DISTANCE LEARNING TRENDS AND BENCHMARKS: LESSONS FROM AN ONLINE MBA PROGRAM

Candice R. Hollenbeck, George M. Zinkhan, and Warren French

For a variety of reasons, distance learning (DL) is an attractive option in higher education. Drawing upon six years of experience with a customized M.B.A. program, we identify trends, factors for success, and potential advantages and disadvantages associated with distance learning. We develop a three-step process for implementing and evaluating a customized DL program, with an emphasis on teaching Marketing courses. Then, we make some predictions regarding distance learning in higher education and suggest appeals to be used when marketing such a program.

Introduction

Enrollment in higher education institutions has continued to increase steadily over the past two decades (US Department of Education 2000). In 2000, 15 million students were involved in traditional higher education in the U.S. (“Higher Education” 2002). This number is expected to grow to 20 million students in 2010 (“Higher Education Enrollments” 1996). Although historical trends in enrollment have been positive, other studies predict future declines in enrollment numbers due to increases in tuition and economic impediments (Berger and Kostal 2002; Psacharopoulos 1973; Tuckman 1973). The most recent annual College Board survey shows higher education tuition rising 7.7 percent from the previous year (Yudof 2002). These rising costs have led some participants and providers to seek new alternatives (Eastman and Swift 2001; Svetcov 1995; White et al. 1978), especially since state support of higher education is shrinking (Trombley 2003).

“For-profit” universities have arisen to capitalize on perceived time and cost deficiencies in traditional universities (Zinkhan 2001). These institutions enroll over 500,000 students annually, show a more rapid growth rate than traditional universities, and have revenues of $13 billion per year (Symonds 2003). Currently, 10% of all MBA candidates attend a “for-profit” university, e.g., the University of Phoenix. These commercial institutions format their programs toward the needs of goal-directed students who have time constraints caused by employment responsibilities. Distance learning is a major component in many of their offerings.

At present, higher education is offered not only by smaller colleges, which stress teaching, but also by two broad types of universities. The first is the traditional “factory university,” which is place-bound and product-oriented. The institution sets the time, place and pace for learning, while the student exerts little influence on the process. The “virtual university” represents the second type of university, where education is offered by a web of institutional providers. In a virtual university, the student sets the time, place and pace. Both types of universities share two common features. They add value via coursework, and they are degree-granting institutions.

The virtual university relies on educational methods that we refer to as distance learning (DL). DL is defined as receiving education through Web-based remote sources and can include both synchronous and asynchronous learning. DL courses may include video technologies, audio technologies, email and other types of Internet interaction or a combination of several remote methods of communication and education. DL, unencumbered by many of the constraints facing traditional universities, has the potential to change the practices and images of higher education. As such, our objectives are four-fold. First, we provide an overview of possible financial roles for DL. We have found financial matters to be particularly salient in decision-making regarding DL programs. Universities want to know their financial options and be prepared for future changes. Second, we summarize our experience with one specific DL program by identifying student suggestions for improvement. Third, we offer opinions on the factors that lead to successful distance learning programs. Then,
A Means for Dealing with Financial Constraints

There are five major approaches for confronting financial constraints, with DL, in some ways, appearing more favorable than the other four approaches. In the 21st Century, universities are taking different measures to deal with their revenue problems (Eastman and Swift 2001). One method of dealing with cash flow constraints is that taken by a number of private universities. This approach eliminates or restricts departments that do not pay their own way. Such measures could have the effect of eliminating the same departments across many universities, forcing students to choose from only "profitable" majors and hindering choices. Another method of dealing with financial constraints is taken by the public university system in the United Kingdom. A central education authority authorizes and supports specialized academic departments in different universities. The result is that no one university dominates all disciplines. This approach makes sense if universities are true to their label and allow studies in a vast array of disciplines. Many of the courses in disciplines that attract little student interest will be cursory overviews. Students who wish to specialize in subjects, which attract few majors, will be directed to a limited number of institutions within the educational system. That limited number will be designated as specialists in the subject. Although economically efficient, this approach is best received when starting a university system rather than when shrinking an existing system.

Another, and perhaps inefficient, method of dealing with financial constraints is to attempt to offer all subject areas, albeit with limited resources. This method cuts budgets to all departments, potentially hindering them from hiring or retaining top faculty members. As a result, the reputation of the school may decline, causing a drop in both student and faculty interest.

Capping enrollments in popular areas is a fourth approach for dealing with financial constraints. Capping enrollments forces students into "second choice" considerations. If a university forces students into their "second choice" or lower, then students may choose to attend other universities where they will be able to study their first choice, causing a drop in enrollment for these schools with a capping policy.

As argued above, there are some problems associated with the first four approaches of responding to financial constraints. Thus, we see distance education (a fifth approach) as a promising method for universities, colleges of business, and marketing departments. Under DL, experts at one institution deliver lectures to students off campus. This is already occurring at colleges where budgets are constrained. For instance, information technologies hold out the promise of motivating and engaging students, accelerating learning, and relating academic theories to the workplace (Young 2001).

