Does an Online Professional Master's Program Meet Student Expectations?

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Background: Online education is especially relevant to those who have a bachelor's degree, are employed in a retail career, and seek further training in the form of an advanced degree. Merchandising is a fast-paced, dynamic sector of the retail industry, requiring professionals to continually update their skills to stay competitive in the job market. New technologies and learner profiles have contributed to rapid growth in online education at the university level. It has become increasingly important for faculty to assess such student learning (Liu, 2012).

Problem: Professionals today are seeking continued education beyond the Bachelor's degree but are unable to pause their careers in order to get the advanced degree. Programs are being developed. Are these programs able to accommodate the expectations of this non-traditional student population?

Purpose: Great-Plains Interactive Distance Education Alliance (GP-IDEA) has been a pioneer in offering fully-online graduate programs in high demand professional fields. The Alliance fosters collaborative development of high quality programs (Sanders, 2011; www.gpidea.org). The purpose of this case study was to investigate student perceptions and experiences of an on-line professional master's program. Research objectives involved evaluation of student satisfaction with the following dimensions: program quality, program structure and content, student/instructor interactions, benefits of the program, applicability of the program in students' professional life, and overall expectations of the program.

Methods: The GP-IDEA Merchandising Master's program serves as a relevant case. This program was designed to target professionals employed in many of the career paths available in the merchandising field. Program development began in 2002 and was launched in 2005; 42 professionals have completed the program. Qualitative methods were used to examine the impact of this graduate program on the lives and careers of these individuals. A semi-structured interview guide was developed with open-ended questions, including: 1) What was your primary motivation for pursuing a graduate degree in merchandising? 2) What did you expect to be the key benefits of receiving the degree? 3) What did you see as strengths of this on-line program? 4) Did completion of the degree allow you to realize your expectations? 5) What has been the impact on your professional life from receiving this degree? All graduates of the program were sent an e-mail invitation to participate. Twenty-one agreed and were interviewed over the telephone by the same interviewer, representing a 50% response rate. Interviews were recorded,

transcribed, and entered into the qualitative analysis software program NVivo10. Data from the interviews was disassembled and organized into themes that came out of the answers to each question. A deductive approach to the coding considered the six dimensions that were identified in the research objectives. Later an inductive approach allowed the data to guide the emergence of additional concepts and themes (Yin, 2011).

Findings: The following themes emerged from the qualitative analysis:
- Program quality – unique, relevant to the work world, well-prepared and knowledgeable faculty with varied and distinct teaching styles.
- Benefits of the program - accommodations made for full-time working students; enhanced job opportunities; salary increases; professional and personal development.
- Applicability to professional life – gaining a better understanding of the broad scope of a merchandising career; preparing for success in a global industry.
- Expectations of the program - knowledge development about the retail merchandising industry; learning to put theory into practice; flexible scheduling.
- Relationships between students - learning from classmates, creating friendships.
- Program diversity – invaluable exposure to instructors and students from different institutions, work situations, and geographic areas.

Conclusions and Implications: The qualitative study revealed an overall positive perception of online education, as experienced by graduates of the GP-IDEA Merchandising Program. Respondents indicated their academic experiences in a distance education graduate program represented a positive investment in both their professional and personal development. Most indicated that completing an online master's degree positively impacted their career advancement. One graduate stated -"This was one of the best things I have ever done."

Graduates of the case program revealed a positive response to working with faculty from multiple institutions and indicated their expectations regarding quality and benefits were generally met. This suggests that online students may be well served through collaborative online curriculum, which would reduce the burden on any one institution. In the current university environment where faculty are asked to do more and more with fewer resources, a multi-institution approach to meet growing demand for online education may be a way to provide benefit to non-traditional professional student without over-burdening faculty resources.

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