

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 397 893

JC 960 495

AUTHOR Minich, Eleanor L.
 TITLE Using Student Feedback To Improve Distance Education.
 INSTITUTION Florida Community Coll., Jacksonville.
 PUB DATE 96
 NOTE 10p.
 PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS Community Colleges; Computer Assisted Instruction; *Distance Education; *Dropout Research; Electronic Mail; Participant Satisfaction; *Program Evaluation; Program Improvement; *Student Attitudes; *Telecourses; Two Year Colleges; Two Year College Students; Withdrawal (Education)

ABSTRACT

Florida Community College at Jacksonville (FCCJ) enrolls over 6,300 students annually in college-credit telecourses and computer-based courses. At the midpoint of each term, all students who have withdrawn from a distance education course are surveyed regarding their reasons for withdrawing and their perceptions of possible improvements. In winter 1995, 355 of the 2,220 students enrolled in telecourses withdrew and were surveyed. Responses, received from 18% (n=65), revealed that 68% had not participated in the course after attending an on-campus orientation and that 69% cited personal reasons outside of the college's control for withdrawing. Based on these findings, it was recommended that faculty initiate contact with distance learners earlier in courses and more frequently, and some faculty have investigated the use of electronic bulletin board systems to add an interactive component to telecourses. Surveys are also conducted of students completing distance education courses regarding their perceptions of administrative issues, faculty support services, and course design. In winter 1995, 424 students returned surveys, indicating that only 33% watched courses during scheduled cablecasts, 76% had access to a computer, and a majority were satisfied with faculty support and course organization. These findings suggested that cablecast scheduling was not as crucial as previously thought, since most students taped courses, and that modem-based courses were an option, with a sociology course using the FCCJ bulletin board planned for fall 1996. (BCY)

 * Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
 * from the original document. *

Using Student Feedback to Improve Distance Education

By

Eleanor L. Minich
Florida Community College, Jacksonville

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

E. Minich

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

960 495

USING STUDENT FEEDBACK TO IMPROVE DISTANCE EDUCATION

Eleanor L. Minich
Assistant Instructional Dean, Open Campus
Florida Community College at Jacksonville

SUMMARY

Florida Community College at Jacksonville (FCCJ) enrolls more than 6,300 students annually in college-credit telecourses and on-line courses. As part of its on-going evaluation of distance education, FCCJ solicits student feedback through the use of two student surveys.

At the midpoint of each term, all students who have withdrawn from a distance education course are surveyed to determine why they withdrew and what, if anything, the college could have done to have better supported the student and thus prevented this withdrawal. At the end of each term, all distance education students are surveyed to evaluate the faculty support, administrative and student services provided during the term.

This paper details how the surveys were developed and administered, what data was gathered, and how this information has been used to revise and improve the distance education program at FCCJ.

COLLEGE OVERVIEW

FCCJ is a public, two-year comprehensive community college enrolling over 94,000 students annually in a variety of academic, training and enrichment courses and programs. FCCJ is the 2nd largest community college in the state and the 10th largest in the nation, and is accredited by the Commission of Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools to award the associate degree.

DISTANCE EDUCATION COURSES

Starting in 1980 with two telecourses on educational access cable television, the distance education program now enrolls over 6,300 students annually in over 35 college credit telecourses and modem-based courses. Distance education offerings include courses in American history, accounting, algebra, anthropology, biology, business law, chemistry, economics, computer science, English, French, humanities, literature, management, marketing, sales, statistics, psychology, political science, religion and sociology.

Distance learning has steadily attracted an increasing student audience at FCCJ. The number of college credit students studying via telecourse increased by 60% from 3,976 in the academic year 1989/90 to 6,364 in the academic year 1995/96. FCCJ's Open Campus manages telecourses and modem-based instruction.