Although this fifth option can eventually help balance income statements, institutions must first invest in a reliable technology system. Many institutions are unwilling or unable to fully invest in DL programs, thus failing to establish a dependable technology delivery system and consistent infrastructure. Institutions may be apprehensive of initial financial investments, because they are unable to accurately access the long-term profitability. This inevitably causes more problems and uncertainty, because institutions tend to experiment with only a few DL courses without having the necessary resources to ensure educational merit. These types of experiments...
inexorably give students, faculty and spectators substan-
tial viewpoints of the potential of DL courses. Colleges of business possess a resourceful advantage for
investing in DL courses. Studies (Kasworm 2003; Tyler 2001; Wilkes and Burnham 1991) confirm that DL
courses are often aimed at graduate students and work-
ing professionals rather than first-time students. Work-
ing professionals want advanced business degrees; but
when given the option, students would rather keep
their existing job and attend school via remote sources
(Olosgaard 1987). Giving up an income producing oc-
cupation is risky, especially when the economy is uncer-
tain. A study by Berger and Kostal (2002) suggests that
tuition, average wage levels, and average education lev-
els significantly affect enrollment demand, while state
appropriations, other revenue, number of institutions,
and the level of regulation significantly affect enrollment
supply. Today students are less likely to quit their jobs
and attend graduate school full-time, because economic
wages are stabilizing while tuition costs are increasing.
With an increasing number of for-profit DL competitors
targeting working students (e.g., University of Phoenix),
business professionals have more options for advancing
their education while keeping their current jobs.
In addition, these factors make it more difficult for
traditional graduate programs to attract a paying stu-
dent base. MBA applications across the country de-
clined in 2003 (Symonds 2003). With shrinking state sup-
port and enrollment declines, new funds are needed to
support higher education. Thus, there is no better time or
place for customizing educational programs to meet the
needs of sponsor firms/industries (Murray 2003).
Customizing MBA programs, but also staying within
AACSB guidelines, enhances reputations and substan-
tiates programs of this nature. Financial benefits make
this option attractive for higher education institutions,
sponsor firms, and prospective students. For the edu-
cational institution, the firm sponsorship ensures a reli-
able revenue stream. In addition, the university gets a
premium price for customizing the program. This pre-
mium price serves to compensate for upfront cost of
technology. We found that it is important to choose a
technology platform that evolves over time so that fu-
ture versions are included in annual licensing fees. Cus-
tomized Internet-based courses also provide an oppor-
tunity for offering niche services to qualified MBA stu-
dents who can enroll for university-sponsored courses
(Smith 2001).
For the firm, DL keeps the student on the job and the
employer keeps a valuable employee who attains a desired
skill set. For the student, the employee attains the desired
skill set while keeping a needed income producing job. In
addition, there is an advantage involving a second re-
source, time, that makes distance learning an attractive
option. Smith (2001) describes how an MBA student’s
need for flexibility is a key driver of Internet-based courses.
For Marketing educators in particular, DL is an ideal
medium for instructing application oriented courses such
as Marketing Principles, International Marketing, and
Marketing Research. Textbooks for these courses already
rely on the Internet for case studies and individual stu-
dent experiments. In Marketing courses, students must
understand how the Internet impacts marketing prac-
tices and the advantages and disadvantages of conduct-
 ing research via the Web. DL provides a natural environ-
ment for Marketing educators to use Internet technology
to teach MBA students and prepare them for modern-
day technological challenges (Moon 1999). In the follow-
ing section, we discuss our experiences associated with
one specific DL program in the field of business adminis-
tration offered by an AACSB accredited University.
Distance Learning: One Specific MBA Program
In this DL MBA program, each class contains 40-48
students. Students are experienced employees of an in-
ternational consulting firm and work at least 45 hours
per week across three time zones. This program is two
years in length, and students take two classes at a time.
The program consists of 16 hours per subject of class-
room contact across five days on campus, 12 weeks of
DL with 7.5 hours per subject per week, and 2 hours of
wrap up on campus. As mentioned previously, the field
of Marketing plays a key role in this MBA program. For
instance, a student in the program may take up to six
different courses taught by Marketing faculty members.
The concerns of the students regarding the distance
learning aspects of the program encompass two under-
lying elements. The first is personal time management.
Faculty have responded to the students’ job pressures
by building flexibility into the due dates for assign-
ments. Benchmarking expected time requirements to
onsite MBA courses has helped give faculty more real-
istic expectations about the time necessary to complete
their assignments. In turn, coordination between fac-
culty has evened out the peaks and valleys in the
workload. Only after a predetermined tardiness limit is
set, is a uniform grade deduction penalty, common for
all courses, applied.
The second concern is about faculty contact. DL ver-
sus onsite education makes personal discussion some-
what more difficult. Students want to use the limited
onsite time for discussion with faculty. They want the
faculty’s personal opinions about issues raised in the
course material. This presents a problem for faculty
who are wary of DL. They want to pack all the perti-
nent lecture material they can into the limited onsite class hours. The students counter that the same lecture material can be adequately delivered through Power Point lecture slides delivered on the software platform. What underlies this conflict is the faculty’s lack of full confidence that DL is as effective as face-to-face onsite instruction (French et al. 2000). Our recommendation here mirrors Sweeney and Ingrain’s (2001) finding that students value “face-to-face tutorials,” and find these as more effective learning means than other Web-based approaches (e.g., bulletin boards, chat rooms). Programs must take into account this finding to better structure the course delivery for the student.

