

Acceptability of Online Degrees As Criteria for Admission to Graduate Programs

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ABSTRACT

THIS PAPER PRESENTS the results of a nationwide survey of deans, associate deans, and directors who make recommendations concerning the admission of applicants to graduate programs in their colleges and universities. A questionnaire was sent to a sample of academic officers in public and private institutions describing three different types of applicants. Each of the three applicants had a bachelor's degree in the relevant subject, good grades, similar GRE scores, and strong letters of recommendation. However, one applicant had studied in the traditional classroom and laboratory settings on campus. A second applicant had taken half of the required courses for the bachelor's degree online and half on campus. The third applicant had taken all courses for the degree over the Internet. The question addressed by the project is whether a bachelor's degree earned partially or fully online is equally acceptable to those who recommend students for graduate admissions. The findings appear to indicate rather clearly that they are not. (*Keywords: online degrees, distance education, acceptability, criteria for graduate admissions*)

INTRODUCTION

ONLINE EDUCATION PROGRAMS are experiencing dramatic growth since the late 1990s. Public and private colleges and universities have substantially increased the number of online courses and programs available to on- and off-campus students. In a survey of 1,600 institutions conducted in 2002 by the U.S. Department of Education and summarized by Kiernan (2003), 56% of all American colleges were offering online courses, with public colleges offering online courses more frequently than their private counterparts. For example, 89% of public four-year colleges offered online courses, compared to 40% of private colleges. Overall, the results of the survey indicated that the number of for-credit courses offered by degree-granting institutions through distance education programs grew to 118,100 in the 2000-2001 academic year from 47,500 in 1997-1998. Similarly, enrollment in for-credit online courses increased to 2.9 million in 2000-2001, from 754,000 in 1994-1995. The U.S. Distance Learning Association expects the enrollment in such courses to reach five million by 2006 (Terry, 2002).

Continuing this trend of growth in 2002, more than 1.6 million students in U.S. institutions of higher education took *at least one online course* during the fall semester alone. However, more than one third of these students (578,000) took *all of their courses online* (Allen & Seaman, 2003). It is now estimated that 34% of all institutions now offer complete degree programs online; for public colleges, this figure is 49% (Allen & Seaman, 2003). Online degrees are being offered in approximately 55 academic and professional fields (Waits & Lewis, 2003).

REASONS FOR THE GROWTH OF ONLINE EDUCATION

It is estimated that 70 million working adults have never earned a college degree (Carnevale & Olsen, 2003). For many of these individuals, traditional on-campus programs present an insurmountable problem. Older women who have children and jobs and who

want to improve their job credentials were more attracted to undergraduate distance-education programs than members of any other group because of the flexibility such programs provide (Carnevale, 2002b; Levine & Sun, 2002). In addition, distance education serves a unique role for military personnel on active duty in distant locations (Carnevale & Olsen). Working adults, who are often unable to participate in the traditional classroom, view online education as their only alternative. In the future, as more people complete their undergraduate degrees online, it can be expected that some of them will decide to pursue graduate education.

THE ACCEPTABILITY OF ONLINE EDUCATION

Despite the rapid growth in online education, questions remain about the nature of that experience. Some educators cast doubt on the quality of online courses and make the point that online degree programs are too susceptible to fraud and can devalue a college degree (Peabody, 2001; Symonds, 2001). Although more institutions are beginning to offer “hybrid” or “blended” courses that combine the online delivery of content with face-to-face instruction, a recent report indicates that most students do not expect to receive the same level of interaction with instructors in online courses (Altschuler, 2001). Some educators also have misgivings about the effectiveness of distance education and whether the learning experience and outcomes that take place over the Internet are equal to those occurring in traditional academic settings (Maki & Maki, 2002; Young, 2000). A recent review of research on this topic, conducted by the Institute for Higher Education Policy, states that the overall quality of much of the research on distance learning is questionable and, thus, the findings are inconclusive (Phipps & Merisotis, 1999). Another review of over 400 studies concludes that there is no significant difference in the effectiveness of the two methods (Russell, 2000). (See also Twigg, 2003, p. 28).

More recently, however, a significant question has arisen. It concerns the *acceptability* of bachelor's degrees that have been earned solely or partly online as criteria for entry into established graduate

programs. Anecdotal evidence seems to indicate there may be some problems with the acceptability of course work completed online when students apply to traditional institutions. Administrators of some online colleges have complained that their students often get a “rude surprise” if they try to transfer to a traditional institution and find their course credits “don’t count for anything” (Carnevale, 2002a). Although some of these students later succeeded in persuading administrators to accept their credits, others are unable to do so, resulting in wasted time and money. However, it appears that differences in national and regional accreditation agencies may explain some of these problems (Carnevale).

