Study of Graduate Student Perceptions at The University of West Alabama.

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Abstract

With the increase in the number of online graduate programs available and economic considerations, small, rural universities have to be concerned about a possible decline in their on-campus enrollment. This study examines those factors that effect students' decisions to take on-campus classes that can impact recruitment of on-campus students. Participants included both MEd and MSCE students (n = 90). The researcher team-constructed instrument consisted of seven variables associated with graduate student choice. The study found that the financial cost of the program was the only significant variable.

Introduction

Current literature related to why graduate students choose on-campus graduate programs at rural universities versus online course classes is, at best, scarce. During the last decade, graduate admissions officers, recruitment personnel, college administrators and university faculty members have worked to attract more graduate students to their respective rural universities. Online graduate enrollment growth at rural universities has often dramatically outpaced traditional, on-campus enrollments (Beard, Harper & Riley, 2004). For the purposes of this study, 'rural university' is defined as a university that serves a small population, is remotely located in a non-urban area, and functions with limited resources due to deficient economic and social conditions. As a result, a new paradigm has emerged; traditional or on-campus graduate offerings of courses is growing at a lower rate or even declining while on-line offerings are increasing. The Sloan Consortium report (2008) noted a 17 % increase in online enrollment for 2008 for a total of 4.6 million students. Furthermore, Parry (2010) reported:

> Seventy-three percent of institutions report increased demand for existing online courses, compared with 54 percent for face-to-face. Sixty-six percent report increased demand for new online courses. And students are clamoring for distance education at colleges that don't offer it; 45 percent of institutions in that category report growing demand for new online courses and programs (Summary).

Review of the Related Literature

Examination of variables in this research project led to the following areas of investigation: selecting a graduate institution, the role of recruitment in graduate programs, web-based andtraditional instructional choices and learning, and school counseling programs on campus and online.

Selecting a Graduate Institution. Enrolling in online graduate programs can be a positive experience; however, distance education is not the best choice for all students. Some adult learners excel in an online graduate program while others prefer the traditional, on-campus route. Online learning is considerably different from its face-to-face counterpart (Bennett & Lockyer, 2004; Conrad, 2004). In 2008, an increase of 12.9% in students completing at least one online course over the prior year exceeded the increase of 1.2% overall within the higher education population during the same time period (Allen & Seaman, (2008).

professor-student relationships, on campus learning formats versus online learning formats, need for feelings of association with campus life, and the degree of structure needed. The individual seeking a graduate program in counseling should consider the critical academic factors, as well as the critical non-academic factors involved in the selection. According to Lei and Ning-Kuang (2010), a variety of demographic factors influence the selection; these include age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, citizenship, marital status and enrollment status. The decision-making process can provide students with opportunities to locate and pursue their particular field of study, to find the best fit for their strengths and talents, and to determine what their educational needs will be (Poock and Love, 2007). Graduate students must also meet the requirements of the program to which they are seeking enrollment; therefore, they might decide on a program or institution which has certain scores on standardized tests and grade point averages; favorable living/travel expenses; opportunities for peer interactions, and local job opportunities (Lei and Ning-Kuang, 2010).

The Role of Recruitment in Graduate Programs. Quarterman (2008) examined barriers and strategies to recruit and retain a diverse graduate student population. His qualitative investigation included surveys from university administrators. Barriers to recruitment included "the need for planned recruitment and retention programs, the lack of financial resources and an insufficient pool of eligible students" (Quaterman, 2008, p. 2). Strategies for recruitment included "personal contact through visits, the need for recruitment fairs and career days at institutions of higher learning, and availability of financial resources" (Quarterman, 2008, p. 2). Oftentimes, diverse students fail to develop and thrive in an environment that does not provide faculty role models and mentors, adequate financial resources, and access to basic skills subject matter. The diverse students may feel alienated, isolated, and lonely, resulting in their departure from the program; therefore, retention is an aspect of recruitment. The findings of Quarterman's (2008) study indicated that it is important for college/university administrators and professors to recognize the needs of graduate students as dominant in the selection process. Understanding the barriers to recruitment at a rural university and the requirements for retention promotes the potential to increase the enrollment of graduate students in a counseling graduate program.