Over the course of six years, we developed our program to have flexibility for course assignments by giving students the opportunity to agree upon deadlines at the beginning of a module. Students also participate in the decision making to determine how late assignments would be penalized. In many cases, the students agree upon different arrangements for late assignments for each course. For some courses, late assignments are deducted points for each day late. In other courses, late assignments are not penalized; however, students do not receive feedback until all assignments are completed. This motivates students to consider the entire class in accomplishing assignments in a timely manner. In addressing the second concern, faculty members continue to be creative in their communication methods by posing questions to specific students, requiring periodic check-ins for each student, and by monitoring discussion groups. The standard for consistent communication is set high for faculty members, and those who do not adhere to this standard are dropped from the program.

With a focus on income-producing DL programs, it is easy to lose sight of their educational purpose. Are they successful? More specifically, what are the factors associated with DL success? One approach to dealing with the last question is provided in the following section.

Factors Associated with Distance Learning Success

As distance education courses grow in number, educational institutions strive to develop effective implementation and evaluation methods for online instruction. Here, we review the effectiveness of the distance learning MBA program described above. Based on a six-year evaluation of this program, we offer insights for evaluating and assessing programs of this nature.

As with any education program, the first step in an effective evaluation process is to designate learning outcomes. Here, we focus on learning that is provided in real-life contexts (Lave and Wenger 1991). Two phrases currently found in education theory are “situated learning” and “communities of practice” (Choi and Hannafin 1995; Lave and Wenger 1991; Rasmussen and Northrup 1999; Schwen and Hara 2003; Taylor 2003; Wilson 1995; Young 1993). Students enrolled in our MBA program work within the same company, providing the situational comradeship and socialization found in communities of practice. The sponsor firm for this program situates the students in a common, though geographically dispersed, work setting, allowing instructors to center coursework around daily work activities.

According to Schwen and Hara (2003) communities of practice cannot be forced. Instead, they emerge through group activities. Instructors of online courses need to be aware of the characteristics of existing workplace commonalities to nurture them in course assignments. We nurture communities of practice by situating coursework around everyday workplace activities. For example, in Marketing courses, students are able to use current work-related projects to analyze potential target markets, market segmentation approaches, and customer relationship strategies. When virtual tasks are based on real-life applications, the students are able to tap into their physical, mental, and social surroundings to accomplish course assignments. When actual customer bases are analyzed for course assignments, the employer, the students, and the quality of course discussions all benefit from the application.

Given this educational setting, what are the appropriate assessment processes for our distance-learning program? Wlodkowski and Jaynes (1990) identified seven dimensions for assessing education programs: (1) achievability, (2) believability, (3) measurability, (4) desirability, (5) focusing, (6) motivation, and (7) commitment. These seven areas provide a direct and systematized method for assessment and evaluation. These measures emphasize application, rather than memorization. Students are expected to broaden their mental models by learning how to adapt to real changes in the business environment. These seven dimensions evaluate students’ ability to evaluate the present business environment for marketing opportunities, to analyze customer-based problems and pose solutions, to work in teams to accomplish tasks, and to communicate effectively via web-based technologies. For example, pertinent marketing problems, posed and answered on the course discussion board by members of one class, are carried forward to subsequent classes’ discussion boards.

In addition to Wlodkowski and Jaynes dimensions, the Institute for Higher Education Policy (2000) offers a series of benchmarks as measures of success in distance learning programs. For each of these benchmarks, the Institute delineates practical application components...
that had been identified through an extensive literature review. These benchmarks serve as a starting point in our assessment in that they appear to coincide with Wlodkowski and Jaynes’ seven aforementioned criteria. Here, we synthesize and summarize the Institute’s benchmark areas by presenting a three-step process covering planning, implementing and then assessing distance learning programs. The following commentary on each of the Institute’s benchmarks is based on the successes and failures with our program.

**Step 1. Planning for Success**

Establishing strong motivational tactics is a key strategy. “Motivation,” as described by Wlodkowski and Jaynes, examines whether the learning goals are stimulating, competence building, and reinforcing. To generate motivation, we recommend three strategies: a) build a sense of community for students, b) guarantee reliable technology, and c) provide incentives for faculty. Our strategies interconnect with four of the Institute for Higher Education Policy’s benchmarks: Course Structure Benchmarks, Institutional Benchmarks, Student Support Benchmarks, and Faculty Support Benchmarks.

The Institute suggests, “Before starting an online program, students are advised about the program to determine (1) if they possess the self-motivation and commitment to learn at a distance and (2) if they have access to the minimal technology required by the course design.” We extend this by recommending group participation assignments as a means of stimulating individual student involvement.

