

Ifeanyi Olagbaju 2010 Professional Advising Leadership Fellows Training Program Report

Topic: Distance Learning for Graduate Students

'Online education is borderless with students, faculty and ideas crossing borders.' Salman Rushdie, 2010 NAFSA conference for international educators. This statement infers that online education works. I am certain it is a good option for a number of students.

Due to the increase in the number of graduate students seeking information on distance education, I decided this would be my PAL research topic. The aim of my PAL research was to study distance learning programs, determine the accreditation process of these programs and provide students and EducationUSA Advisors with guidelines to follow when considering distance learning.

Based on the results of a survey I conducted among graduate students in Africa and South Asia, Nigerian employers in the public and private sector and a response to my inquiry from the Federal Ministry of Education in both regions, I knew that addressing the accreditation and recognition of distance learning degrees had to be my priority.

Graduate students considering distance learning worry that their degrees will not be recognized in their countries. This fear was buttressed by a letter from the ministry of education in Nigeria stating that online degrees are not recognized.

To clarify on the associated issues, I met with key staff at the U. S. Department of Education and the Distance Education Training Council. Department of Education ensures that before a school is accredited to offer any program, accrediting officials review curriculum in detail, speak with faculty involved in curriculum design and finally conduct site visits.

Officials determine, if, appropriate delivery methods are being used to effectively teach students and that sufficient support services are provided. If all the set criteria are not met, a school will not be accredited. Through impromptu site visits and student interviews, officials are able to gather unbiased information on programs offered at various institutions.

U. S. Department of Education officials corrected my reference to quality 'online' programs, stressing that from an accreditation perspective, institutions must offer quality programs. There is no separation between traditional and online delivery. Officials stated that results obtained through years of research do not support the claim that distance learning programs do not compare to learning in a traditional setting. There is no question of equality. 'Learning- at- a-distance' is simply an option students have when considering higher education.

The second phase of my research involved studying class design and delivery. My focus was on graduate Business and Human Resource Management programs. Again, this was determined by results obtained from 5 African advisors surveying a pool of 100 graduate students. Furthermore, some advisors and I were certain that health related and engineering programs could not be offered through distance learning especially if a practicum were required.

I wanted to know how maximum participation was ensured in an online classroom, I was curious to learn how students kept up with synchronous programs, whether faculty would recommend blended programs and how students were assessed. I wanted to be sure that all students were being taught by the same professors and if so,

was curious to learn how an online class compared with a traditional class. I wanted to sit in an online class to experience the process first hand.

As an EducationUSA Advisor, I met with staff of the International Student Advising office at every University visited and did an information session at Pennsylvania State University. As a PAL Fellow, I scheduled targeted meetings. The caliber of people I met with will buttress the significance of my findings.

These included: Associate Vice President Instructional Technology-Northern Virginia Community College, Dean School of Engineering -Villanova University College of Engineering, Director of E-Learning and Graduate Marketing-Villanova University, Academic Director and author-Drexel University Online, Assistant Professor of Education & Graduate Program Officer-Pennsylvania State University, Associate Professor-University of Maryland University College and Associate Dean Academic and Student Affairs - Jefferson Medical College, Thomas Jefferson University.

Instructional technology (I.T.) has evolved to embrace the totality of an educational institutions need and the learning style of students. I. T.'s purpose is to promote learning by using technology to solve educational challenges. Different media are used depending on the class and professor's preference. These range from web-based applications like web 2.0 and Google to the use of wiki and webinars to facilitate collaboration and simulation software or dry laboratory's for scientists. Today's classrooms are set-up to support synchronous learning regardless of a student's location.

RESULT. Distance education has a number of advantages. Instructional designers work with faculty to prepare for each class thereby allowing for advanced planning. More thought is put into each lecture and greater content is covered. Students cannot hide in an online classroom. Time management, research and writing skills are enhanced.

Through distance education, partnerships are established between local and stateside institutions with EducationUSA Advisors sometimes serving as facilitators. Undergraduate students may spend two years in-country then transfer to the U. S. for the remaining two years. In some countries, successful models of this has allowed for reduced costs for students and increased enrollments at U. S. institutions.

As we prepare students for study in the dynamic environment U. S. classrooms afford, our guiding principles as advisors must remain the same. The outcome we seek is to provide unbiased information on study in the U. S. at accredited institutions. Therefore, whether a student is considering undergraduate or graduate study, short-term or distance learning, they must begin their search with accredited U. S. institutions.

Efforts must be made as a matter of priority, to explain to other countries educational ministries, the advancements that have been made in Distance Learning programs, the accreditation procedures, the list of educational institutions offering distance education as an option, the course content of each of these programs and the qualification received after successful study.

With this in mind, I plan to hold sessions at the Africa Regional conference in Johannesburg and the NAFSA conference in Vancouver.

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