The university registrar has a crucial role in recruiting and retaining graduate students, particularly those individuals who benefit from inclusion (Rees, 2009). The entire faculty, staff, and administration of a university have a mandate to create a caring environment for all students at all levels. The registrar must promote and recruit diverse students; then, the students must be monitored for progress and to ensure graduation. Furthermore, the registrar must also be aware of the recent changes to recruitment. Many graduate students prefer to receive electronic information about prospective enrollment; sixty-three percent of a sample of 1,000 prospective graduate applicants preferred electronic information prior to and after enrollment (Czurak, 2009). Czurak (2009) noted that knowing what was required in the program was of the highest importance, with the availability of information on finances/funding as the second in importance.

Web-based and Traditional Instructional Choices and Learning. Web-based learning through online courses represents a paradigm shift in adult learning theories to a more constructivist approach (Moore, 2005). The complex phenomenon of web-based learning indicates changes in both work and educational environments in higher education. Traditional methods now compete with a wide range of distance education programs. Because of the rapid growth of technological possibilities, universities are now working with students who are independent of the educational institution. Virtual universities have brought educational opportunities to many students who could not find time to attend the traditional university classes. However, there are many limitations to the distance learning superstore or boutique. The impetus to join the marketplace in distance learning has created situations where courses proliferate with apparent cause and effect on the graduate programs offered in the traditional classrooms. According to Sloan-C Online Survey Report (2003), 81% of all institutions offer one online or blended course, while complete degree programs are found at 34% of all institutions.

Twigg (2001) reported that online courses are usually designed to deliver instruction in the same ways as traditional courses, creating a new set of problems in instructional planning. Online courses should be based on the individualized instruction of students to improve the quality of their learning. The courses should reduce student costs and provide sustainable innovations in approaching the needs of the online learners.

According to Beaudoin (2003), one of the significant areas of change as a result of the availability of online learning opportunities is the need for a change in the leadership practices of stakeholders in the traditional university classes. Situational leadership is no longer sufficient to induce graduate students to attend on campus classes (Beaudoin, 2003).

The debate between online classes and traditional university classes is often an interior dialogue among graduate students seeking to complete a degree. There are a number of personal factors that affect the graduate student's decisions; he or she must decide, for instance, whether he or she needs face time with an instructor in a traditional setting or whether face time is a non-essential. The graduate student must consider his or her family status and job or career status and whether he or she will be distracted while trying to study or be involved in class work. Also, the graduate student must consider whether he or she has the patience and discipline to complete the work within the specific class deadlines. It is easier to become distracted, or to put off online assignments when there is no direct supervision. A final thing to consider is the degree of satisfaction one will derive from taking an online class (McAllister, 2008).

Jennings (2009) also explored the differences between online and traditional classes, recommending that students spend time exploring their learning styles and specific and individual needs in the areas of time, communication/discussion, course materials and the credibility of the professors. When the graduate student considers time for traditional classes, there is a schedule for class attendance that is mandated; online students, on the other hand, have no deadlines on attendance. For a graduate student who needs personal interaction and communication, the online class may not provide enough contact to meet her or his needs. In traditional classes, students receive answers to questions immediately; in online classes, the student must wait until the response to a question is posted in a discussion board. With regard to course materials, many of these are downloaded for online courses as text, audio, or video. Traditional classes often provide many of the same materials; however, there may not be enough discussion about the materials for online students and fewer explanations. The ideal is that both traditional and online courses have credentialed professors who are credible. Legitimacy of professors is a crucial factor in the value of the course to an individual's future. According to Jennings (2009) the expectation is that students will continue to debate the merits of both online and traditional courses in order to make effective personal decisions.

