Online Graduate Degree Recruiting: Is it Different?

By Dr. A. Mark Doggett and Dr. Stan Lightner

Peer-Refereed Article
Pedagogical Research and Issues

KEYWORD SEARCH

Administration
Distance Learning
Higher Education
Internet
Research

Online Graduate Degree Recruiting: Is it Different?

By Dr. A. Mark Doggett and Dr. Stan Lightner

Dr. A. Mark Doggett is an Assistant Professor and the Coordinator for the Master of Science Degree in Technology Management at Western Kentucky University. His interests are in the area of technology management practices, lean, theory of constraints, and systems thinking. His research includes various decision-making and problem-solving strategies, and the development of distance learning approaches. His areas of expertise include leadership, process management, and manufacturing technology with over 20 years of experience in business and industry. Doggett received his doctorate at Colorado State University and B.S. and M.S. degrees in Industrial Technology from California State University Fresno.

Dr. Stan Lightner is an Assistant Professor at Western Kentucky University where he is a member of the Graduate College. His interests are in the areas of ergonomics, machine tool products and applications, training and instructional systems, and lean thinking. His research focus is on the improvement of the industrial technology curriculum, specifically manufacturing and the development of distance learning approaches. He has over thirty years of experience in technology management in industry and education. Lightner received his doctorate at Oklahoma State University; B.S. and M.S. degrees in Industrial Technology from Northeastern State University Tahlequah, Oklahoma and an AS in Quality Control from Manatee Junior College.

ABSTRACT

A survey of the faculty via the Engineering Technology List Serve and an online technical graduate program was conducted to gather recruiting strategy data. The questions assessed if and how recruiting for online graduate programs is different from face-to-face programs. Qualitative and quantitative data was gathered from current students and alumni of the online Technology Management Master of Science program at Western Kentucky University to ascertain any commonalities in their decision to enroll in an online program.

OVERVIEW

As graduate programs evolve and expand through the utilization of distance learning via the Internet, the means and methods of recruiting have changed. Simply sending recruiting posters to other institutions with compatible undergraduate programs, or setting up booths at conventions cannot and will not attract a sufficient quantity of qualified students. The growth of private, on-line universities is directly tied to their marketing efforts. Since the vast majority of technical programs do not have similar resources, the researchers set out to determine the most effective and cost efficient recruiting methods employed by similar programs.

ONLINE PROGRAM DIFFERENCES

Student Demographics

Is the potential population for online programs different from the population for face-to-face programs? According to Flowers (2005), online degree programs have changed the makeup of the students who enroll. Prior to online offerings, courses consisted of small graduate classes of part-time local and regional students. Conversely, online graduate courses have full-time working professionals in larger classes with greater geographic diversity. Geographic freedom, along with the convenience of time flexibility was the most appealing aspect of online education and allowed students to enroll in classes that they would otherwise not have been able. In some cases, an online course may be the only choice students have for getting an education.

In a survey of four technology classes at Purdue University, Schmidt and Gallegos (2001) found that respondents perceived that full-time workers would benefit most from courses delivered via distance format. In addition, respondents suggested other groups would benefit such as athletes and the physically disabled. In response to why these groups would benefit, the same study reported the most frequently selected reasons were family or work responsibilities, location convenience, and poverty of time.

Perceptions of Online Education

In a Sloan Consortium survey of 4,494 institutions (2,590 responses), 35.7 percent of faculty at public institutions stated their school accepts the value and legitimacy of online education, down from 68.7 percent from 2007 (Sloan Consortium, 2008). With regard to academic quality, 55.8% of master's degree programs reported learning outcomes in online education the same as face-to-face, while 18.3% reported outcomes superior or somewhat superior to face-to-face (Sloan Consortium, 2010). Engineering was the only discipline area where online representation is much lower than for other areas (Sloan Consortium, 2008).

Authors have cited the advantages of online courses as time and location flexibility, access to global resources, and student-centered learning. Disadvantages of distance learning included infrequent personal contact with faculty

members, feelings of isolation, navigating coursework, technology problems, feedback time, and the challenges of a self-directed learning environment (Smallwood & Zargari, 2000; Burgess & Strong, 2003).