When compared to traditional courses within higher education, distance education courses experience higher dropout rates, sometimes as high as 50 percent (Eastman and Swift 2001). This high percentage may be attributed to factors such as isolation or lack of a feeling of achievement. “Achievability,” as noted by Wlodkowski and Jaynes, examines the needed time to reach specified learning goals and evaluates the skills needed by individual students to achieve the learning goals. Personality profiles suggest that some students perform better when they have the camaraderie of physical group interaction and peer accountability. Because a virtual classroom lacks the physical interaction and social involvement of a traditional classroom, it is of great importance to cultivate a sense of motivation and achievement through group interaction. Our students are assigned to four person teams. Each team, constructed on the basis of personality tests and student location, has a life span of one year.

Structuring group assignments into online courses provides opportunities for students to interact and motivate one another. Group activities ensure that students share knowledge, engage in continuous dialogue, and depend on each other to achieve learning outcomes, all of which are fundamental in building a learning community (Lock 2002). These techniques are also fundamental for marketing professionals. Professionals must work in teams, utilize existing resources, and communicate to customers. Thus, the skills developed through group interaction in the online classroom will transfer to other settings in the workplace.

Building a sense of community lies at the core of the educational structure for distance learning (Hung and Chen 2001). The learning community is influenced by interaction and abounds in the relationships among students in shared contexts (Wilson 1993). Our students have similar goals and responsibilities, and selective course assignments focus on those responsibilities. Group assignments focus on those managerial responsibilities in a marketing context. That context centers on the bi-annual listing of research priorities published by the Marketing Science Institute (MSI). Each sponsor representative chooses five topics from the MSI list – topics that can apply to the student’s relation to their client in the role of consultants. Student teams then outline possible “answers” to the MSI research priorities and how those answers can be implemented within client firms. In graduate programs of this nature, “one cannot separate the learning process from the situation in which the learning is presented” (Merriam and Caffarella 1999, p. 241). Building the curriculum around core commonalities enhances the learning process because the learners are able to integrate their physical, social, and situational experiences into the practice of learning.

In addition, it is critical that the technology being used is reliable and comprehensible. We concur with the Institute’s recommendation that “The reliability of the technology delivery system is as fail-safe as possible.” Time tends to be a limited resource for students in distance learning programs, who typically balance work and school. When logging onto a network to participate in a group discussion, download a lecture, or turn in an assignment, students need reliable technology. Without dependable technology, students are likely to become frustrated, disappointed, and detached, which can be detrimental to a distance-learning program. Accordingly, we extend the Institute’s recommendation to have a centralized system for building and maintaining the distance education infrastructure, to include the establishment of a reliable technical support staff before the onset of a distance learning program. A reliable technical support staff is indispensable at the beginning stages of a distance learning program.

The issue of technical support overlaps with the Institute’s suggestion that “Throughout the duration of
the course/program, students have access to technical assistance, including detailed instruction regarding the electronic media used, practice sessions prior to the beginning of the course, and convenient access to technical support staff.” This may require that the program spend more money upfront to hire additional staff for the start up of a program, and we were wise enough to do so. Poor technology performance at the beginning can have long-term negative effects on the overall growth of a program. Students have to believe that they can complete a lengthy MBA program. “Believability,” as stated by Wlodkowski and Jaynes, refers to the confidence among students to achieve learning goals. Believability is reinforced by providing technical assistance to students throughout the course.

Learning to use a variety of technologies also advances the students’ marketing career. Students entering the field of marketing must be able to organize web-based customer discussion forums, utilize web-based marketing tools, and manage customer communication methods via the Internet. Firms are rapidly moving toward more web-based marketing techniques. The skills that our students learn in online courses enhance their ability to analyze Internet marketing tools from the perspective of the customer. Students learn what works and what does not work for effective web-based communication, for building a virtual community, and for sustaining trust and reliability.

The Institute labeled some elements of Faculty Support Benchmarks as “non-essential.” However, we believe that this area deserves reevaluation. As originally stated by the Institute, “Faculty are provided professional incentives for innovative practices to encourage development of distance learning courses” and “There are institutional rewards for the effective teaching of distance learning courses.” Unfortunately, these two statements were dropped from the Institute’s final recommendations. Instructional design is a major concern because the task of preparing for distance education courses can be quite burdensome for faculty members. Sweeney and Ingrain (2001) recommend that instructors need to spend more time developing and cultivating instructional skills for online courses. In our experience, the time investment required by faculty members who use distance learning approached double the amount of time it takes to prepare for traditional courses. This time is necessary for faculty to learn adequate information about the sponsor firm and the students’ general environment in order to integrate real-life assignments into courses.

In our program faculty members have the option of participating or not. That is, a faculty member could participate in the distance learning program or could teach traditional courses via traditional methods. Because a significant time investment is required (e.g., learning software, learning the industry), extra compensation was offered in the early years. But, as the program aged this compensation shrank in size. As a result, some faculty members have reverted to traditional courses rather than teach time-consuming distance education courses. For this reason, we deem it necessary to provide adequate faculty incentives. Likewise, instructors need to know that administration is aware of the time investment needed to teach online courses (Berger and Topol 2001). Incentives such as reduced teaching loads or additional monetary rewards are essential for motivating faculty to teach online courses. The prestige of innovative teaching fades quickly, and more substantial rewards are needed to sustain enthusiasm among faculty members. For the University, there are additional benefits for paying a premium for faculty motivation. Financially rewarding faculty members for customizing courses ensures that the University maintains the intellectual right of developed course materials. Materials become the property of the University since faculty members are paid for the extra time to develop the course. Therefore, to avoid student drop out and diminished motivation among both faculty and students, the program must develop a sense of community for students, establish a reliable technology system, and provide incentives for faculty. These three factors will strengthen commitment accords among faculty and students.

