



Trends in e-learning:

Tracking the Impact of e-learning in Higher Education

2006 Distance Education Survey Results
Instructional Technology Council
April 2007

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2006 Distance Education Survey Results

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April 2007

Acknowledgements:

We wish to express our appreciation to the institutions which participated in the survey, the Instructional Technology Council (ITC) membership, and the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) membership.

Special appreciation to:

- The ITC Board of Directors, for their support of the project
- The ITC Survey Committee members, for their efforts to identify topic areas and specific questions for the annual survey.
- Travis Souza, e-learning Coordinator, TMCC, for his work in creating the online survey instrument and tabulating the results
- Brandy Colby, e-learning Assistant, TMCC, for her work in distributing the survey and monitoring responses
- Christine Mullins, ITC Executive Director, for her coordination and assistance with conducting the survey

About the ITC

The Instructional Technology Council (ITC) is an affiliated council of the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC). Based in Washington, DC, the ITC was founded in 1977 as an outcome of the special Taskforce for the Uses of Mass Media for Learning. As instructional technology mediums have evolved, so too has the ITC which has provided national leadership for more than thirty years on an array of distance learning/e-learning issues. Currently, with a membership of nearly 500 colleges and universities, the ITC continues to grow along with higher education interest in electronically-mediated instruction. For more information about the ITC, visit the web site: www.itcnetwork.org

Introduction

The Instructional Technology Council (ITC) established the annual distance education survey in response to the growing need for national data related to program creation and development as well as for key issues related to faculty and students. Certainly, like other practitioners in the e-learning field, the ITC is aware of the useful data from the US Department of Education as well as the annual report by Sloan-C: *Making the Grade: Online Education in the United States*. Though useful, the data generated by each study was necessarily broad in nature; the direct correlation between the national data and a specific e-learning program and a particular institution has always been unclear.

The ITC set out to develop a new survey instrument that would longitudinally track data and trends nationally, but would also generate more specific data regarding real and relevant problems facing emerging as well as established e-learning programs.

The ITC Board of Directors, in the fall of 2004, authorized formation of a special ad hoc committee to develop a set of relevant questions and to devise an instrument and a strategy for conducting an annual national e-learning survey. It was also decided that the survey should be manageable; the number of questions asked would be capped so as to permit a respondent to complete the survey within a reasonable time frame.

The first survey was conducted in the spring of 2005 and served as a beta-test for the questions and the process. In reviewing the inaugural results, it became apparent that a few of the questions were creating angst for respondents since institutions do not necessarily gather or report information in the same way. Adjustments were made, and a new set of questions were submitted to the ITC membership in the fall of 2005. This also established "fall" as the annual survey window. The ITC membership was the target audience for the first two survey cycles; for the 2006 survey cycle, the membership of the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) was

added. The question set is now standardized, as is the annual schedule for the survey.

How the Survey was Conducted

The survey questions have been developed and reviewed by e-learning practitioners to ensure that the data/information generated is of value to e-learning administrators. Survey questions are divided into three major categories - Administrative, Faculty and Students – with a set of relevant questions for each.

The survey was delivered electronically via email to the designated institution representative identified in the ITC membership – initially more than 400 institutions – and to the president of the institution for the AACC membership – more than 1,000 institutions. Duplicates between the two lists were eliminated.

An open-source solution – PHP Surveyor – was used as the platform for the survey. Three hundred twenty institutions completed the 2006 survey. Statistically, the respondents represented an appropriate cross-section based on 1) the number of responding institutions, 2) the regional distribution of responding institutions, and 3) the type of responding institution (based on the Carnegie categories).

Preliminary survey results were tabulated and shared with the ITC Board of Directors as well as with the members of the AACC Commission on Academic, Student and Community Development and the Commission on Research, Technology and Emerging Trends during scheduled meetings in Washington, DC in November 2006.

Final results were presented during the annual meeting of the Instructional Technology Council (ITC), during its annual conference which in February of 2007, was held in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

The ITC has also utilized its scheduled Affiliated Council session at the annual AACC conference to report the results of the survey; for the first time in Long Beach, California (April 2006) and currently scheduled for presentation in Tampa, Florida (April 2007).

Results will also be electronically distributed to all ITC and AACC member institutions.