Recruiting
Flowers (2005) found that most students learn about online degree programs through the program Web site, word of mouth, and professional associations. Magazine advertisements were unsuccessful. In a Noel-Levitz sponsored graduate survey of 1,069 prospective graduate students, 62% of respondents said they preferred Web sites and electronic communications to brochures (Geyer, 2007). Arizona State University (2008) suggested the use of electronic prospective request forms as a quick means for students to provide contact information for follow-up. They also emphasized the need for an informative, navigable, and frequently updated website.

The University of Central Florida, College of Graduate Studies recommended a focus on online advertising, e-mail communications, and the program Web site, because most graduate prospects get their information this way. "Printed brochures are valuable only for recruiting events or related activities as a supplement to faculty expertise" ("Recruiting", 2003, para. 13). Cesarini, Sinn, and Armentano (2006) asserted that universities have little experience with this type of recruiting and that such efforts must include targeted, out-of-state marketing venues—a challenge for state-based institutions.

RESEARCH
The scope and intent of the study was to investigate if recruiting for web-based graduate programs in technology is different from recruiting for face-to-face programs. If the recruiting is different, how is it different, and how do students find out about online graduate programs? Finally, the researchers wanted to know why students pick online graduate programs. An eight-question survey was anonymously administered using the Free Assessment Summary Tool (FAST) at www.getfast.ca (Ravelli & Patz, 2004). A link was sent to faculty on the Engineering Tech listserve, which has 4,036 members at just under 1000 institutions in all 50 states in the U.S. and 50 countries. Two thousand seven hundred six faculty members represent 371 four-year institutions, but not all of these have graduate programs (W.W. Buchanan, personal communication, February 16, 2010). In addition, an anonymous ten-question survey was sent to students currently enrolled in an online graduate program in technology management at Western Kentucky University. The degree currently has 40 majors, of which 31 are full-time students. The typical student in this program is 25 to 40 years old and employed full-time as a technical professional. Approximately 25% of the students are female. Eighty-nine responses to the survey were received from faculty while 24 responses were received from students.
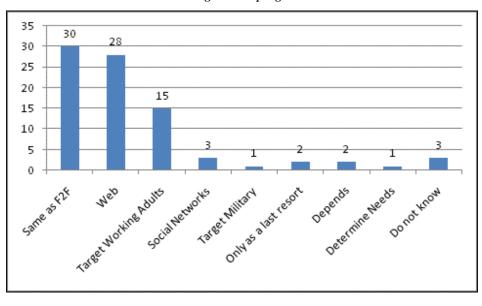
Assumptions and Limitations
For this study, the students surveyed were assumed to be representative of online graduate students at a comprehensive regional university. Faculty members surveyed self-selected based upon their interest and expertise in engineering technology or technology management graduate programs. Responses to survey questions were limited in that faculty respondents may not have been involved in graduate recruiting or teaching online classes. Standard human subject protocols were followed to reduce research bias and protect survey participants.

FINDINGS
Faculty Responses
The first question posed to faculty was, "Is recruiting different for online graduate programs in technology than face-to-face (F2F) graduate programs?" Of the 89 responses, 60 said yes or 67%, 16 said no (18%), three (4%) stated somewhat, and 10 (11%) did not know or had no experience. To the question, "If it is different, how is it different?" twenty-three (26%) replied that it is geared toward a non-traditional student, 13 (14%) replied that it covers a wider geographical area, 10 (11%) stated there is more use of the Internet now, and three (4%) said online programs have to be more aggressive due to increased competition.

Faculty were asked, "How should universities recruit for online graduate programs?" and "How do you recruit students for your online program?" To the former question, 30 said that universities should recruit the same as face-to-face, 28 stated that recruit-

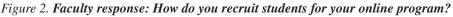*Figure 1. Faculty response: How should universities recruit for online graduate programs?*

ing should be Web-based, 15 replied that recruiting should target working adults, three said social networks, and one responded that recruiting should target military. Eight respondents did not know or thought it depends on other factors based on needs or only as a last resort (see Figure 1). To the latter question regarding how they actually recruit, 28 recruit the same as face-to-face, 19 did not know, 16 recruit online, eight had no online programs, five hired someone to recruit for online programs, and four used a multi-channeled/targeted approach. One respondent indicated they already had too many students. (see Figure 2).

Faculty were asked, "What is currently used to recruit students to your online graduate programs?" Thirty-three stated the Internet or Web sites are used and 28 did not know or stated none. Twenty replied that traditional media was used while five indicated the use of social networking sites. Four used listserves and e-mail lists while four used word-of mouth recruiting. Two said they used Google ad words and one used Webinars (see Figure 3).