There is also evidence that some academic administrators do not view teaching an online course as a significant professional accomplishment. In a national survey, 109 university and college administrators were asked to evaluate performance criteria for awarding promotion and tenure (Adams, 2003). The list of criteria included “managing an online course,” as well as excellent teaching evaluations, and various categories of scholarly publications and service. Although managing an online course is time-intensive, it was not viewed as an important aspect of job performance for awarding raises, tenure or promotion (Adams).

In spite of these problems, however, many administrators are optimistic about the future of online education. In a survey conducted by Babson College and the Sloan Consortium, one third of 1,000 respondents believed that the quality of online education would be superior to traditional instruction at their institutions within three years (Allen & Seaman, 2003).

The issue of faculty rewards for preparing and teaching online courses, as well as the quality of these courses, certainly are important in the debate about online education and are indications of the degree to which such instruction is accepted and valued by some administrators. However, the critical issue is what happens to the students when they complete courses and undergraduate degree programs online. What is likely to happen to such students who then knock at the doors of traditional institutions, hoping to begin their

graduate education? Thus, the question addressed by this study is whether a bachelor's degree, earned entirely in a traditional manner, half online, or entirely online is equally acceptable to those who serve as admission officers for graduate admissions in institutions.

METHOD

TO ADDRESS THIS ISSUE, a questionnaire was sent to administrators—deans, associate deans, and program directors—in charge of graduate programs in 245 public and private institutions in every state. The names of these individuals were verified in advance to ensure that the questionnaire would reach the appropriate person. Lists of institutions were drawn mainly from those published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. A total of 160 completed questionnaires were returned representing a 65.3% response rate.

Items in the questionnaire asked respondents to indicate their opinion about how likely it would be that they would *recommend admission* to their particular graduate program for three different applicants. Each of the applicants was described as having: (1) *the same* strong letters of recommendation, plus *high* GPAs and GRE (or other relevant test) scores that adequately meet the entrance requirements of their program; (2) a *bachelor's degree in the required subject*, with the appropriate courses (taken either online or in traditional classrooms and labs). Thus, each applicant had similar qualifications except for the nature of the course work for which their bachelor's degree had been awarded.

One applicant was described as having a bachelor's degree from a *traditional* institution, in which all of the courses were taken in labs and classrooms on-campus. The second applicant was described as having a bachelor's degree from a traditional institution in which *50 percent* of the courses were taken online with the remainder taken in labs and classrooms on-campus. Finally, the third applicant was described as having a bachelor's degree *earned solely online*.

The subjects were asked to indicate their opinions on whether they would recommend each of the three applicants for admission to their programs. Their options for responding to the questionnaire were: (a) *likely to recommend admission*, (b) *might recommend admission, but with reservations*, (c) *would be unlikely to recommend admission* or (d) *definitely would not recommend admission*. The questionnaire also included a number of items concerning background information about their institution—such as total enrollment, whether course work or entire degree programs are offered online, and whether there are plans for future online offerings. Qualitative comments were also solicited concerning their views about online instruction.

RESULTS

ENROLLMENTS IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS represented ranged from a minimum of 1,000 students to a maximum of 48,000, with an average of 10,946. Almost half (48.1%) were doctoral-level institutions. The majority of the institutions (71.6%) offered some courses online for their students. However, only 23.2 % offered entire degree programs online.

ADMISSION OF NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

Figures 1, 2, and 3 show the percent of deans, associate deans, and program directors who indicated that they *would recommend* admission for the three types of applicants—candidates who had a bachelor's degree granted by either (1) a *traditional* institution, where no online credits or courses were involved, or (2) a degree granted for a (50/50) *combination* of online and traditional courses, or (3) a degree granted by a virtual institution for courses taken *solely online*.

As these figures indicate, few of the respondents had any reservations in recommending admission for the applicant with the degree earned in the traditional way. Over 96% felt that they would do so. None were unwilling to admit the applicant. Furthermore, there were

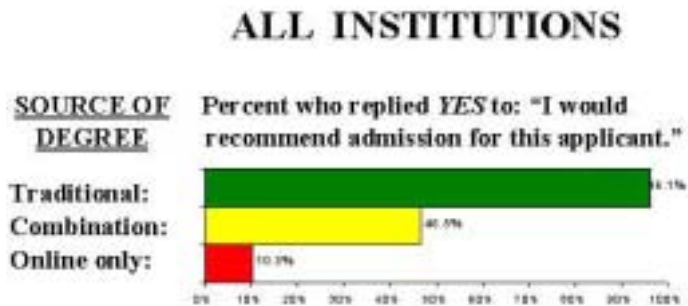


Figure 1.

