is not as effective as traditional learning in terms of learning outcomes. Stith (2000) suggested that a large proportion of institutions simply do not yet recognize online education as a credible process. This uncertainty in the field created ample room for debate. This study investigated the perceptions of distance education among higher education faculty members. Rather than limit the study to a particular model, structure, or online course, the study provided insight into the overall perceptions of distance education among higher education faculty members.

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### ***PURPOSE OF THE STUDY***

This study investigated the perceptions of distance education among faculty in institutions of higher education in a southeastern state. More specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions: What are the general perceptions of faculty who have not used distance education in their educational experiences as a medium with regards to its affects on educational outcomes, and how do faculty in general compare the quality of the educational experience of distance education to traditional, face-to-face classroom setting?

### ***RELATED LITERATURE***

Uhlig (2002) examined the history and future of distance education, pointing out that distance education is not new, but the arrival of an affordable personal computer (PC), the expansion of the Internet, and the willingness of national and regional accreditation agencies to consider other than traditional instructional milieus has encouraged the rapid development of online courses. It is useful in this context to remember that the PC, the critical building block of Internet-based online education and educational programming, is now only about 20 years old. In tracing the emergence of modern distance education, Uhlig (2002) reported that universities and colleges have long offered text-based or print-based correspondence programs covering virtually everything from high school courses to advanced degree programs, licensure and certification programs and examinations, and traditional college-level courses. The critical difference identified by Uhlig between the earlier distance education programs and today's Web-based programs is the option of immediate or nearly immediate feedback.

Universities are finding themselves, as Piotrowski and Vodanovich (2000) suggested, deeply challenged by the demand of students for virtual or distance education programs and the need to inculcate in the faculty members a

more positive attitude toward these programs. With an apparent transformation from "print learning" to "electronic learning," administrators and faculty members might harness the Internet as a prominent instructional medium to provide access and flexibility to the learning environment (Piotrowski & Vodanovich, 2000).

A primary strategy for the delivery of successful distance education programming for higher education faculty members is centered upon making sure that the technological components needed for the program are all in place and that users will be trained to work with hardware and software alike. It is also important to emphasize the curriculum component of a distance education project. Curriculum integrity in the transformation from the traditional classroom setting to Web-based delivery can be a complex and highly challenging process. Nixon and Leftwich (1998) advised that redesigning curriculum requires establishing the mission and goals of the entire distance education program. In addition, Broady-Ortmann (2002) recommend that before a distance education program is developed, faculty members should be surveyed to determine their attitudes toward such programs, their willingness to participate, and any and all concerns that faculty members may have regarding participation. A dedicated and committed faculty presence is seen as one of the key elements needed for success in distance education (Broady-Ortmann, 2002).

As instructional technology has evolved and become more available, faculty members in educational institutions at all levels have been confronted with the necessity of adapting to new teaching practices. Universities have developed more professional development training for practicing faculty members to improve and enhance their technology skills, but a major deficit is in the area of college and university faculty members training for technology use. Stith (2000) argued that distance education can be simplified from the technological perspective by the use of packaged programs such as WebCT or Blackboard. Though

some type of training is necessary in order to be comfortable working with the packaged programs, using these packages is far less complex than developing programs from scratch.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study used an amended version of the questionnaire used in a similar study in Florida. Creswell's (1994) definition of a descriptive survey was the best fit for generalizing the population based on the research questions, instrument, and secondary data. The investigator explored the subject by seeking responses from those who have taken part in distance education, as well as those who have not. The design was classified as quantitative because of the statistics generated through measurable percentages (Singleton & Straits, 1999; Zuzolo & McCallister, 1996).

### ***Sample***

The sample of this study was faculty members employed at institutions of higher education that were accredited by the Southern Association for Colleges and Schools (SACS). Faculty listings from all colleges and universities in one southeastern state were obtained from each institution's catalog, thus becoming the sampling frame. The researchers used a simple random sample. Each faculty member was assigned a number. To facilitate the selection of the sample size, a set of random numbers was generated in a spreadsheet. At the time of the study, there were 1,967 full-time faculty members employed by accredited higher education institutions. To obtain a chi-square of 1 degree of freedom relative to the desired level of confidence and a 95% confidence interval, Kloos (2004) determined that, for a population between 1,500 and 2,000, sample size should be 135. The survey was mailed to a total of 500 respondents. This number of respondents allowed for the minimal accepted number when using random sampling (Aczel, 2002). It was anticipated the researcher would receive approximately 30%, or 95 to

150 responses and 137 returned usable surveys.