In response to the question, "What role should technology play in recruiting for online graduate programs?" forty-five of the faculty thought it should play a leading role. Six of the faculty suggested technology such as social networks, Second Life, video, or chat. Five were unsure or did not know while three stated it should be the same as face-to-face. Three responded that technology would be useful in helping or facilitating communication and three stated that it would be one of many tools used in recruiting (see Figure 4). To the question, "What technologies not currently available would be helpful in recruitment of online students?" thirty-four did not know or were unsure. Eight stated that it would improve current technology and four suggested that technology might provide access to three-dimensional virtual labs (see Figure 5).

When faculty were asked, "Is it your opinion that students who enroll in
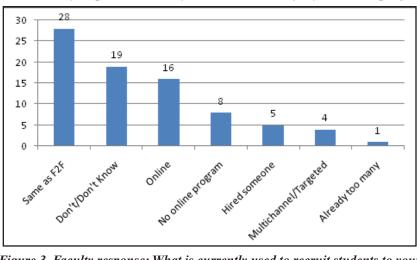
*Figure 2. **Faculty response: How do you recruit students for your online program?***

*Figure 3. **Faculty response: What is currently used to recruit students to your online graduate programs?***
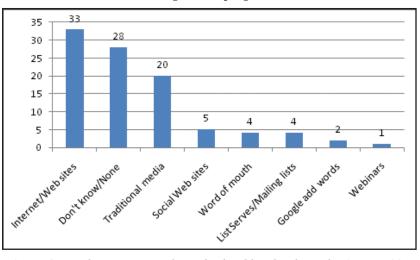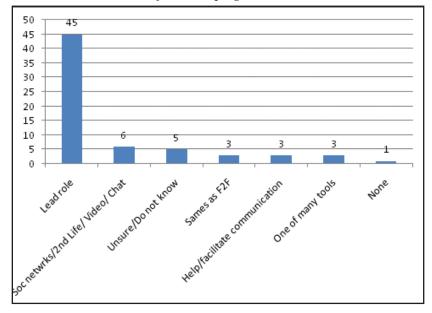

*Figure 4. **Faculty response: What role should technology play in recruiting for online programs?***

online graduate programs are different than students who enroll in F2F graduate programs?" thirty-eight responded affirmatively while 13 said no. Three respondents did no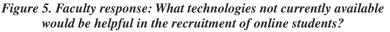t know. Forty-six of the faculty responded to the question, "What has been the reaction of employers to your online degree program?" as being equal to face-to-face programs. Twenty-four did not know. Six stated that employers reacted less favorably to online, four said employers' reactions are mixed, and three said employers were curious, watchful, or skeptical.

Student Responses

When students were asked why they chose an online program instead of a face-to-face program, nine stated because they hold a full time job, while eight responded that it was the flexible schedule. Four students replied the online program provided a better work, life, and family balance and two responded that it was convenient. Two selected online because no class attendance or travel was required. Two stated that there was no other program option available and one said that it was less stressful. One student would have chosen a face-to-face program (see Figure 6). Other responses were:

- I did not know that it was an online program.
- This program seemed to be a better fit for me than the alternative MBA.
- In the past, I found it very hard to pay attention in a F2F class, especially when the professor got off on a tangent. I found that I was really doing a lot of self-study anyway, so why bother going to class. You will only get out what you put into it, so the medium for the class did not matter to me.
- Highly adaptable while on active duty in the military.