The Data

There were 320 completed surveys returned out of the initial distribution of slightly more than 1,000. This produced a response rate of approximately 32%. As previously indicated, the completed surveys were reviewed to ensure a representative sample of AACC/ITC member institutions participated and included confirming an acceptable response rate (320/1,000) with an acceptable distribution based on size and location.

The survey questions – and results – are sorted into four primary categories: General Information, Administrative, Faculty, and Students.

Please Note: The individual completing the survey for each institution was normally the Distance Education administrator; consequently, the viewpoint being measured is that of the typical Distance Education administrator responding on behalf of his/her institution.

GENERAL INFORMATION

This category is intended to establish the overall context for Distance Education at respondent campuses.

Institutions Surveyed a total of 97.5% of respondents identified themselves as Associate's Colleges (94%) or Associate's Dominant Colleges (3.5%). Of the 320 respondents, eighteen self-identified as being Baccalaureate institutions.

DE Enrollment Growth Respondents were asked to report comparative enrollment trends in Distance Education for Fall 2004 to Fall 2005 (assumed to be the most recent year of data available). Campuses reported a 15% increase from fall-to-fall for Distance Education enrollments, substantially ahead of overall campus enrollments which averaged 2% nationally.

Direct Report Line Sixty-four percent of respondents indicated that their campus Distance Education program reported to the VPAA or an academic dean. This reflected an increase over the previous year (58% in 2005).

Non-credit Offerings Sixty-one percent of campuses reported they offer noncredit Distance Education classes – normally as a component of either Community Education or Business Outreach divisions.

ADMINISTRATIVE

A comment from the 2006 ITC DE Survey: The largest challenge we have faced with our distance learning program is acceptance and willingness to adapt by administration. Offering a course through distance learning methods in turn means that administration has to adapt their faculty schedules and accept that many "traditional" students would prefer to enroll in a distance learning course. This has been a very difficult concept to sell at the departmental level.

This category addresses the key issue areas confronting Distance Education administrators.

Challenges Respondents were asked to rank a set of challenges facing their Distance Education program. This question has been asked each of the three years the survey has been conducted (the first two years, the survey was distributed exclusively to ITC member institutions; for the current year of the survey, the distribution was expanded to include AACC member institutions). Results are provided in the chart below:

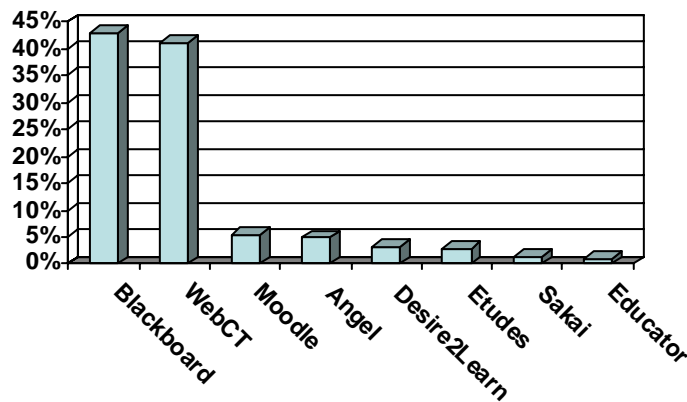
Chart 1: Greatest Challenges For Administrators of DE Programs

Range for responses 1 = greatest challenge 8 = least challenging

Challenge	Rank 2006	Rank 2005	Rank 2004
Support staff needed for training & technical assistance	1	1	1
Operating & equipment budgets	2	2	3
Adequate student services for DE students	3	5	2
Adequate administrative authority	4	4	5
Faculty acceptance	5	3	4
Adequate space for training & technical assistance	6	7	7
Organizational acceptance	7	6	6
Student acceptance	8	8	8