School Counseling Programs on Campus and Online. An example of a carefully designed program came from three universities in western Canada who worked together to create an applied counseling initiative that is delivered by web-based technology (Collins & Jerry, 2005). The structure of the program (The Campus Alberta Applied Psychology: Counseling Initiative (CAAP) was designed to provide "a predominately Web-based alternative for individuals seeking graduate level training in counseling psychology" (p. 100). Unique qualities of the program were the collaborative nature of the undertaking, the first web-based program in the counseling/psychology area in Canada, and the ways that students in the work force could utilize the degree program. The program was developed after a survey revealed 800 individuals were looking for an online program to allow them to continue working and meeting their personal needs. This marked analysis provided the impetus to collaborate "to provide curricula, student services, library and other supports" (p. 101) from locations in four different cities. This collaboration provided a seamless delivery for the necessary services. The diploma (parchment) included the crests of all of the institutions. There are several programs under the CAAP initiative umbrella; however, the focus of this review of literature is on the counseling program. The program from CAAP is described as equivalent to "the on-campus course-based Master of Education in Counseling programs at Alberta universities, with a 12 course (36 credit) requirement, plus a final exit project that is seen as the equivalent of six credits" (p. 101). The timeframe for completion of the program is three years. The program includes practicum hours (260) but it is expected that there will be more hours included to meet Canadian and American requirements. Four courses within the program require students to meet face-to-face in summer institutes for three weeks. The costs of the program are $10,287 US. The student can pay for the program at a fixed rate over the three-year length of the program. Courses costs $1,305 US. Students in the on-campus program can also take CAAP classes if they choose. The program is accredited and the courses are transferable.

One of the most important aspects of the program is the ability to standardize the content of the courses offered. There is also a standardized process for delivery of the instructional material developed from templates created by the lead professors for the courses. Students take courses and have weekly lessons that include discussions by chat room or e-mail, as well as small group activities. Class size is limited to 20 graduate students. After the end of the first two years of the program, students reported higher satisfaction when they were taking only online courses. The CAAP is based on a highly successful on-campus counseling program that produces academic success and satisfaction for the students that are enrolled that the three universities.

Most online programs follow the design of on-campus programs in order to meet the requirements for graduation and certification as a counselor. Reform in the area of counseling has been initiated by the Education Trust's National Center for Transforming School Counseling (NCTSC) and American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model derived from standards put forth by the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). Whether the program is presented online or on-campus the requirements of the standards remains inviolate. Counseling programs that are following the specialty standards will produce graduates who are capable of performing transformed counselor roles. Students in a study who follow the training modules developed by ASCA reported that they perceived an improvement in their preparation to meet the standards in four areas:

      (a) developing school counseling programs that promote access, equity, and achievement for all students;

      (b) working toward systemic change in schools;

      (c) using teaming and collaboration to promote access and equity and improve student achievement; and

      (d) using data to design programs and create change for typically underrepresented groups. (Wilkerson & Eschbach, 2010, p. 7)

This implies that any and all counselor programs should incorporate these areas into their course work. Through efforts to articulate the role of the school counselor, organizations have developed stronger standards to insure that professionals have the skills they need to perform their functions effectively. Regardless of the choice by graduate students to take courses online or on campus; the outcome should be improved counseling for students.

With the rising enrollment in online programs, the question remains why some students continue to prefer the traditional on-campus route. The absence of current studies related to rural universities raises the question: On what evidential bases are rural universities creating their marketing plans for recruiting graduate students to their respective on-campus programs? Clearly, more research is needed related to the current factors associated with attracting graduate students to the graduate programs at rural universities. The question of the decade for many rural universities appears to be "What can we do to preserve and/or grow our on-campus graduate enrollments?"

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was two-fold: a) to expand the body of current literature related to on-campus graduate student recruitment at rural universities, and b) to help identify those recruitment factors which might be used to effectively recruit more graduate students to complete coursework on-campus at a rural university. The researchers entered into this study with the desire to create a dialog about the future of on-campus graduate recruitment based more on research-based evidence and less on traditionally speculative approaches.

Methodology

The researchers in this study chose to examine seven variables related to graduate student perception and influence toward taking traditionally-taught, on-campus classes at a rural university. A faculty research team created a survey instrument to assess student perception variables identified as being linked to graduate student

enrollment in on-campus classes. The survey was administered to 45 Masters in Education in School Counseling graduate students (M.Ed.) and 45 Masters in Continuing Education in Counseling (M.S.C.E). graduate students at a small rural university. Traditionally, M.Ed. students at the rural university take more classes on-campus versus their M.S.C.E. counterparts who tend to take more of their classes online. Results from the two groups were compared across the following seven graduate student perception variables: a) costs associated with taking the course, b) academic rigor, c) general learning atmosphere, d) professor-student relationship, e) on-campus offering format, f) feelings of association with campus life, and g) the need for structure.

