



Arizona Regents University Distance Learning Assessment Final Report (March 2004)

Social Research Laboratory

Survey Research Laboratory



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PROJECT GOALS

The Arizona Regents University (ARU) commissioned Arizona State University's Survey Research Laboratory and Northern Arizona University's Social Research Laboratory to examine the viability of potential markets for distance education programs in Arizona.

This research study was broken down into three components. The first research component involved students currently enrolled in distance education courses now offered by Northern Arizona University, Arizona State University, and the University of Arizona. ARU wanted to acquire insight into the student experience registering for courses, interacting with distance education technology, participating in distance classes, and overall satisfaction with distance education compared with taking courses in a traditional classroom environment.

The second research component involved an assessment of the size of potential markets for distance learning programming in Arizona. After profiling the Arizona economy, four economic sectors were selected as possessing great potential for distance education programs. Research would focus on the growth potential of these sectors, current and future demand for on-going education programs, access to technology for taking distance education courses, employer interest in distance education, and the experiences of employees who have previously taken distance education courses. The four economic sectors selected for additional inquiry were the financial sector, technology/business, government, and health care.

The third component involved a needs assessment for Arizona educators interested in pursuing additional university course-work following employment in an Arizona school district. Teachers from throughout the state were queried as to their interest in pursuing additional coursework using distance-learning technology, their experiences taking distance-learning courses, and the reasons why teachers choose to return to school once employed in a teaching post.

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

Component 1: Distance-Learning Students

The Social Research Laboratory of Northern Arizona University (NAU SRL) and the Survey Research Laboratory of Arizona State University (ASU SRL) conducted a set of focus groups with students using distance learning courses in their program of study. The central purpose of the student focus groups was to gain valuable feedback from current distance learning participants (especially ARU enrollees) and to assess participants' opinions, criticisms, and suggestions concerning their experience with distance learning and ARU. Specifically, the focus group gathered information from participants in the following areas: (1) familiarity with ARU and its mission; (2) experience with distance learning; (3) opinions about the enrollment and administrative process for distance learning courses; and, (4) opinions about how to best make students aware of the distance learning opportunities provided by ARU.

Two focus groups were held. One focus group was facilitated by NAU SRL on April 29, 2003 in Tucson at the Marriott–University Park hotel near the campus of the University of Arizona with seven participants representative of the target audience. The second focus group was facilitated by ASU SRL on April 30, 2003 in Tempe at the ASU University Club with eleven participants.

Component 2: Economic Sector Research

The Social Research Laboratory of Northern Arizona University (NAU SRL) and the Survey Research Laboratory of Arizona State University (ASU SRL) conducted a series of in-depth interviews with various types of employers in Arizona to assess their training and education needs. Specifically, the research focuses on understanding current training and educational practices, as well as the future training and education needs. The goal was to better understand potential markets for distance learning programming in Arizona, as well as to identify possible types of funding for such programming.

NAU SRL and ASU SRL conducted in-depth interviews with Arizona employers from the following areas: (1) Technology/Business; (2) Financial; (3) Healthcare; and, (4) Government. Interviews were arranged with individuals who have the most involvement and familiarity with the training and educational needs of their organization's employees. Most frequently, interviewees were located in their organization's Human Resources division, but occasionally they were located within upper management. In an effort to canvass the entire state, Arizona was stratified into three regions; Northern Arizona (greater Flagstaff area), Central Arizona (greater Phoenix area) and Southern Arizona (greater Tucson area). Employers from the four interest areas were contacted in each of the three region and the research teams utilized individual, in-depth interviews to gather data.

In-depth interviews offer researchers an opportunity to obtain detailed information on specific topics. The interview atmosphere enables researchers to probe the complexity of participants' thought processes and elicit great depth and detail about a particular subject. The research team created and employed a standardized interview protocol which ensured that all topics of interest were explored, but allowed the facilitator to tailor the interview to the specifics of each employer. Thirty-five in-depth interviews were conducted for this study. NAU SRL conducted 34 interviews and ASU SRL conducted one interview.

Component 3: Educator Research

The purpose of this third phase of the research was to determine what needs Arizona teachers have that can be met through distance education, their familiarity with and previous use of distance education, and their perception of specific curricular areas that would be most attractive to be delivered in this format. For this phase of the study, four focus groups with teachers were held in Tempe, Tucson, Prescott, and Sierra Vista. All four groups were conducted by ASU SRL between December 1, 2003 and January 7, 2004. The focus group format allowed researchers to speak with teachers who had the option of attending "brick and mortar" classes as well as the more geographically isolated for whom this would be a hardship.

PROJECT FINDINGS

Component 1: Distance-Learning Students

Although focus group participants showed varying levels of familiarity with Arizona Regents University, they shared the belief that distance learning plays an important role in their ability to complete their education. The flexibility to take classes from any of the state's universities assists them in meeting their course requirements; although, participants expressed concern about the inconsistent quality of courses, instructors, and/or inadequate course material. There was also a level of confusion about inter-university administrative processes, especially for the first-time student. The multiple systems required by different universities was identified as an issue that impacts the students' experience and ability to interface with the course. These systems include e-mail, course software, and administration websites.