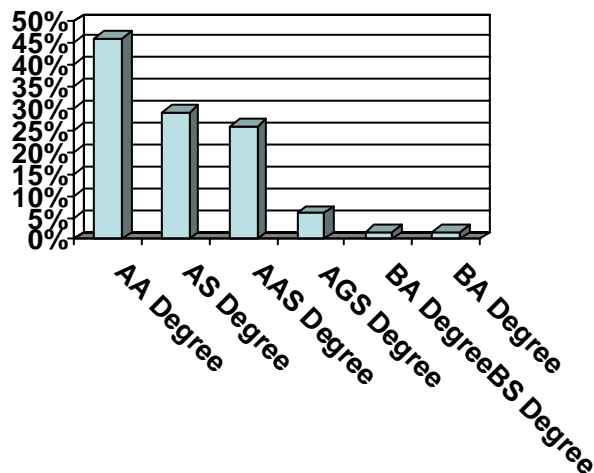
LMS Usage Eighty-four percent of respondents indicated they use Blackboard/ WebCT as their Learning Management System (LMS) platform for web-based instruction (43% = Blackboard, 41% = WebCT – down from 49% last year). Thirty-one percent of respondents indicated they were considering switching LMS platforms in the next few years. Seventy-four percent indicated that they restrict the number of LMS platforms the campus will support. LMS Usage is reported in Table 1.

Table 1: LMS Usage



Online Degrees Respondents were asked if their institution offers online degrees as part of their Distance Education program. An online degree, for purposes of the survey, was defined as “at least 70% of coursework need to complete the degree is available online.” Sixty-three percent of respondents indicated that they offer one or more degrees online. Table 2 offers a breakdown by degree type:

Table 2: Online Degrees Offered by Degree Type



Course Evaluation Respondents were asked to identify the types of evaluation they use for Distance Education classes:

- 83% of institutions in the survey use student evaluations
- 64% use some type of administrative review
- 51% use peer evaluation and
- 50% utilize campus standards/best practices.

Course Enrollment Caps Institutions were asked two questions regarding online enrollments. Eighty-six percent of respondents indicated that they utilize caps for online class enrollments. They were then asked to indicate the typical enrollment cap by class type:

- 26 students for an Introductory Math class
- 24 students for an Introductory English composition class
- 29 students for an Introductory Political Science class

Class Hosting Institutions were asked how they host (e.g. servers) their online classes. Based on responses:

- 54% own and maintain their own servers
- 28% outsource their server needs to a 3rd party (e.g., LMS provider, publisher, out-sourced IT provider)
- 17% share servers with others (e.g., system, district, consortium)

Most Difficult Classes The growth in Distance Education programs has met with some resistance by individual faculty/departments. The survey asked respondents to identify classes which have been difficult to offer because of faculty resistance and/or pedagogical challenges. Classes listed included:

- Lab-based science classes
- Speech classes
- Clinical requirements
- Fine Arts classes
- Nursing classes
- Math classes
- Industrial technology classes
- Foreign language classes
- Computer hardware classes

A comment from the 2006 ITC Survey: After having been a very active college and having full degrees online since 1998, we find that the technology, costs and competition in the field of Distance Education are making it more and more difficult to keep up with the growth and compete with the large "For Profit's" each year.

Services and Technology Support Regional accrediting agencies require “equivalency” in student services and support for Distance Education students. With growing numbers of online students, campuses also are recognizing the need to introduce or expand additional services and support. The status of student services and related technology support is provided in Chart 2:

Chart 2: Status Report on Student Services and Technology Support

Service/Technology	Currently offer	Plan to offer within 1-2 years
Audio/Video Streaming	55%	19%
Campus testing center for DE students	69%	30%
Dedicated web site for DE program & students	76%	24%
DE-specific faculty training	92%	8%
HelpDesk and technical support for DE faculty	90%	10%
HelpDesk and technical support for DE students	88%	12%
Online admission to institution	77%	14%
Online counseling/advising services	43%	35%
Online information/application for financial aid	82%	18%
Online library services & resources	96%	1%
Online payment of tuition & fees	78%	21%
Online plagiarism evaluation	48%	52%
Online registration for classes	87%	13%
Online student course evaluation	79%	20%
Online student organization, web site & services	49%	50%
Online student orientation for DE classes	66%	33%
Online textbook sales	66%	33%
Online tutoring assistance	42%	57%
Campus web portal	52%	48%

DE Fees Forty percent of institutions reported they currently charge an additional per credit fee for Distance Education classes. The overall average of fees assessed was \$26 with \$15 being the most common.

A comment from the 2006 ITC DE Survey: Our biggest challenge is that DE does not have a consistent, stable and integrated funding mechanism. Additionally, DE has not been woven into the mission of the institution as a whole. This is in large measure due to the fact that interest bubbled-up from the faculty level while administrative support has been inconsistent.