“Commitment,” as noted by Wlodkowski and Jaynes, examines individual student and faculty commitment to the course. What we have not done, but is worth considering, is to involve students in an agreement where they pledge responsibility and effort during the duration of the course. At the end of the course, students can perform self-evaluations. This tactic motivates students to take responsibility for their own learning by diagnosing their own needs. Self-assessment tactics such as this requires a profound understanding of the discipline at hand and allows students to function in roles similar to those in real-world settings. For example, our students are required to evaluate their own performance on the job. Requiring students to evaluate their performance in graduate courses serves to enhance their self-evaluation skill. In brief, the Institute’s benchmarks, along with our extensions and reevaluations, seem to satisfy four of Wlodkowski and Jaynes’ seven objectives for educational programs. See Table 1.

**Step 2. Implementing Courses**

Expectations for course development should be clearly communicated to all of those involved in the planning
process. To ensure quality and consistency throughout the program, a coordinator must be in place to maintain communication throughout the planning process, and learning guidelines need to be established upfront. Student-to-student and student-to-teacher interaction are priorities, the latter leading to course modifications when necessary. These key initiatives coincide with two of the Institute’s benchmarks: Course Development Benchmarks and Teaching/Learning Benchmarks. When developing courses for a distance learning program, three actions should be taken. The first action is to appoint a person to take charge of the program, and we did. This distance learning coordinator collaborates with department heads to identify key elements or deliverables from each discipline. Secondly, the distance learning coordinator and the department heads select faculty to participate in the program and ask them to develop courses. Thirdly, all instructors in the distance learning program should meet with each other to ensure that the deliverables are satisfied with minimal redundancy. After these initial actions are taken, guidelines can be established to ensure that student learning needs are met.

Under Course Development Benchmarks, the Institute states, “Guidelines regarding minimum standards are used for course development, design, and delivery, while learning outcomes—not the availability of existing technology—determine the technology being used to deliver course content.” Predetermining learning guidelines requires faculty to formulate course content with a focus on building the curriculum around student commonalities such as similar workplace goals and responsibilities. In doing this, faculty are able to examine the desires of students through continuous interaction. “Desirability,” as noted by Wlodkowski and Jaynes, analyzes whether the learning goal is applicable and desirable for all students. In our case, the sponsor conducted a one-day seminar for participating faculty, during which the students’ jobs were explained in detail. This seminar made it easier for faculty members to integrate the students’ physical, social, and situational experiences into each course. In many cases, faculty work together to implement ongoing work projects in related online courses. For example, one group of students began collecting data for a course project in Marketing Management. The same group of students continued refining and analyzing the same data set for Account Management and Relationship Selling in the following semester. Building upon assignments in succeeding courses provides students with the opportunity to advance work-related assignments and gain more knowledge. Students have more time to manage projects to completion. We recognize two basic preconditions in the development of course curriculum. First, faculty members must accept the values, rules, and customs of the learning culture in order to construct a sense of community. Students come together because they are able to identify with a common need or shared goal (Hung and Chen 2001). Likewise, students must be willing to share the experiential issues that exist within their work environment. Online communication serves as a rich context for dialogue about workplace practices and dilemmas. The discussion board within our online learning platform facilitates this. Once commonalities are understood, faculty can take advantage of situational learning by linking relevant core concepts to practical workplace situations. Second, structured group work assignments are integrated into each course to provide a forum to stimulate situational collaboration. Learning is based on real-world experiences, and the emphasis is not on memory but rather on how students process information internally (Young 1993). Thus, the interactive online environment gives students the opportunity to talk with one another about core concepts from course material as well as critique each other’s work through cooperative group projects.

Within Course Development Benchmarks the Institute suggests, “Instructional materials are reviewed periodically to ensure they meet program standards.” We believe that this benchmark is appropriate if approached tactfully. If performed in an insensitive manner, faculty may view this benchmark as the equivalent of having to turn in lesson plans. We propose that, after delivering the course and reviewing student feedback, faculty members determine at least one improvement or modification to each course. Once modifications are recorded, faculty members share these improvements with one another advancing teaching methods throughout the program. This method of monitoring courses provides faculty with the flexibility to instruct courses using their own talents and judgments.