Students were asked to select a response that most closely resembled their perspective about online education. Fourteen students stated that online education is more rigorous than face-to-face, five stated that it is less rigorous, and five stated that it is the same. When asked to explain their
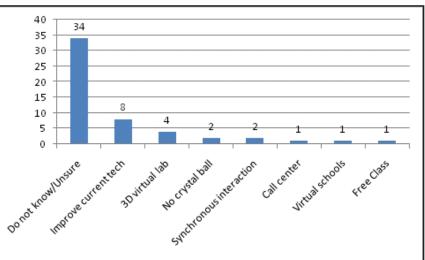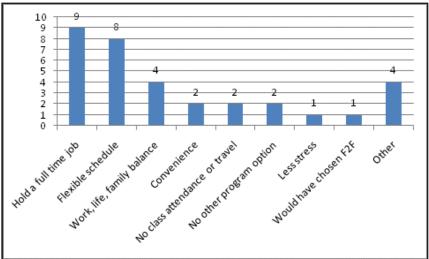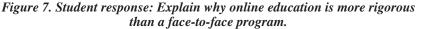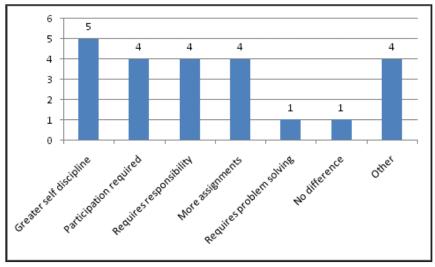
Figure 5. Faculty response: What technologies not currently available would be helpful in the recruitment of online students?

Figure 6. Student response: Why did you choose an online program instead of a face-to-face program?

Figure 7. Student response: Explain why online education is more rigorous than a face-to-face program.

response, five replied that it requires greater self-discipline, four stated that greater participation is required, four stated that it required responsibility, and four said it has more assignments. One student said it requires more problem solving and one student stated there is no difference (see Figure 7). Other responses were:

- It is quite possible to lose focus in online learning environments. Actually attending courses means you must be highly organized and motivated as compared to researching using the Internet and online sources.
- One can do a discussion on Blackboard in one hour instead of three hours of sitting in class. Also, the class load for online is less than F2F.
- I found that typically, online courses are less work to me than traditional face-to-face classes. There are no tests and everything is essentially open book.
- There is continuous posting and replies to posting.

To the question, "How did you first find out about the online program?" seven students responded that they found out about it from program faculty. Five stated that they heard it from other alumni or students in the program. Three stated the Web site was their first source of information while two received an e-mail about the program. Two students received information from the university graduate studies office and one received a program pamphlet (See Figure 8). Three other responses were:

- Work related
- School administrators
- Company Technical Education Center

Students were asked how they perceive their employers' reaction to an online degree compared to a face-to-face degree. Eighteen perceived their employer's reaction as the same, five perceived the employer's reaction as worth more, and one had no opinion.

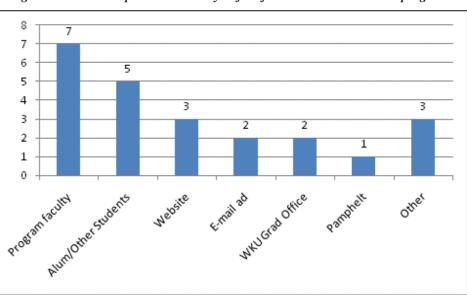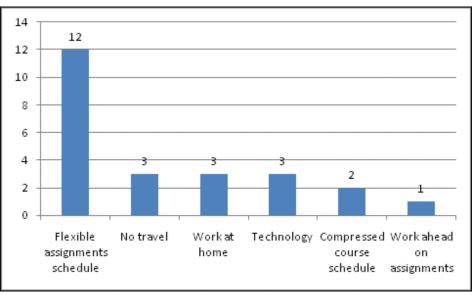When asked about the specific advantages of an online degree program, 12

Figure 8. Student response: How did you first find out about the online program?

Figure 9. Student response: What are the specific advantages of an online program?

students responded that having flexibility in the schedule/assignments was important, while three cited no travel as an advantage, and three stated the ability to work from home. Additionally, three thought that using technology was an advantage, two like the compressed course schedule associated with the program, and one student liked to work ahead on assignments (See Figure 9).

When asked about the specific disadvantages of an online degree program, 12 students cited the absence of face-to-face interaction or the lack of ca-

maraderie between students, while six disliked slow feedback on assignments (See Figure 10). Two students said the stigma of an online degree was a disadvantage. One student each responded to the question with the following:
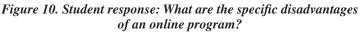
- Takes longer to learn
- More expensive than face-to-face courses
- More work assigned
- Limited by instructor expertise
- Body language during discussions and the ability to pick a professors brain