### ***Instrumentation***

The questionnaire consisted of questions related to the higher education faculty members' experiences and observations of distance education. Prior to officially distributing the survey, a random sample of 10 faculty members was selected to pretest the survey. The results of this pilot study, along with direction from the dissertation committee, verified the clarity of the instrument and the appropriateness of the proper data collection. Adjustments were made to develop a high level of user-friendliness throughout the survey. The survey instrument was designed to be completed within 15 to 20 minutes, but no specific time limit was given. In 2001, a similar version of this questionnaire was administered by the Florida Department of Education (FDOE) to community college faculty members throughout the Florida community college system. The original version of the instrument was deemed reliable by the FDOE and Bower and Kamata (2001) of Florida State University. There were modifications to the instrument to make it a viable instrument for this particular study. The modifications were made and the new version of the instrument was sent to FDOE, as well as Bower and Kamata, and the instrument was deemed suitable.

Three scales were developed corresponding to the instrument. The first scale, "Distance Education Effectiveness," corresponded to the following questions: 5-10 and 12. The choices for question 7 were reversed to reflect continuity for the scale. The maximum score for this scale was 28. Higher scores in Scale One resulted in the belief that distance education is more effective. The second scale, "Distance Compared to Traditional," corresponded to the following questions: 11, 13-14, and 16-17. For the same reason as on Scale One, the choices for question 17 were reversed. The maximum score was 20. Higher scores reflect distance education is perceived to be superior to traditional education. The third and final scale,

“Educator Status,” corresponded to the following questions: 15 and 18-23. The maximum score was 25.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed in the following manner. First, chi square was used as an omnibus to evaluate the overall hypothesis containing multiple subhypotheses. This test will assist to illuminate any goodness-of-fit associations between faculty with experience and without experience and the variables within each of the three scales. Because this is an omnibus test for goodness-of-fit, follow-up independent *t* tests were conducted on each significant chi square statistic.

Pearson chi square was also used to conduct analysis of two binary variables: “Overall your teaching experience in distance education has been” and “Would you recommend involvement in distance education to other faculty members at your college/university.” Although the latter is a binary variable, the former is still categorical. Thus, chi square was used to analyze the question of overall experiences in two ways. First, because this variable contained a choice option of “neutral” the variable was recoded to omit that option, as not to skew the data during *t* test analysis. During

recoding, it was noted that responses to that question inherently fell into only three categories: neutral (78), positive (39), or very positive (19). Obviously, after omitting the neutral responses, the variable left was binary in nature. Thus, a first chi square was used to assess differences between positive and very positive responses by faculty experience and a second chi square was analyzed to assess any differences between those faculty who indicated positive responses (combining both positive and very positive responses) and those faculty indicating neutral.

Two-tailed, independent *t* tests were conducted on each variable to test for mean differences between faculty with experience and faculty without experience in distance education across the effectiveness, traditional, and status scales. Variables violating the assumption of equality-of-variance, meaning that the equality-of-variance is not assumed, are indicated by noninteger degrees of freedom. Eta square ( $\eta^2$ ) was used to calculate the effect size of each variable to assist in determining the degree to which group means differed. The statistic was calculated using the following formula:

$$\eta^2 = t^2/t^2 + (N_1 + N_2 - 2).$$

TABLE 1  
Omnibus Chi-Square Results for Faculty Experience With Distance Education by Effectiveness Scale

<i>Variables</i>	<i>N</i>	$\chi^2$	<i>p</i>
Higher education students perform better in distance education classes as compared to traditional classes.	137	71.662	.000
Distance education provides ample faculty members / student interaction	137	60.914	.000
I believe distance education causes the quality of education to decline	137	66.921	.000
Distance education improves the students' quantitative skills	137	31.641	.000
Distance education provides an avenue for students to master the subject matter of the courses	137	64.869	.000
Distance education provides an avenue for assessing the educational effectiveness of the course.	136	57.463	.000
Student interactivity is better developed in distance education as opposed to traditional education.	137	65.329	.000

Note: SD = strongly agree, A = agree, D = disagree, SD = strongly disagree. Degrees of freedom for all chi-square tests was 3.