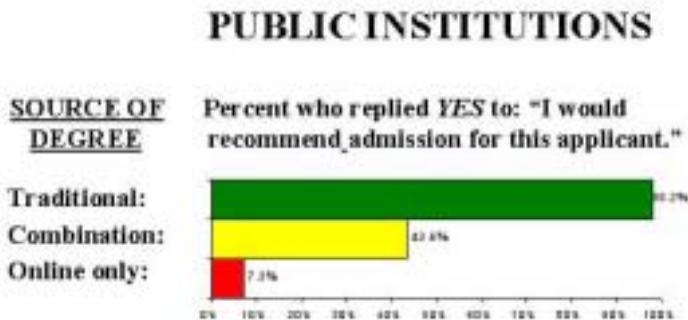


Figure 2.

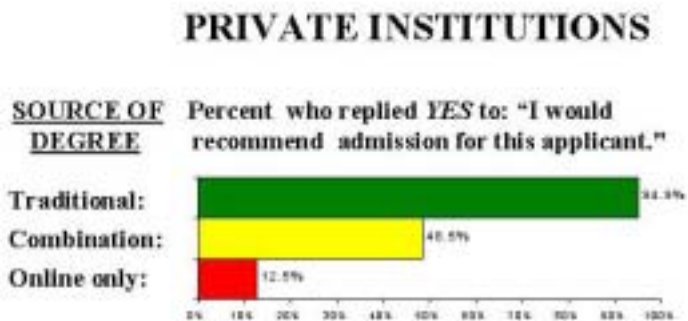


Figure 3.

only minor differences between types of institutions. That is, administrators in public and private institutions made a similar pattern of recommendations.

There was considerably less enthusiasm for admitting the applicant with a degree in which half of the courses were earned in the traditional way and the other half were credits earned online. As the figures show, fewer than 50% indicated that they would recommend admission for this type of applicant. About 43% had reservations concerning admission and 11% said they were unlikely to admit the applicant. Again, there were no substantial differences between public and private institutions.

However, the applicant with a degree earned totally online fared much worse. Only 7% of the public institutions and just over 11% of their private counterparts indicated that they would recommend admission this type of applicant. Fully half of the respondents (50.7%) said that they were unlikely to or definitely would not admit the candidate. About 36% professed reservations about admission.

The statistical significance of these findings can be understood by calculating the *differences* (Ds) between the percents of respondents who would or would not recommend each of the three types of candidates for admission. There are three such differences on each of the five figures in this manuscript. For example, in Figure 1 (All Institutions), the difference between those who would recommend an applicant with a degree from a traditional institution and one who received a degree for a combination of online and classroom courses is $D = 49.6\%$. There are ten such values that can be calculated (between applicant types) within all of the figures. All ten values could be obtained and their statistical significance could be listed separately. However, all ten are not needed. The D-value which is the smallest will be sufficient to judge whether the others with larger D-values will also be significant (McNemar, 1949, pp. 75-77). Using that strategy, the smallest difference (also based on the smallest N-values) among the ten is that between applicants with the combination degree and the online degree for private universities. Here, $D = 36\%$. A D-value of only 16.72 percent would be needed to yield a significance

level of $p < .0001$. Thus, with 36% as the smallest of the D-values in the five figures, any possible significance level for any comparison among them will be well below the .0001 level. Put simply, the probability that these comparisons could have been a result of chance is virtually zero.

Therefore, the overall conclusion from these results is that in both public and private institutions, those who play a major role in screening applicants for admission to graduate programs do not see online instruction as the equivalent of that which takes place in traditional settings.

Doctoral-level institutions. It also appears that the doctoral-level institutions in the study were less willing to consider non-traditional degrees than the remaining institutions. Only 37% of the respondents from doctoral institutions would recommend without reservation the applicant with half of the courses earned online (compared to 55% of the remaining respondents); and only 6.8% of those from doctoral institutions would recommend the applicant with all courses earned online (compared to 13.8% for the remaining).

Institutions offering online degrees. Perhaps the most striking finding from this study concerns the differences between respondents from institutions that offer degree programs online and those that do not. The colleges and universities that offer online programs were more willing to admit the applicant who earned half of the required credits online than the remaining institutions (52.8% vs. 44.5%).

However, only 5.6% of the institutions offering online degree programs indicated that they would recommend admission without reservation for the applicant with a bachelor's degree earned entirely online, compared to 11.8% of the remaining institutions. In other words, institutions that have the most experience in developing, implementing, and administering online degree programs were less likely to accept applicants with online degrees into their graduate programs.