Results of the Study

Researchers conducted both a t-test for independent means statistical procedure for each variable. Table one shows the statistical analysis of the t-test for independent means with the Levene's Test for Equality of Variances.

Table One
Statistical analysis: t-test for independent means of variables

Variable	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
	F	Sig	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
VAR00001 Cost	2.057	.155	2.031	91	.045*
VAR00002 Rigor	.044	.834	.746	91	.458
VAR00003 Atmosphere	.001	.980	-.175	91	.682
VAR00004 Prof-Stu	.801	.373	.188	91	.851
VAR00005 On-camp Lrn	1.940	.167	1.751	91	.083
VAR00006 Assoc Camp	.647	.423	.910	91	.365
VAR00007 Structure	.677	.413	1.072	91	.267

*Significant at p < .05

Findings revealed non-significant Levene Tests results for all seven variables assessed; therefore, researchers accepted findings of the respective t-tests for each variable in the interpretation of their results. For the variable "costs associated with taking the course," the data revealed a significant finding (p=.045) at the .05 level for the 2-tailed t-test. Data analyses of the variable "academic rigor" resulted in a non-significant finding (p=.458) at the .05 level. For the variable "general learning atmosphere," the data revealed a non-significant finding (p=.862) at the .05 level. Examination of the variable "professor-student relationship" revealed a non-significant finding (p=.851) at the .05 level. For the variable "on-campus offering format," the data revealed a non-significant finding (p=.083) at the .05 level. Data analyses of the variable "feelings of association with campus life" resulted in a non-significant finding (p=.365) at the .05 level. For the variable "the need for structure," the data revealed a non-significant finding (p=.287) at the .05 level.

Summary and Implications

The results of this study suggest that, with the exception of costs, the other variables examined by the researchers did not appear to significantly influence student perceptions about taking on-campus graduate classes. The findings match the research by Lei and Ning-Kuang (2010) which included favorable living/travel expenses. This also agreed with the research of Collins and Jerry, 2005; McAllister, 2008; Quaterman, 2009; and Twigg, 200l, who reported that cost was associated with the selection of an online or on-campus program. Rural universities seeking to improve their on-campus graduate enrollments should pay attention to

the entire student financial costs associated with taking an on-campus class (tuition, books, fees, etc). These schools should also collect more information about their on-campus graduate students (i.e. average distance travelled to class, how much tuition they can afford, etc.) and ensure that adequate on-campus support systems are in place to encourage students who choose to make the commute. The body of literature and evidential research should be expanded to help rural universities in their quest to retain, grow and make informed recruiting decisions in the best interest of their on-campus graduate programs.

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Live

APPENDIX

ON CAMPUS SURVEY

In the identification section, circle the number by the response corresponding to the letter of each item that best identifies your response.

1. What is your gender?
   a) Female   b) Male

2. What degree are you pursuing?
   a) M.Ed.   b) MSCE   c) MAT certification   d) MAT (non-certification)

Read each statement and select the number that represents most closely the degree of influence the item had in your decision to earn your degree online.

1. Strongly influenced   4. Had no influence
2. Influenced   5. Strongly had no influence
3. Neither influenced or not influenced

I chose to take my courses at the University of West Alabama on campus because:

1. The cost of on campus courses is cheaper than courses online.   1 2 3 4 5

2. Courses offered on campus are easier than courses online.   1 2 3 4 5

3. I enjoy the classroom atmosphere (discussion, group work).   1 2 3 4 5

4. I like the professional relationship I can have with my professor.   1 2 3   4 5

5. I like the format of the class better than online.   1 2 3 4 5

6. I feel more a part of the campus life   1 2 3 4 5

7. I would have difficulty structuring my time in an online class   1 2 3 4 5