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF DISTANCE LEARNERS

Demographic information on distance learners at FCCJ has been available through FCCJ's Office of Research and Institutional Planning. In May 1995, the average telecourse student was white (76%), female (69%), approximately 31 years old, and seeking an associate in arts degree (61%) while employed outside the home (78%). Most telecourse students were enrolling at FCCJ for at least the 4th time (78%) and receiving some form of financial aid (54%)

TYPES OF SURVEYS

The student demographic information mentioned above is gathered through a standard, collegewide, computerized analysis of registration and admissions records. This type of information is gathered on all students at FCCJ. In 1991, Open Campus recognized the need to gather more specific, detailed information on its distance learners in order to allow for continuous program improvement. Since customized student information was not available, Open Campus staff were given the task of designing survey instruments and a survey implementation process.

There are two questions that telecourse faculty and staff wanted answered: Why are students withdrawing from telecourses? How can we improve support services provided to distance learners?

STUDENT WITHDRAWAL SURVEY

Why do telecourses have higher withdrawal rates than class-room based instruction? In order to answer this question, Open Campus designed a Student Withdrawal Survey. This survey is one page, mailed to each student who has withdrawn from a telecourse, and accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped business reply envelope. Students need only circle the appropriate response, add any written comments, and return it to Open Campus. All surveys are anonymous and confidential. This survey has been sent to students who have withdrawn for the past four years. Open Campus is currently offering its first modem-based course this term, and plans to survey all withdrawals from on-line courses in the future.

Students are asked the following 6 questions.

1. Were you active in the telecourse before your withdrawal? Did you attend the on-campus orientation, take any exams, submit any homework, contact the instructor or the FCCJ telecourse office?

2. Why did you withdraw? (Personal reasons? Poor Service from FCCJ or the instructor? Inappropriate pacing? Inconvenient times of testing, viewing, orientation? Other?

3. Are you employed outside the home?

4. Would you enroll in a telecourse again?

5. What is your gender and age?

Since this electronic format makes it difficult to present information in tables and charts, this paper will focus on the student withdrawal survey of Winter Term 1995, the period January-May 1995.

In Winter Term 1995 there were 2220 telecourse enrollments, 16% of which subsequently withdrew. All 355 withdrawals were sent surveys. If one student withdrew from 2 telecourses, that student received one withdrawal survey for each course. This allowed Open Campus to gather the data by course as well as by entire program. In previous terms the withdrawal rate from telecourses was approximately 15-20%.

Of the 355 surveys mailed, 18% (65) were returned with responses. Open Campus recognizes that students who have not completed a course are not the best candidates for completing a survey, but usually has a withdrawal survey return rate of about 16-24%

The majority (68%) of the students responded that they had attended the telecourse on-campus orientation at the start of the term, but had not subsequently taken tests, submitted homework, or contacted faculty or staff for assistance. How was this information used? Open Campus has encouraged faculty to initiate contact earlier and more frequently with telecourse students. This increased faculty contact may encourage students to continue to pursue their studies and maintain their initial level of interest and motivation.

Personal reasons (69%) are the main reason for withdrawal - family responsibilities, change in employment circumstances, business travel, personal or family illness, or other personal commitments. In previous terms, personal reasons

accounted for 59% - 77% of telecourse withdrawals. In Winter Term 1995 an additional 20% of respondents cited poor faculty support and 18% indicated inappropriate pacing.

What does this data tell us? Students withdraw from telecourses for the same reason they initially enrolled - personal reasons. Distance learners are working people with family responsibilities, and telecourses offered the convenience and flexibility necessary for these students to add college classes to an already busy personal schedule. While FCCJ offers non-traditional educational opportunities to working adults through distance learning classes, the college has no control over the personal situation of its students.

However, this survey has identified one area in which FCCJ needs to improve: faculty support of distance learners. In addition to encouraging faculty to contact students earlier and more frequently as mentioned above, some faculty are investigating the use of the FCCJ electronic bulletin board to add an interactive component to their telecourses. Further, the college has plans to implement a voice-mail system for its distance learners that would facilitate contact among faculty, students and staff.

Despite the fact that these respondents have withdrawn from a telecourse, 55% intend to enroll in another telecourse in the future and another 20% would consider telecourse enrollment again. As one student responded, "I enjoyed the convenience of furthering my education and career at the same time."