Students responded to the question, "Was your decision to enroll in the online technology program influenced by its reputation as a traditional brick & mortar university?" Eleven responded yes and 13 responded no. When asked to explain their responses, five stated that they picked the program rather than the school and five indicated they received their undergraduate degrees at the same institution (See Figure 11). Four replied that the university reputation was a factor and three enrolled because they knew faculty in the program. Two students indicated their decision was not influenced by the university reputation or as not applicable to their decision. One student stated they chose the program specifically because it was online and one stated they chose the program because their employer paid the tuition. Two other students had the following explanations:

- I feel the online schools that only offer online courses have an unsavory reputation about them. Even if that is my own belief, it would be hard not to convey that perception to others when speaking of my background after completing the course work.
- Virtual education has no brick and mortar boundary. There can be students participating in the program that have never seen the university. While it is a beautiful university, online programs get to the heart of the matter and tackle the intellectual side of a student out of the gate.

When asked, "Would you choose an online program again?" twenty-one students responded positively while only three responded negatively. If students responded yes, they were asked why they would choose an online program again (See Figure 12). Eight students responded that they would choose online because it suits their schedule or work hours. Five responded that it fulfills their personal needs/lifestyle. Three students stated that the online program is preferred because it is available anywhere and two because it allows life balance. Two students stated that an online program is applicable

Figure 10. Student response: What are the specific disadvantages of an online program?
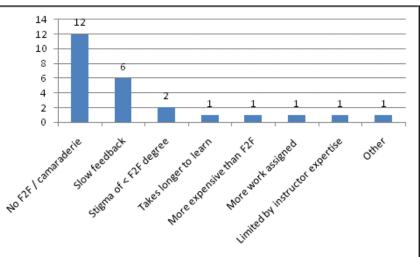

Figure 11. Students explanation of why they enrolled in an online technology program and whether it is influenced by its reputation as a traditional brick & mortar university.
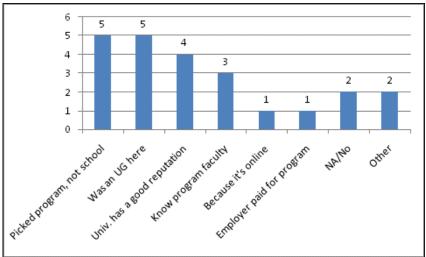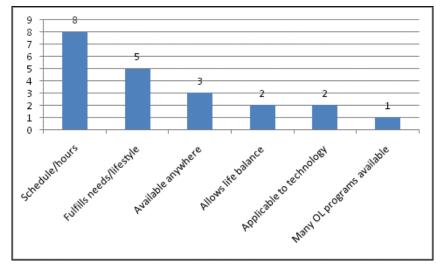

Figure 12. Students explanation of why they would choose an online program again.

because the program is about technology and one student said that it was one of many online programs available.

DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

An interesting observation regarding the faculty responses to the first two questions regarding recruiting differences were that only 49 faculty responded to the second question that asked *how* online recruiting is different from the original 60 faculty who stated it *is* different. Thus, an additional 12% say it is different, but they did not respond how it is different. Perhaps this raises an apparent dissonance within faculty in that they sense recruiting is different for online programs, but they are not sure how it is different.

The majority of faculty (70%) were of the opinion that students who enroll in online graduate program are different than students who enroll in face-to-face programs. Students who reinforced this opinion as a majority (63%) chose an online program because they hold a full-time job, need a flexible schedule, and want to spend time with their families. Both a majority of students and faculty perceive that employers view an online degree as equal to or the same as a face-to-face degree, but a greater percentage (32%) of faculty than students (4%) were not sure or did not know.

While 34% of faculty stated they use the Internet or Web sites to recruit students to online programs, the same percentage of students find out about programs through faculty or other students. Fourteen percent of the students said they found out about the online program through electronic media. Only one student knew of the program via a printed brochure.

Two-thirds of faculty perceived that recruiting is different for online programs because students who enroll in online courses tend to be non-traditional, but the majority still utilize traditional recruiting methods and think they should continue. Faculty stated the Internet/Web should be used to recruit online students or are currently using it while a number of faculty do not know the methods used. A majority of faculty responded that technology should play a leading role for online program recruiting, but do not know or are unsure of what technologies would be helpful in online student recruitment. Faculty perceived that employers react to online degree programs the same to face-to-face programs and this is congruent with the literature.

Students stated they chose online programs because of full-time employment, flexibility, and for work/life balance. The majority of students perceived online education as more rigorous than face-to-face because it requires more self-discipline, responsibility, participation, and the completion of more assignments. The advantages of online programs are flexibility of assignments and schedules. The disadvantages of online programs are the lack of face-to-face interaction and camaraderie with other students. This survey supported the published literature in this regard.