TABLE 2  
Omnibus Chi-Square Results for Faculty Experience and Comparison on Traditional Scale

<i>Variables</i>	<i>N</i>	$\chi^2$	<i>p</i>
When compared to traditional education, distance education provides students with a higher quality of course material. <sup>a</sup>	137	58.068	.000
Distance education improves performance of educators. <sup>a</sup>	137	28.927	.000
Distance education improves performance of students. <sup>a</sup>	137	60.820	.000
Compared to conventional classroom courses distance learning courses are. <sup>c</sup>	137	29.763	.000

Note: <sup>a</sup>A = strongly disagree, B = disagree, C = agree, D = strongly agree. <sup>b</sup>A = negative, B = neutral, C = positive, D = very positive. <sup>c</sup>A = a better learning experience, B = an equivalent learning experience, C = a worse learning experience, D = an ineffective learning experience. Degrees of freedom for all chi-square tests was 3.

TABLE 3  
Omnibus Chi-Square results for Faculty Experience and Comparison on Status Scale

<i>Variables</i>	<i>N</i>	$\chi^2$	<i>p</i>
My department will recognize my efforts in using distance education for instruction. <sup>a</sup>	137	4.215	.239
My department is committed to vision of distance education for instruction. <sup>a</sup>	137	1.746	.627
Faculty members at my college/university who teach distance education courses gain more prestige than those who do not. <sup>a</sup>	137	1.317	.725
Faculty members at my college/university who teach distance education courses enjoy a higher profile than those who do not. <sup>a</sup>	137	3.963	.047
My departmental faculty colleagues view distance education in a positive light. <sup>a</sup>	137	15.999	.000
Involvement with Distance education efforts is a status symbol in my college/university. <sup>b</sup>	137	1.563	.458

Note: <sup>a</sup>A = Strongly Disagree, B = Disagree, C = Agree, D = Strongly Agree. <sup>b</sup>Degrees of freedom for all chi-square tests was 2; (all other *df* = 3).

## RESULTS

Results from the chi square omnibus test indicated significant results across all three scales of measurement. Specifically, significant relationships were found for all seven variables in the effectiveness scale, and all four variables comprising the traditional scales. Two of the six variables were significant for the status scale, "Faculty members at my college/university who teach distance education courses enjoy a higher profile than those who do not,"  $\chi^2(1) = 3.963$ ;  $p < .05$  and "My departmental faculty colleagues view distance education in a positive light,"  $\chi^2(1) = 15.999$ ;  $p < .001$ . All omnibus chi-square results are presented in Tables 1, 2, and 3. Independent *t* tests were

used as a follow-up measure to the chi square to assess the specific nature of the relationships exhibited. Only the two significant variables from the status scale will be included in the *t*-test analysis. A comprehensive listing of all *t* tests, group means, and  $\eta^2$  statistics are presented in Tables 4, 5, and 6 by appropriate scale.

### The Effectiveness Scale

Not surprisingly, independent *t*-tests indicated significant results for all seven effectiveness variables. Calculated  $\eta^2$  statistics ranged from .161 to .465, and constituted a strong effect size. Examination of the first variable indicated significant findings, "Higher educa-

TABLE 4  
Independent *t* Test for Faculty Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Distance Education