Under Teaching/Learning Benchmarks the Institute states, “Student interaction with faculty and other students is an essential characteristic and is facilitated through a variety of ways, including voice-mail and/or email.” Responsive feedback communicates the sincere interest of faculty in individual student development. Likewise, measurability is enforced by providing timely feedback. “Measurability,” as defined by Wlodkowski and Jaynes, examines the individual student’s ability to gauge his/her progress with specific tasks or assignments. Students in our program have reported that courses are more meaningful with extensive interaction between students and the instructor. Faculty ensure consistent communication by requiring several check in points during assignments.
For example, when studying market information, students must communicate with their instructor at the onset of the assignment and discuss how data will be collected. The instructor provides advice in collecting data, critiquing the survey instrument. Once data are collected, students must communicate their plan for analyzing the data. The instructor provides feedback about trends and themes and gives advice about appropriate software. Once the data are analyzed, students communicate findings to the instructor, and the instructor responds with suggestions for report writing and presentation of results (e.g., specific tables or figures). This detailed communication stream is different from traditional courses, where students are assigned a task and a due date and receive feedback sometime in the future. Ongoing communication of this nature sets online courses apart from traditional courses and serves to add value to student learning experiences.

Therefore, to ensure quality and consistency in designing and instructing situated courses, a coordinator must be in place to maintain communication throughout the planning process. Learning guidelines need to be established upfront, student-to-student and student-to-teacher interaction must be a priority, and ongoing communication about course modifications is essential for continued improvements. By carrying out these proceedings, faculty and students will have a clear focus for the learning objectives. “Focusing,” as identified by Wlodkowski and Jaynes, examines how individual students and faculty members will be reminded of the learning goals throughout the course. If the foregoing suggestions from the Institute along with our proposal are implemented, we believe that three remaining objectives from Wlodkoski and Jaynes’ list will be satisfied. See Table 1.

### Step 3. Assessing Distance Education Programs for Continued Success

Assessment is a core construct in education and typically measures performance in terms of numbers and statistics. However, there is a growing consensus that traditional methods of evaluation fail to measure learning outcomes accurately (Choi and Hannafin 1995). Standardized testing, criterion-referenced tests, and teacher-constructed tests focus heavily on memorization, providing little information to evaluate the level of understanding or thinking skills developed among individual students (Choi and Hannafin 1995). Based on feedback from the sponsor firm, memorization should not be the focus of the program. Rather, there should be a focus on conceptualizing and applying the learned material. Evaluations must be viewed from both the perspective of the student and sponsoring firm. A firm is likely to be concerned with evaluation after degree attainment. In our case, a year after completion, is the employee more productive than a colleague who did not take the course?

The issue of assessment corresponds with the Institute’s recommendation that the program’s educational effectiveness be “assessed through an evaluation process that uses several methods and applies specific standards.” We agree with the Institute’s recommendation and extend it by incorporating goal setting and evaluation strategies provided by Wlodkowski and Jaynes (1990). Unfortunately, to this point we have not developed a multidimensional assessment instrument for our program that adequately meets the aforementioned strategies.

Given the nature of learning environments, faculty should emphasize underlying course concepts and reiterate learning goals throughout various assignments, rather than “teach to the test,” as some instructors may do in traditional education settings (Choi and Hannafin 1995). In distance education, learning focuses on processing information through reflection and restructuring knowledge to be applied in real-life situations. Therefore, assessment should emphasize flexibility in higher-level thinking skills and stimulate students to review and evaluate novel circumstances, not simply verify previously experienced encounters (Choi and Hannafin 1995). Rather than relying on concrete, absolute evaluation standards, faculty are able to use the learning strategies provided by Wlodkowski and Jaynes and the benchmarks provided by the Institute of Higher Education to create an assessment that uses several methods of evaluation. Table 1 summarizes our implementation to create an assessment that uses several methods and applies specific standards.” We agree with the Institute’s recommendation that the program’s educational effectiveness be “assessed through an evaluation process that uses several methods and applies specific standards.”  We agree with the Institute’s recommendation and extend it by incorporating goal setting and evaluation strategies provided by Wlodkowski and Jaynes (1990). Unfortunately, to this point we have not developed a multidimensional assessment instrument for our program that adequately meets the aforementioned strategies.

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### Predictions for Higher Education and DL

In Table 2, we illustrate some of the costs and benefits associated with DL MBA programs. Note that these table entries are largely derived from previous discussion. We want to emphasize that distance learning does not necessarily provide a “ready-made” solution in higher education. Nonetheless, it does create some op-
Table 1  
Distance Education Assessment Tool

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<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Step 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believability</td>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Step 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Step 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desirability</td>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Step 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measurability</td>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Step 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focusing</td>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Step 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2  
Distance Learning: Costs and Benefits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DL MBA Program</th>
<th>Costs</th>
<th>Benefits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Time to:</td>
<td></td>
<td>• DL methods of instruction become more standardized over time. Horizons broadened especially with respect to e-communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) learn new method of instruction, (2) prepare the course, (3) grade the assignments, (4) communicate with individual students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Costs of mastering software associated with the program</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Financial costs of program start up</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Salaries of personnel dedicated to the program</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology program</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Costs of technology upgrades</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Technology serves as a marketing tool for the</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

opportunities. In this paper, we outline some of these opportunities and illustrate key costs and investments that we required to achieve DL success.