FACULTY

The survey asked a series of questions about faculty involved in Distance Education instruction.

Challenges Administrators were asked to identify the greatest challenges as relates to faculty. Overall rankings are included in Chart 3:

Chart 3: Greatest Challenges For Faculty Teaching DE Classes

Range for responses 1 = greatest challenge - 7 = least challenging

Challenge	Rank 2006	Rank 2005	Rank 2004
Workload issues	1	1	1
Training	2	3	4
Compensation	3	5	2
Buy-in to electronically-delivered instruction	4	4	3
Technical support	5	6	5
Recruitment	6	2	6
Intellectual property/ownership issues	7	7	7

Faculty Training Administrators were asked two questions about faculty training. The first concerned whether or not training for DE faculty was mandatory. Sixty-seven percent of those responding indicated it was (up from 57% a year before). If they responded "Yes", they were then asked to identify how many hours of training were required:

- 33% require more than eight hours of training
- 18% require less than eight hours of training
- 8% require exactly eight hours of training

A comment from the 2006 ITC DE Survey: Staffing- we don't have enough office staff in our department to meet the demand for courses. We also need an Instructional Design Team to work with the faculty as we grow

Testing Issues related to testing have surfaced on many campuses. The core issue normally is to what extent proctored testing should be required. Respondents indicated that there is indeed significant flexibility:

- 90% allow both on-campus and online testing (blended)
- 52% allow exclusively online testing (non-proctored)
- 34% allow testing to be exclusively on campus (proctored)

Full-time/Part-time Institutions report that 67% of DE classes are taught by full-time faculty, while 33% are taught by part-time faculty.

Faculty Location Given the virtual nature of the online classroom, campuses are beginning to explore the possibility of faculty being located somewhere other than on campus. Sixty-seven percent of campuses report that they do not permit full-time faculty to be located off-campus in another city/state. But 32% report that they do allow full-time faculty to be located in another city/state. As concerns the current location of DE faculty, Respondents to the ITC survey reported:

- 83% have DE faculty on-campus only
- 10% have faculty located in other cities in the state
- 3% have faculty located in other state
- 1% have faculty located in other countries

Limiting the # of Classes Taught Another issue on many campuses concerns limiting the number of DE classes a full-time faculty member can teach each semester. Thirty-one percent report that they do limit the number of DE classes that can be taught; the most typical limit is normally .47 of a full teaching load. Sixty-nine percent indicate that they do not limit the number of DE classes as part of a full-time teaching load.

A comment from the 2006 ITC DE Survey: The main problem with first time online education students is their difficulty with transitioning the mindset of the student responsibility and understanding of the challenge and time involved of online course assignments. Most procrastinate because they do not budget their time and think online courses are easier and won't take as much time.

STUDENTS

Administrators were next asked to answer questions concerning students enrolled in Distance Education classes.

Challenges Administrators were asked to rank the major challenges for the DE program as relates to students.

Chart 4: Greatest Challenges For Students Enrolled in DE Classes

Range for responses 1 = greatest challenge - 8 = least challenging

Challenge	Rank 2006	Rank 2005	Rank 2004
Orientation/preparation for taking DE classes	1	1	1
Assessing student learning and performance in DE classes	2	2	2
Computer problems/technical support	3	6	3
Providing equivalent student services virtually	4	3	4
Low student completion rate	5	4	6
Completion of student evaluations	6	5	5
Cheating	7	-	7
Recruitment/interest in DE by students	8	8	8

Retention Administrators were asked to provide comparative data regarding retention rates for DE classes v. traditional classes. The results:

- Retention rate for DE classes (average): 72%
- Retention rate for traditional classes (average): 78%

Traditional/Non-traditional Students As concerns the students taking DE classes, the percentage that are:

- Traditional (18-25) = 48%
- Nontraditional (26+) = 52%

Gender The gender breakdown for student enrollments for DE classes is:

- 60% Female
- 40% Male

Student Demand Finally, DE administrators were asked to report their success in meeting anticipated student demand for DE classes:

- 70% reported that demand is currently exceeding DE class offerings
- 30% reported that demand is currently being met

Observations and Trends

As has been previously discussed, the ITC Survey is now in its third year. Certainly, participation in the completion of the survey was limited to ITC member institutions during its first two years, but those completing the survey seem to synchronize with the results of this year's survey. We have selectively included some of the longitudinal data from the first two years so as to establish benchmarks for current and future survey results.