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Experience</i>			<i>No Experience</i>			<i>t</i>	$\eta^2$
	$M^+$	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	$M^+$	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>		
Higher education students perform better in distance education classes as compared to traditional classes. <sup>a</sup>	3.34	.784	68	1.84	.834	69	10.827*	.465
Distance education provides ample faculty members / student interaction. <sup>a</sup>	3.22	.878	68	1.84	.994	69	8.604*	.354
I believe distance education causes the quality of education to decline. <sup>a</sup>	3.03	.977	68	2.13	1.083	69	5.098*	.161
Distance education improves the students' quantitative skills. <sup>a</sup>	1.56	.799	68	3.10	.987	69	-10.044*	.428
Distance education provides an avenue for students to master the subject matter of the courses. <sup>a</sup>	3.46	.818	68	2.01	.947	69	9.526*	.402
Distance education provides an avenue for assessing the educational effectiveness of the course. <sup>b</sup>	3.30	.798	67	2.16	.980	69	7.422*	.291
Student interactivity is better developed in distance education as opposed to traditional education. <sup>a</sup>	3.24	.672	68	1.96	.848	69	9.776*	.414

*Note:* <sup>a</sup>4 = strongly agree, 3 = agree, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree. <sup>a</sup>Degrees of freedom = 135. <sup>b</sup>degrees of freedom = 134. \**p* < .001.

TABLE 5  
Independent *t* Test for Faculty Perceptions of Distance Education Versus Traditional Education

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Experience</i>			<i>No Experience</i>			<i>t</i>	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>		
When compared to traditional education, distance education provides students with a higher quality of course material. <sup>a, d</sup>	2.84	.704	68	1.70	.810	69	8.815*	.365
Distance education improves performance of educators. <sup>a, c</sup>	2.91	.989	68	1.91	1.011	69	5.846*	.202
Distance education improves performance of students. <sup>a, c</sup>	3.13	.731	68	2.01	.813	69	8.456*	.346
Compared to conventional classroom courses distance learning courses are <sup>b, c</sup>	1.85	.675	68	2.62	.842	69	-5.912*	.206

*Note:* <sup>a</sup>4 = strongly agree, 3 = agree, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree. <sup>b</sup>1 = A better learning experience, 2 = an equivalent learning experience, 3 = a worse learning experience, 4 = an ineffective learning experience. <sup>c</sup>Degrees of freedom = 135. <sup>d</sup>Degrees of freedom = 132.94. <sup>e</sup>Degrees of freedom = 129.65. <sup>f</sup>Degrees of freedom = 57. \**p* < .001

tion students perform better in distance education classes as compared to traditional classes,"  $t(135) = 10.827$ ,  $p = .000$ . Faculty with experience ( $M = 3.34$ ,  $SD = .784$ ) on aver-

age perceive that students' perform better in distance education versus traditional courses as compared to faculty without experience ( $M = 1.84$ ,  $SD = .834$ ). This variable also exhibited

TABLE 6  
Independent *t* Test for Faculty Perceptions of Status With Distance Education

Variables	Experience			No Experience			<i>t</i>	$\eta^2$
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>		
Faculty members at my college/university who teach distance education courses enjoy a higher profile than those who do not. <sup>a</sup>	1.69	.605	68	1.48	.633	69	2.013*	.029
My departmental faculty colleagues view distance education in a positive light. <sup>b</sup>	2.07	.834	68	1.57	.606	69	4.085**	.110

Note: <sup>a</sup>4 = Strongly Agree, 3 = Agree, 2 = Disagree, 1 = Strongly Disagree. Degrees of freedom for all =135. \**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .001.

the highest  $\eta^2$  (.465); specifying that 47% of the variance of this variable was accounted for by whether a responding faculty member possessed prior teaching experience with distance education.

The second variable was also significant, "Distance education provides ample faculty members / student interaction,"  $t(135) = 8.604$ ,  $p = .000$ . Faculty with experience ( $M = 3.22$ ,  $SD = .878$ ) on average perceived that distance education provided ample faculty-student interaction versus faculty without experience ( $M = 1.84$ ,  $SD = .994$ ) who disagreed. The  $\eta^2$  specified that 35% of the variance of this variable was also accounted for by whether a responding faculty member possessed prior teaching experience with distance education.