With Table 2 as a background, we make three future-oriented predictions for higher education and DL programs. First, DL programs will continue to grow in number and scope. Second, partnerships between businesses and educational institutions will become more prevalent as distance learning becomes a viable means of employee education. Third, DL courses and programs will become more standardized as technology advances and research continues to identify the most effective means of delivering distance learning courses.

Courses in higher education that utilize some aspect of distance learning for communication and instruction continue to grow each year. In 1993, fewer than 100 higher education institutions offered Internet-based courses, and, in 1999, approximately two-thirds of the 3,200 accredited 4-year colleges and graduate schools in the United States offered courses via the Internet (Eastman and Swift 2001). A more recent study reported that a majority of college administrators believed that distance learning courses were at least of equal quality to those offered face-to-face (Read 2003). In the future, we predict that the usage and acceptance of distance learning courses within higher education institutions will continue to increase. This increase can be attributed to a number of factors such as the rising costs for both institutions and students, technological advances in the delivery of education, enrollment management issues, and the increasing number of adult students who are seeking flexible alternatives for education.

Likewise, partnerships between schools and businesses are becoming increasingly popular due to cost
benefits, the interactive aspects of learning, and the advantages of information exchange (Webster and Hackley 1997). Research suggests that business schools are taking the lead in offering online courses in graduate degree programs (Arbaugh 2000). In 2000, 25 AACSB-accredited schools in the United States provided entirely online MBA programs, and many others offered MBA courses via the Web (www.academyonline.com, 2000). As the business environment changes, the nature of business education follows in order to meet the demands of technological change and globalization. More business schools are reaching niche markets by creating tailor-made distance education programs for employees in specific industries (Carnevale 2002). Online trainings and online education for corporations have become a viable option when seeking flexible and financially sound alternatives for providing employees with the necessary skills and academic qualifications for a particular job (Evans and Haase 2001; Rose 1996; Westera et al. 2000). We predict that business schools will begin adopting more distance learning teaching methods to remain competitive.

Initial studies in distance education have focused primarily on comparing student performance in online and traditional courses (Arbaugh 2000; Hiltz and Wellman 1997; Ludlow 1994). Today, there are a number of studies that suggest no significant difference between distance learning and classroom learning in terms of course completion, academic performance, achievement, examination results and grades (Carswell et al. 2000; Jordan et al. 1999; Russell 1997; Solomon and Schrum 2002). Research on other factors such as student satisfaction with the course has yielded mixed results, suggesting that students were less satisfied with their distance learning classes than students in traditional classrooms (Allen et al. 2002; Gunawardena and Bowerie 1992; Messing 1998). In contrast, some studies find that students have favorable attitudes toward dis-

| Table 3                                                                 |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| **Salient Aspects of a Successful DL Program**              |     |
| Targeted Marketing Appeals                                      |     |
| Sponsor firm collaborates with the College to design course curriculum | √   |
| Predetermined course curriculum with a focus on student commonalities | √   |
| Sponsor firm assesses student potential                         |     |
| The College makes final student selections                     | √   |
| Financial incentives for motivating faculty                    |     |
| Professional incentives for innovative instruction             |     |
| Partnering of faculty to ensure minimal redundancy in deliverables | √   |
| Constant dialogue between faculty and students via email and discussion boards | √   |
| Personalized dialogue between faculty and students during campus visits | √   |
| Course evaluations include feedback from both students and sponsor firm | √   |
| The University bundles books and tuition into one set fee for the program | √   |
| Sponsor firm provides hardware and software tools for students  |     |
| Dependable technical support staff                              |     |
| Guaranteed reliable technology                                  |     |
| The University provides a user-friendly virtual library for students | √   |
| Building community is the underpinning of the program          |     |
| Balanced workload for students throughout the semester         |     |
| Flexibility for students in terms of assignments and due dates  |     |
| Student work groups are assigned based on geographic regions and personality | √   |
| Assignments integrate real-world applications                  | √   |
| Courses focus on application, not memorization                 |     |
| Faculty commit to responsive feedback regarding student assignments | √   |
| Faculty commit to continuous course improvement based on student feedback | √   |
tance education (Chyung et al. 1998; Garrison and Baynton 1987; Misanchuck and Duerer 2001; Pugh and Siantz 1995). These differences may be attributed to various methods of instructing and managing online courses (Carswell et al. 2000; Schrum and Berge 1998; Solomon and Schrum 2002). We predict that instructing and managing DL courses will become more standardized, applying analogous formats for coursework and student interaction. In addition, we forecast that marketing instructors will develop their own specialized techniques for teaching online courses, similar to the uniqueness and inventiveness that marketing instructors bring to traditional courses.

Marketing Appeals

If the predictions about the future of DL are true, what can be done to capitalize on them? Specifically, what aspects of DL should be emphasized when creating and promoting a customized DL program? Concentrating on the most salient points in the previous sections, a list of potential “drivers of satisfaction” can be compiled. The points on this list can serve as appeals when a customized DL program is marketed to its three key constituencies – students, sponsor, and faculty members. These appeals are useful when measuring the costs versus the benefits of customized DL programs. Considering Table 3 on the whole, the benefits outweigh the costs (by a large extent).