Based on the 2006 ITC Survey results, we offer the following as major observations concerning significance and trends in Distance Education:

- #1 Demand for DE classes by students in especially 2-year institutions continues to grow. The rate of growth for DE (a 15% increase for 2004-2005) far outpaces the growth rate for traditional enrollments. Seventy percent of DE administrator respondents also report that student demand exceeds current class offerings.
- #2 Student retention (completion) for DE classes is much improved over national data reported just five years ago. Comparative retention data documents a six percent gap (72% for DE/78% for traditional classes). Data of just five years ago reported a national DE retention rate of around 50% - or less.
- #3 Virtual student services and technology support services are rapidly expanding as campuses move to meet accreditation expectations of "equivalency". Many campuses have already completed this transformation.
- #4 The recent merger of Blackboard-WebCt has apparently prompted a growing number of campuses to review current Learning Management System (LMS) commitments. Thirty-one percent of campuses surveyed indicated they were considering switching from their current LMS. Data also measured an 8% drop for campuses using WebCT from the previous year (49% for 2005 v. 41% for 2006)
- #5 Administrators have consistently identified "support staff needed for training and technical assistance" as their greatest challenge confronting their DE program.
- #6 Administrators have consistently identified "workload" issues as their greatest challenge related to faculty.
- #7 Administrators have consistently identified "orientation/preparation for taking DE classes" as their greatest challenge related to students.

- #8 Conversely, DE administrators have apparent buy-in from both faculty and students. In all "Greatest Challenges" categories for administrators, faculty, and students, issues of "student acceptance", "recruitment", and "recruitment/interest in DE" have ranked consistently lowest amongst those listed.

Comment from the 2006 ITC DE Survey: Our challenges are being able to meet the needs of increasing numbers of online students and faculty, as well as increasing numbers of students and faculty in face-to-face web-enhanced courses, with current Distance Learning resources and personnel.

Trends

Based on the data of the first three years of this survey, certain trends may be emerging. DE programs are now well-established at most 2-year institutions and have become accepted into the existing administrative structure. "Institutionalization" can be a two-edged sword; after all, DE programs have often served as "change agents" and as "transformational leaders" within administrations. DE programs have grown rapidly, historically are cross-divisional/doing-it-different types of programs, are recognized for greater efficiency by doing more-with-less, and have generated dialog and introspection especially in academic departments.

Becoming more mainstream therefore carries the risk of potentially diminishing the ability to effect administrative change. On the other hand, being accepted into the administrative structure, can, over time, improve chances for increased budgets, staffing, space and priority.

Key trends to monitor include:

- DE may now represent the only real growth in enrollments for most institutions
- DE, with its technology base, will be increasingly attractive to millennial students
- DE will continue to be the change agent for campuses, allowing for the updating as well as improved levels of related services for students and faculty
- The answer to the question, "where do we put DE administratively?" may have been answered. Trends indicate an accelerated movement of DE programs away from IT operations and to the academic side of the institution (VPAA or academic dean).
- The quality of DE instruction is trending towards continuous improvement as more institutional resources are redirected to DE. Programs are focusing on quality, consistency, assessment and retention to address latent concerns. Survey data reported two years

ago indicated that an overwhelming majority of campus administrators already felt that the quality of an online class was equivalent to that of its traditional counterpart. That same majority anticipated that within three years, the quality of an online class would exceed that of a traditional class (The Chronicle of Higher Education – March 2005).

Conclusion

The results of this survey are intended, first and foremost, to be of value to Distance Education practitioners. The DE landscape is changing rapidly, and the need for relevant data and information has never been more important. This is new ground for most college administrators. They are being asked to support new staffing, space and budget requests – often with a fixed or shrinking budget. College administrators want to make sure they are making the right decisions that will benefit their students, faculty, staff and greater community.

To that end, the Instructional Technology Council (ITC) committed to developing a survey that tracks pertinent data and to be able to answer the critical question, “how does my institution compare to other institutions nationally?” It is our hope that this survey report will help answer that question.

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