In summary, the student withdrawal survey has been a useful tool for improvement of telecourse delivery at FCCJ. According to the student feedback, we need to improve faculty contact and support for telecourse students. We also learned that the majority of these students withdrew for reasons beyond the control of the college, and that most of these students will enroll in telecourses again.

This on-line presentation may not be the best format for transmitting a copy of the survey instrument itself. If you would like to receive a hard copy of the Student Withdrawal survey, please email Ellie Minich at the address published at the end of this paper.

END OF TERM SURVEY

How can we improve support services for distance learners? FCCJ utilizes an End of Term Survey to gather student answers to this question. This survey instrument was again designed and implemented by Open Campus staff.

Like the Student Withdrawal Survey, the responses to the End of Term Survey were tabulated manually (a tedious process at best) and entered into a spreadsheet program, Excel. The most recent survey, the responses to which are still being received,

has finally been automated, allowing a computerized analysis of all survey results. But until recently, the manual counting process made it very difficult to apply many common statistical measures.

At the end of the term and after the final grades have been submitted, each student enrolled in a telecourse is sent a survey and a self-addressed business reply envelope. The survey was printed front-to-back on legal size paper. Surveys were coded by course so that information could be gathered by individual telecourse and for the telecourse program as a whole. All surveys were anonymous and confidential. Students were asked to circle their answers directly on the sheet, with additional written comments encouraged.

Since this electronic format makes it difficult to present information in tables and charts, this paper will focus on the student withdrawal survey of Winter Term 1995, the period January-May 1995.

In Winter Term 1995 there were 2220 telecourse enrollments, 424 (19%) of which returned the survey. In previous terms the survey response rate has been approximately 15-20%.

Students were asked three sets of questions about administrative issues, faculty support services, and telecourse design. This on-line presentation may not be the best format for transmitting a copy of the survey instrument itself. If you would like to receive a hard copy of the End of Term survey, please email Ellie Minich at the address published at the end of this paper. The questions asked are outlined below:

FCCJ asked each of the 17 questions in the Administrative Issues section of the survey. The feedback from the Winter 1995 survey and how this feedback was utilized is given below.

99% of respondents had a VCR at home and 100% have television sets. In addition, 41% said they had two or more VCR's and 84% have two or more TV's. This tells us that telecourses - both cablecast and videocassette - will be more convenient than ever for adult students with families. Mom or Dad will be more likely to pursue college classes on TV or VCR if it causes no family disputes about what's on TV.

Only 33% watch during regularly scheduled cablecasts. 64% are videotaping the lessons for more convenient viewing on a VCR, 23% are watching the videocassettes available in the college LRC's, 8% admit never watching the video lessons at all, 3% rented the lessons, and no one watched the videotaped lessons at the Navy base libraries.

This has been very useful information for the Open Campus telecourse office. With a minority watching during the cablecasts, Open Campus no longer struggles

with the cablecast schedule, knowing that most students are taping for later viewing anyway. We know that when requests for damaged or missing tapes come in from the campus LRC's or the Navy base libraries, priority should be given to the campus LRC's since Navy base usage by students is low.

Since demographic data from the college research office tells us that the majority of telecourse students are concurrently registered in classes on campus, the 23% watching lessons in the LRC's is not surprising. These students are making good use of time between on-campus classes.

The honest 8% who admitted never watching the tapes is not surprising. "I never watched the video lessons" was added as one of the answers to this question after students on previous surveys penciled in this answer. We followed their lead, added it as an choice and now consistently receive a small percentage of responses from students who never watched the lessons. Concerned that this indicated a problem with the video component of a particular course, but this is not the case. Open Campus examined these responses closely and discovered that respondents to this question had been enrolled in a variety of telecourses.

No changes were made to the on-campus orientation schedule when 68% said it was conveniently scheduled and only 7% of those who attended said it was not helpful.

When students who live at the Jacksonville beaches suggested that we offer testing at the beach, Open Campus added a Thursday evening testing session at a public high school at the beach. Current responses indicate no problems with the choice of testing times and locations, with 45% testing with their instructors and the remainder choosing to test with a test proctor at one of the other 7 testing locations.