For the educational institution, the most notable benefit from customizing a DL program is that it provides a reliable revenue stream. By customizing programs, the university can build a relationship that not only produces profits but also builds the business acumen of its faculty. In ensuring success with DL programs of this nature, the university must effectively market the program to the students, the sponsor, and the faculty. Here, we elaborate on the appeals in Table 3.

Students

Our DL program has two overarching appeals for potential students: time and quality. Regarding time, our students are in every time zone in North America and they prefer to function asynchronously via a personal computer. Working asynchronously provides students with flexibility in terms of work, travel, and family obligations. Likewise, in a DL program, students are able to maintain their current job while advancing their education. While time is the primary advantage that most DL programs emphasize, quality is one area that differentiates DL programs.

Both the University and the program’s industry sponsor posited the goal of a quality education experience. The University decided that the most appropriate method of delivering this goal was the establishment of a community culture among not only the students but also the faculty and support staff. With this in mind, building a community became the working goal of the program and as a result students feel a part of something more than a graduate program. Students are members of a learning community. The key component of our community is shared contexts. This means that learning is social and cultural in nature and incorporates real-life situations into the educational context. The students have similar goals, responsibilities, traditions, and ethical dilemmas. Building the curriculum around these commonalities enhances the learning process because students are able to integrate their physical, social, and situational experience into the practice of learning.

In addition, as part of the learning contract, faculty members are expected to maintain a high level of communication with the class. This is accomplished in a variety of ways, chief of which is email. Email address lists for the entire class and the smaller teams are created on the platform for immediate use. This is effective when used to direct students via a hotlink to other parts of the course such as the schedules, discussion boards, or course materials. Constructive feedback from the instructor to students about assignments is provided in a timely manner. One faculty member who fell short on this dimension was dropped from the program. Faculty members involved in this program are pre-advised and well aware of the need for constructive feedback and of the value in positive reinforcement. Due to this high level of communicative contact and personal feedback, students receive quality education through continuous, personalized communication with faculty. Thus, community and quality are distinct marketing appeals for potential students.

Sponsor

Customized DL programs have three overarching marketing appeals for sponsor firms: involvement in program structure, employee development, and employee retention. The sponsor firm plays an active role...
in customizing our DL program by hand-picking the employees who participate in the program, critiquing courses, and providing constructive feedback. Thus, one of the premier benefits of a customized DL program for the sponsor firm is partnering with the University to craft courses specific for their workforce. This is accomplished by emphasizing selected skills or knowledge applicable to their workplace needs and conditions.

In addition, the sponsor firm selects promotable employees to participate in the program. Since the sponsor firm offers interest-free loans to the students to pay for the program and forgives these loans if the student remains with the firm for three years after completing the program, dropout rates are low. In brief, the sponsor is signaling to the selected students that they have a long-term future with the firm.

Before starting a DL program, students are advised to determine if they possess the self-motivation and commitment to learn at a distance. The initial advise-ment process is conducted by the sponsor firm and involves an evaluation and recommendation of each applicant. This screening process is aimed at identifying dedicated and motivated individuals. The final acceptance decisions allowing only a certain number of students into the program are determined by the College of Business. The selection process ensures that the firm is investing in employees who will become future leaders of their organization. This is an important attribute because employers can streamline the process of educating and advancing leaders and managers within their workforce. Likewise, employees that are satisfied with their personal developments and challenged by their educational advancements are more likely to have long-term commitments to the organization. Thus, sponsor firms benefit from customized DL programs through in-volvement in student selection and course offerings, employee development, and employee retention.

Faculty

At the University, there are three marketing appeals for faculty: technological, financial, and intellectual. The first incentive is an advanced lap top computer which allows for grading assignments at any location. While this is an incentive, it is also a necessity due to the continuous communication with regard to this type of instruction. There is also additional compensation to participate in the distance learning instructional process. This financial incentive keeps faculty motivated and interested in experimenting with new forms of pedagogy. Finally, one of the most noticeable incentives is the feeling among these professors that they are participating with a small cadre on the cutting edge of new forms of education. Once faculty go through an initial learning curve, creative instruction strategies transcend and the motivation for continued improvement becomes apparent.

The Internet is an innovative means for demonstrating marketing applications. When capitalizing on the advantages of DL, Marketing instructors are able to illustrate marketing principles in real world settings and the pragmatic application to specific workplace circumstances.

In addition, marketing courses can be customized to meet the internal needs of the sponsor firm. For example, in one Marketing course, “account management and customer relationships,” the firm’s representative worked with the instructor to create the initial course format. In doing this, the firm’s representative collaborated with the instructor to orchestrate the course’s goals and objectives. These are just a few practical ways in which marketing courses benefit from customized DL programs. The two overarching appeals for instructors of DL marketing courses is the benefit of situating marketing principles in real world settings and the pragmatic application to specific workplace circumstances.

Summary

Distance learning poses many challenges to higher education, but also offers solutions. Accompanying these solutions are costs and risks. As the Internet becomes more prominent in the classroom, marketing educators need to evaluate the usefulness of this teaching instrument and determine the most effective pedagogies. The future of marketing education most likely involves an injection of distance learning methods and theories.

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