The following is a summary of participants' suggestions for improving the image, usability, and distance learning course experience.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING THE EXPOSURE OF ARIZONA REGENTS UNIVERSITY

- Advertising the Arizona Regents University opportunities using traditional media such as radio or TV
- Asking advisors and professors to provide information to students
- Creating a more obvious link to Arizona Regents University in university catalogues and websites
- Continue expanding the corporate workforce relationship

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING THE DISTANCE LEARNING COURSE EXPERIENCE

- Increasing instructor training and quality
- Reviewing and monitoring courses and instructors
- Offering more classes, especially in the summer
- More instruction from faculty in how the system works
- Creating a one-system e-mail account University wide
- Devising procedures to better incorporate group activities into distance learning
- Establishing standard dates, both before and after the official class period, when online class material is available
- Retaining live help desk personnel

SUGGESTIONS FOR MAKING CROSS-UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATION EASIER TO NAVIGATE

- Streamlining the tuition process to reduce errors
- Building an interface that facilitates the movement of transcript information between universities in a timely manner
- Standardize course development, management and requirements across faculty, departments and universities

Component 2: Economic Sector Research

A broad cross-section of Arizona employers was contacted and interviewed for this study. While many of the training and education needs of different industries are unique, there are many areas of overlap that can be identified. The following provides a summary of ways that the universities can better meet the education and training needs of Arizona employers using distance-based learning.

SUGGESTIONS FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION AND COURSE DEVELOPMENT

- Meet with employment development and management teams of larger employers to specifically understand and address their training and educational needs. Several employers valued the outreach provided by community colleges in their area and the initiative taken to create programs designed to meet their needs. Personal relationship between the management teams of industries and universities are needed to develop future partnerships.
- Develop shorter, job-specific courses. While most employers support and reimburse employees for semester-long courses, employees are much more interested in four, six and eight-week courses that are more specifically focused.
- Create application-based courses. Employers and employees are more interested in practical application rather than theoretical or general information. The information provided should be able to be readily applied. Several employers would like to see “point-in-time” and “just-in-time” courses that quickly translate research and advances in different areas into applications in various fields.
- Many agencies, businesses and industries have very high security in their computer systems and networks. These firewalls make it difficult for employees to take distance-based courses at their work computers. Employers encourage the universities to set up kiosks or other technical solutions to enable secure connections that maintain security.
- Courses requested across the various areas include: project management, business management, financial management, accounting, sales, information technology, writing, data analysis, customer service and specialized training (e.g., health care workers).
- Develop certificates that count towards university credit. This approach is being used by two larger employers in Arizona in conjunction with different community colleges. Training, workshops and courses that have been approved receive university credit towards a degree.
- Provide mixed-mode courses. Create courses that are primarily on-line, distance-based but have an initial meeting that is in person and creates a collaborative, group environment.
- Advertise more. Many human resource managers and training developers do not feel knowledgeable about all the courses and options offered by the state universities.
- Don't wait for a critical mass. Most programs are developed with small numbers of employees and then become implemented. Partnerships with Rio Salado Community College, Maricopa Community College and others began with a small number of students but continue to grow today.

- Maintain constant contact with Arizona employers. Markets change quickly and courses and programs need to be created to match those changes. Staying in touch with Arizona employers, businesses and industries will help ARU “stay ahead of the curve” and anticipate upcoming trends and changes.

SUGGESTIONS FOR DISTANCE LEARNING ADMINISTRATION AND STRATEGIES

- Keep the cost down. Several companies would be interested if costs were within a specific range. While this range varies, many use university courses as a standard of cost. Those businesses and industries that are able to commit large dollar amounts to employee education and development are more likely to be willing to do a “cost-share” with universities in developing courses that would benefit their employees. However, a major challenge is having and sustaining a critical mass of employees at any one time for any one course.
- Target younger employees. Many employers note that younger employees are more likely to embrace and utilize on-line, distance-based learning options.
- Create courses that have a standard of quality. Some employers have received mixed reviews from employees who have taken university distance-based courses. Some courses were rated high in quality while others were criticized as minimal and inadequate.
- Smooth out the process. Several employees have been interested in taking distance-based university courses but ran into “red tape” in trying to enroll in these classes and also in transferring credits and completing degree requirements.
- Promote “latest advances” in distance-based courses. Many distance-based courses have material that is dated. Timing from discovery to distribution should be minimal.
- Use more creativity in integrating work-based experience with university courses. Some companies suggest providing credit for work experience in conjunction with distance-based university courses.
- Several companies have suggested that universities create “cutting-edge” skill courses that may not have high numbers initially but could be marketed to a larger, national audience. These courses could be credit or certificate-oriented. Suggested areas include customer service, reservation service, and data entry types of skills.
- Develop mixed-mode using telemedicine and tele-therapy. Many healthcare and mental healthcare providers are interested in distance-based learning that integrates video and visual learning.

Component 3: Educator Research

There was wide-spread knowledge about and exposure to distance learning in these groups of Arizona teachers. Their computing abilities ranged from skilled to novice, but all had the necessary level of ability to participate in distance learning. Most of them had internet access from home, and a large majority could also use school computers (with their higher-speed lines) after hours, weekends, and summers, although there were concerns about building ventilation, etc.

Almost all of these teachers paid for their courses out of their own funds. Some had grants of one sort or another, but there was very little unified effort by school districts to reimburse for these courses. Given the state of Arizona's school funding that is perhaps understandable, but it will be a barrier to be overcome in increasing their participation.

There were the usual mixed reactions to distance learning. It is appropriate for some subjects (and perhaps some learners) more than others, but all participants saw the utility of distance learning for at least some types of courses.

There was great concern about the NCLB act and the requirements needed to stay certified as a "highly qualified" teacher. Much of the discussion about what courses would be desirable to be delivered via distance education focused on meeting these requirements. The teachers in all groups were uniform in stating that the content had to be focused, delivered by someone in whom they had trust, and be specific to their grade levels.

There appear to be significant opportunities in this area for the development of courses that will assist Arizona teachers in maintaining their highly qualified status. It was clear from these participants' comments that the courses will have to be well-marketed and focused on specific needs of Arizona teachers. They are aware of the wide marketplace for distance learning courses, and will have to be sold on the value of taking these courses from Arizona's universities.