87% responded that they would be interested in checking out telecourse videotapes from the LRCs if this service were available. This question has been asked for the past several years to determine the level of student interest in this additional service. Each year the number of positive responses increases, as has the number of students with VCR's at home. These responses tell us it's time to pursue funding sources to offer this service to our students.

Students were also asked to choose their reasons for enrolling in telecourses, and this survey showed that distance education is not the first choice of all telecourse students. 20% of respondents enrolled as an alternative to full or canceled campus-based classes. This is useful for administrators who may need data to show the value of distance education to the institution as a whole. This survey response shows that distance education provides FCCJ with a mechanism for serving students who might

otherwise have been turned away, and is a complementary component to traditional campus-based instruction.

FCCJ students who study exclusively via telecourses are a minority. Nearly 70% of all telecourse students are concurrently enrolled on campus, discrediting the belief that non-traditional programs are "stealing" students from more traditional programs of study. At FCCJ, distance education and traditional classroom-based programs at FCCJ are sharing students rather than competing for them - another piece of data to support distance education.

It is not surprising that most of FCCJ telecourse students enroll in telecourses for the same reasons traditional students enroll in campus-based courses: degree requirements. Winter 1995 survey results indicate that 68% of telecourse students enrolled to fulfill a degree requirement with another 17% enrolling to complete an elective course for a degree program. Non-traditional community college students are no less practical than other students on campus, and Open Campus uses this information to select new telecourse offerings and design the annual cablecast schedule. It is no accident that 69% of college credit telecourse offerings at FCCJ fulfill general education requirements for the associate in arts degree. the remainder are electives.

With 64% saying they received prompt service from the telecourse office and another 34% saying they never had a reason to contact the office, no changes are planned for this office.

Only 23% of students use the telecourse brochure to find out what telecourses will be offered each term, with most students (64%) using the college credit schedule. As a result of this information, the telecourse office stopped mailing telecourse brochures to students. Instead, brochures are placed in public library branches, and mailed to government agencies and private business. This change has saved the telecourse office both money and time.

Finally, the answers to survey questions about computer access and use prompted FCCJ to begin offering courses on-line. 76% of telecourse students have personal access to a computer. 51% have a modem. Most do not regularly access a commercial on-line service (AOL, Prodigy, Compuserve) or the Internet. But 34% said they regularly accessed electronic bulletin boards, and an additional 40% would be interested if they had bulletin board software and training. With several options available, Open Campus chose to begin modem-based courses using the FCCJ bulletin board with FirstClass software. The sociology course currently being offered has been successful, and several more are planned for the fall term 1996.

The final two sets of survey questions were designed to evaluate faculty services and telecourse design, using the scale "Always, Usually, Sometimes, Seldom, Never." Five questions were asked in each area. "Always" and "Usually" were considered positive responses.

Overall, the student feedback on faculty support was good. 77% of respondents felt faculty were available on the telephone, 83% said faculty provided prompt feedback, 82% thought faculty were open to questions, and 78% stated faculty were helpful and concerned. 74% of respondents would definitely recommend their telecourse instructor to a friend and another 14% might make this recommendation.

Overall feedback on the telecourse program was also good. 84% of respondents thought the telecourse was well organized, and 95% stated the telecourse syllabus was clear and complete. 81% indicated that the text and study guide were well coordinated with the other telecourse components. 76% felt telecourses offered a meaningful learning experience, and 72% would recommend their telecourse to a friend, with an additional 17% stating that they would consider making a recommendation.

CONCLUSION

Student feedback is invaluable in improving or revising a distance education program. If we want to know our students want, we only have to ask. Distance learners are more difficult to reach than on-campus students, but not any less willing than on-campus students to give their opinions. FCCJ will continue to revise and implement its survey instruments to better obtain student feedback.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

Eleanor L. Minich
Assistant Instructional Dean, Open Campus
Florida Community College at Jacksonville
101 West State Street, Room A-1181
Jacksonville, Florida 32202
Phone: 904-633-8359
Fax: 904-633-8435
E-mail: eminich@fccj.cc.fl.us