The variable "I believe distance education causes the quality of education to decline" was also significant,  $t(135) = 5.098$ ,  $p = .000$ . Faculty without experience ( $M = 2.13$ ,  $SD = 1.083$ ) on average disagreed that distance education caused the quality of education to decline, versus faculty with experience ( $M = 3.03$ ,  $SD = .977$ ) who, on average, agreed that distance education does cause a decline in the quality of education. This finding seems to run contradictory to the prior two findings concerning students level of performance and student-faculty interaction. If faculty with experience, on average, believed that students perform better and student-faculty interaction was enhanced in distance education, this

should, perhaps, signal an increase in the overall quality of education. Although still strong, but somewhat lesser than other variables in this study, faculty groupings explained 16% of the variance of this variable ( $\eta^2 = .161$ ).

"Distance education improves the students' quantitative skills" was also significant,  $t(135) = -10.044$ ,  $p = .000$ . On average, both faculty with experience and faculty without experience teaching distance education disagreed that distance education enhanced students' quantitative skills; although faculty without experience ( $M = 3.1$ ,  $SD = .987$ ) tended to strongly disagree, whereas faculty with experience ( $M = 1.56$ ,  $SD = .799$ ) just disagreed. As indicated by eta square, 43% of the variance of this variable was accounted for by faculty member's prior teaching experience with distance education

The fifth effectiveness scale variable was also significant, "Distance education provides an avenue for students to master the subject matter of the courses,"  $t(135) = 9.526$ ,  $p = .000$ . On average, faculty with experience ( $M = 3.46$ ,  $SD = .818$ ) agreed with the notion that distance education provides an avenue for students to master the subject matter, versus non-experienced faculty ( $M = 2.01$ ,  $SD = .947$ ) who disagreed with subject mastery in distance education courses. Faculty grouping explained 40% of the variance in this variable.

Another significant variable was "Distance education provides an avenue for assessing the

educational effectiveness of the course,”  $t(134) = 7.422, p = .000$ . Faculty with experience ( $M = 3.3, SD = .798$ ) on average agreed that distance education provided an avenue for assessing how effective the course had been with regards to objective, versus non-experienced faculty ( $M = 2.16, SD = .98$ ) who disagreed with this notion. Although still strong, but somewhat lesser than other variables in this study, faculty groupings explained 29% of the variance of this variable ( $\eta^2 = .291$ ).

The last variable for the effectiveness scale was significant, “Student interactivity is better developed in distance education as opposed to traditional education,”  $t(135) = 9.776, p = .000$ . On average, nonexperienced faculty ( $M = 1.96, SD = .848$ ) disagreed that student interactivity was better developed in distance education, versus experienced faculty ( $M = 3.24, SD = .672$ ) who agreed that distance education enhanced student interactivity. The  $\eta^2$  indicated that 41% of the variance of this variable was also accounted for by whether a responding faculty member possessed prior teaching experience with distance education.

### ***The Traditional Scale***

Along with the variables in the effectiveness scales, all four measures within the traditional scale were significant. As suspected, the results of independent  $t$  tests for the traditional scale also mirrored the previous chi square findings. The first variable, “When compared to traditional education, distance education provides students with a higher quality of course material” was significant,  $t(135) = 9.776, p = .000$ . Both faculty, on average, seemed to disagree that distance education courses provided high quality of course materials, although experienced faculty’s ( $M = 2.84, SD = .704$ ) average was to agreeing, whereas non-experienced faculty ( $M = 1.7, SD = 0.81$ ) strongly disagreed, but was close to just disagreeing. Faculty grouping explained 37% of the variance in this variable.

Next, the variable “distance education improves performance of educators” was sig-

nificant,  $t(135) = 9.776, p = .000$ . Nonexperienced faculty ( $M = 1.91, SD = 1.011$ ), on average, disagreed that distance education improved educator’s performance, whereas experienced faculty ( $M = 2.91, SD = .989$ ) agreed that distance education was a performance enhancer. Eta square indicated a strong effect size for this variable and attributed 20% of the variance to the distance education experiential grouping.

The third traditional scale variable, “Distance education improves performance of students,” was also significant,  $t(135) = 9.776, p = .000$ . On average, experienced faculty ( $M = 3.13, SD = .731$ ) agreed that distance education enhanced students performance versus faculty without experience ( $M = 2.01, SD = .813$ ), who disagreed with distance education’s ability to enhance students’ performance. Faculty’s experience with distance education explains 35% of the variance of this variable.