Some of the reasons for the reluctance to accept applicants with online degrees were expressed in comments by the respondents. Most frequently cited was a lack of interaction between instructors and students. Others added that the acceptability of an online degree was

INSTITUTIONS THAT OFFER NO DEGREES ONLINE

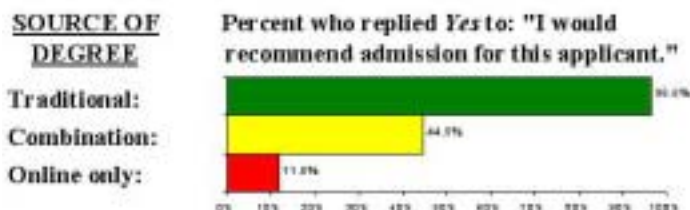


Figure 4

INSTITUTIONS THAT OFFER DEGREES ONLINE

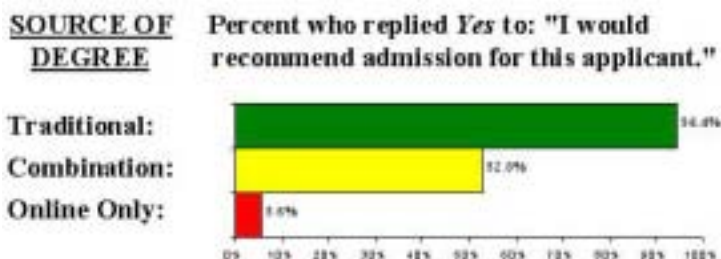


Figure 5.

highly dependent upon the reputation of the institution conferring the degree, as well as the nature of the field in which the degree is received. Some respondents said they were willing to accept an online bachelor's degree in math or science, for example, but not in fields such as counseling or teaching that require face-to-face interaction. Many stressed the importance of regional accreditation as a critical factor in the acceptance of online degrees from a virtual institution, saying that national accreditation alone was not sufficient. Finally, one respondent predicted that when more faculty and deans have earned their own degrees online that the acceptability of such degrees will increase.

FUTURE PLANS FOR ONLINE INSTRUCTION

In spite of their reluctance or refusal to admit applicants with bachelor's degrees in which all or half of courses were taken online, most respondents said that their institutions plans to increase the number of courses offered online in the future.

About 57% of those currently offering online courses plan to increase the number in the future. In addition, 8% that do not now have online courses plan to do so. Thus, a combined 65% of institutions will add or increase the number of online courses available in the future. A total of 16% do not now offer these courses and have no plans to do so.

DISCUSSION

NO CLAIM IS MADE that the opinions of 160 graduate deans, associate deans and program directors provide a final definition of the acceptability or the merits of bachelor's degrees earned either completely, or even partially, online as credentials for admission to graduate programs. Nevertheless, these findings are likely to be troubling to any person who sets out to earn a bachelor's degree solely, or even partially, through distance learning with a graduate degree in mind. Simply put, it appears unlikely that they would be admitted to a graduate program in the majority of the institutions sampled in the present study, even though their other credentials were favorable. There appears to be a considerable consensus—a shared culture of preference—for applicants who have completed their undergraduate work in traditional institution where online distance education has not been a significant part of the credits earned toward completion of their degrees.

These results are focused solely on the opinions of those sampled who set policy for, or manage graduate programs. The results do not speak to the issue of whether online courses and degrees awarded for distance learning provide the same quality of experience as those taken

Table 1
Current Situation of Institutions for Offering Online Instruction

<u>Summary of Present Situation:</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Currently offering online courses and will increase number	92	57.5
Currently offering online courses but plan to decrease number	1	0.6
Not now offering online courses but plan to do so in future	13	8.1
Not now offering online courses and will not do so in future	12	8.0
Not sure of future plans for offering online instruction	37	23.1
No response to this question	<u>5</u>	<u>3.1</u>
Total:	160	100

in the traditional way or to question of the importance of distance education. Undoubtedly, the findings reflect considerable uncertainty that often is characteristic of change and innovation.

What the present findings do provide is a *red flag of caution* to any person who assumes that she can complete a bachelor's degree either completely or even partially online and then—even though other qualifications are in order—be accepted into a traditional graduate program. This situation appears to characterize both public and private institutions.

Whether this lack of confidence in online instruction will continue to prevail among graduate admissions' officers, who are responsible for admitting or rejecting candidates, is difficult to say. Perhaps that will depend on evidence that will be assembled by additional research on this topic in the future. It seems clear at this point, however, that any student, who plans to complete an undergraduate degree online and has thoughts of doing graduate work, should be aware of the cautions posed at this time by the results from this study.

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