Significant differences were found for the last traditional scale variable that asked participants to rate the effectiveness of distance education compared to the conventional classroom,  $t(135) = 9.776, p = .000$ . Non-experienced faculty ( $M = 2.62, SD = .842$ ) indicated that distance education courses were an adequate learning experience compared to conventional classroom settings. Experienced faculty ( $M = 1.85, SD = .675$ ), on the other hand, view distance education courses as adequate or better learning experiences. Faculty groupings variable explained 20% of the variance for this variable.

### ***The Status Scale***

Two measures were investigated using  $t$ -test analysis. Similar to the prior scales, significant independent  $t$  tests mirrored the omnibus chi square results. Significant differences were indicated for the variable “Faculty members at my college/university who teach distance education courses enjoy a higher profile than those who do not,”  $t(135) = 9.776, p = .000$ . On average, faculty from both experienced ( $M = 1.96, SD = .605$ ) and nonexperienced ( $M = 1.48, SD$



TABLE 7  
Pearson Chi Square for Faculty Overall Experiences and Recommendation for Faculty Involvement

<i>Variable</i>	<i>N</i>	$\chi^2$	<i>p</i>
Differences for overall faculty positive and very positive responses	59	.438	.487
Differences for overall faculty neutral and positive/very positive responses	137	48.659	.000
Would you recommend involvement in distance education to other faculty	137	98.194	.000

= .633) backgrounds disagreed with the notion that faculty from their institution enjoyed a higher profile, although nonexperienced faculty leaned more toward strongly disagree. The effect size for the grouping variable was small and only explained 3% of the variance of this variable.

The last significant status scale variable was "My departmental faculty colleagues view distance education in a positive light,"  $t(135) = 9.776$ ,  $p = .000$ . On average, both groups of faculty disagree that their departmental colleagues view distance education positively, although nonexperienced faculty ( $M = 1.57$ ,  $SD = .606$ ) seem to strongly disagree more than experienced faculty ( $M = 2.07$ ,  $SD = .834$ ). Differences in faculty experience accounted for only a moderate effect size or 11% of the variance of this variable.

In addition to independent  $t$  tests, Pearson chi square analysis was used to examine the relationship between three dichotomous variables. A significant relationship was indicated for the first variable "Would you recommend involvement in distance education to other faculty,"  $\chi^2(1) = 98.194$ ;  $p < .001$ . Greater proportions of experienced faculty reported recommending faculty involvement in distance education versus a smaller proportion of non-experienced faculty not recommending similar involvement.

The second chi square analysis concerned faculties overall experience. As discussed in the method section, this variable was dichotomized in two different ways to examine differences between faculty who indicated positive and very positive responses. Only chance dif-

ferences were present for this variable,  $\chi^2(1) = .438$ ;  $p = .487$ . However, significant differences were found when original variable was dichotomized into neutral and positive responses,  $\chi^2(1) = 48.659$ ;  $p < .001$ . Thus, greater proportions of experienced faculty responded that their experiences were positive, versus nonexperienced faculty who responded neutrally. This makes sense because nonexperienced faculty should not have an affective experiential viewpoint from which to respond to this question. Results for Pearson chi square tests are presented in Table 7.

## DISCUSSION

### *Effectiveness Scale*

That significant differences were found between experienced and nonexperienced faculty regarding the effectiveness of distance education with the omnibus test was not surprising. Independent  $t$  tests indicated that faculty members with distance education experiences viewed distance education as favorable concerning overall increased performance, educator-student interaction, provides avenues for students to master skills, as well as an avenue for evaluating the course. Experienced faculty did not view two items favorably: distance education causing educational quality to decline, and developing students' quantitative skills. Puzzling was the finding that while faculty rated the effectiveness of distance education favorably overall, they also indicated their belief that distance education compromised the overall quality of the educa-

tion delivered. This contradiction supports the notion that some faculty members hold a preconceived notion that distance education will compromise educational quality (see Uhlig, 2002). Faculty perceptions of increased effectiveness within this study seem to contradict prior research that indicated little to no difference in student learning and development regardless of instructional medium (see Lewis, 2000; Sonner, 1999; Spooner, Jordan, & Algozzine, 1999; Uhlig, 2002).

### ***The Traditional Scale***

Differences also existed between experienced and nonexperienced faculty concerning their comparison of distance education with the traditional classroom environment. Experienced faculty viewed distance education to be superior to traditional education regarding student performance and providing a better learning experience. In contrast, experienced faculty disagreed that distance education provided a higher quality of course materials and that distance education improved the performance of faculty with regards to teaching. That faculty disagree concerning the higher quality of course materials could be indicative of the perceived need to eliminate course materials due to the highly demanding nature of distance education (see Uhlig, 2002), thus believing that the quality of course materials suffers. Perhaps this statement reflects the basic choices that most faculty make during any given semester with regard to which text to select, which assignment to include, or whether there should be team presentation or individual presentation. Hence, experienced faculty who teach online may see their courses as not really being any different than traditional courses, thereby understanding that quality is built into the design and student involvement rather than seeing technology other than a simple tool to use to enhance learning. Simply stated, faculty who teach using an alternative delivery method must prepare their courses well in advance while taking into consideration technology, student

responses, and their ability to manage the context for which the course is to be delivered.

Second, faculty experience with distance education is a key component to their success and the educational outcomes of the students. An experienced faculty member who is comfortable and understands how to use the tool "technology" to enhance learning will create the kind of learning environment that is conducive to the students who enroll. Again, one should be reminded that there are various levels and forms of distance learning with multiple learners, in varying sizes of classrooms, taught by faculty who have multiple experiences and skills to teach in an alternative format. Therefore, some faculty may view distance education as a hindrance to their performance due to their lack of training in meeting the learning curve required to be successful educators with distance education media (see Merisotis & Phipps, 1999; Nixon & Leftwich (1998).

### ***The Status Scale***

Only two items were examined from the status scales due to nonsignificant omnibus tests for differences. Experienced faculty disagreed that faculty who teach distance education enjoy a higher profile at their institution and disagreed that departmental faculty view distance education in a positive light. These two perceptions also seem in line with the literature and further explain a few findings reported above. If faculty in distance education perceive their reputation denigrated for engaging in distance education, and if the faculty members within a department do not value distance education, these undercurrents may taint faculty's notions of the quality and relative effectiveness of distance education.

### ***Overall Experiences and Recommendation for Faculty Involvement***

Despite the notion that faculty possess a general negative viewpoint of distance educa-

tion, our findings suggest that experienced faculty promote and recommend engagement in distance education. Additionally, generally speaking, experienced faculty tend to rate their experiences with distance education as positive. These findings may have implications for reducing the myth that distance education is laborious and not a worthwhile educational medium.

## CONCLUSION

This research leads to several conclusions regarding the effectiveness of distance education, the comparison of distance education and traditional education, and faculty members' perceptions of the status of distance educators. It was noteworthy that many of those in favor of distance education would not recommend it to their peers. The research was not clear why, but it may be attributed to the increased workload without additional pay or release time. In addition, institutions should strongly encourage that distance education courses be integrated into degree programs and conduct assessment to reveal differences.

A failure to position distance education activities within this broad context is likely to result in the marginalization of these innovative courses, as well as faculty members' perception of distance education as a whole. Distance education students must be exposed to the same quality and quantity of instruction as provided to students in traditional brick-and-mortar classrooms.

However, it is clear that distance education can include many technological components. The relative efficacy of these components should also be carefully examined. Distance education that emphasizes some degree of interaction on an individual basis between faculty members and students, and students themselves, is recommended. Given the relative newness of distance education on the Internet, faculty members must ascertain which of these interactive strategies or course components are most beneficial. Hence, it is possible that some

academic disciplines may be more amenable to distance education than others. However, this study reveals that experience breeds acceptance of distance education. It is clear that institutions of higher education must encourage faculty members to get involved in distance education in an effort to increase the exposure to distance education. One might be reminded that distance education offers several vital promises to universities and their stakeholders, especially faculty members. Moving cautiously yet consistently toward implementation of these innovative Web-based programs is likely to shape American higher education for decades to come.

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