Reputation of the university, while important, does not appear to be the primary reason that students enroll in online programs. Most of the student respondents found out about the online degree program from faculty, from other students/alumni or the Web. Students perceived that employers react to online degree programs the same to face-to-face programs. Most of the students stated they would pick an online program again for the same reasons as above. Again, the survey results support the findings of the Sloan surveys and the reviewed literature.

CONCLUSION

Recruiting is different for Web-based graduate programs in technology, but human interaction is still very important. While faculty perceive traditional recruiting methods may be sufficient, students find out about online graduate programs through faculty, other students, and the web. Students pick online graduate programs for their convenience, flexibility, family-life balance, and because they have *jobs*! Students appear to be willing to sacrifice a degree of face-to-face interaction and personal camaraderie for the advantages of online learning.

Educators should aim recruiting efforts for online programs towards the non-traditional working student. Recruiters should spend their budgets on arranging personal or virtual meetings with program faculty, current students, or alumni rather than on pamphlets and brochures. Colorful, visual Web sites and electronic communication are very important, but students still want to have connection with program faculty and students. Those programs that can find ways to replicate personal interaction asynchronously will likely bode well in the future. Video software programs such as Captivate and Tegrity could be of potential use and interactive communication tools such as Skype, Adobe Connect, or Elluminate might be better than one-way communication.

Students perceive online programs as equal to or more rigorous than face-to-face programs and employers perceive online degrees the same as face-to-face. The time has come to acknowledge the value of online education for working adults. Universities would do well to target their recruiting to include this population of potential students. Faculty would be wise in adding online coursework to their face-to-face programs, but recognize that human interaction is still an important component of education.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Given online education is still in an early stage of development, it is somewhat difficult to identify possible avenues for further research. However, there have been some notable successes in the marketing of web-based distance education such as Phoenix University and Capella University. The for-profit model of devoting millions of dollars to marketing is not within the reach of most public universities. If research is conducted to identify the most effective means deployed by these types of schools, then those methods could be

used, possibly on a smaller scale.

Other low to little cost methods should also be analyzed, including popular social media such as Facebook and Twitter. Many organizations are already using these tools as effective networking methods to market their products and services. Those responsible for recruiting students into their online programs need to keep up-to-date on technological advancements, which can drive down the costs of marketing. They also need to frequently poll their students to help determine what marketing strategies most appeal to their target audiences.

REFERENCES

Arizona State University. (2008). Best Practices for Successful Recruitment. Graduate College. Retrieved February 19, 2010 from http://graduate.asu.edu/files/docs/BestPractices.doc

Burgess, L. A. & Strong, S. D. (2003). Trends in Online Education: Case Study at Southwest Missouri State University. *Journal of Industrial Technology*, *19*(3), 1-5.

Cesarani, P., Sinn, J. W., & Armentano, T. (2006). Distance Education at Bowling Green State University: Challenges, Opportunities, and Promise. *Journal of Industrial Technology*, *22*(4), 1-10.

Flowers, J. C. (2005). The Effect of Online Delivery on Graduate Enrollment. *Journal of Industrial Technology Education*, *42*(4), 7-24.

Geyer, S. (2007). E-Expectations: Graduate Edition: Advanced Degrees of E-Recruitment. White paper sponsored by Noel-Levitz, Inc., James Tower Recruitment, and GradSchools.com.

Ravelli, B. and Patz, Z. (2004). FAST: Free Assessment Summary Tool. Mount Royal College, Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Retrieved June 16, 2008, from http://www.getfast.ca/.

"Recruiting" (2003). University of Central Florida, College of Graduate Studies. Program Directors Guide. Retrieved March 30, 2010 from http://www.admin.graduate.ucf.edu/sitemap/index.cfm?RsrcID=10&SubCatID=53

Schmidt, E. K., & Gallegos, A. (2001). Distance Learning: Issues and Concerns of Distance Learners. *Journal of Industrial Technology*, *17*(3), 1-5.

Sloan Consortium (2008). Staying the Course: Online Education in the United States, 2008. Retrieved March 26, 2010 from http://www.sloanconsortium.org/sites/default/files/staying_the_course-2.pdf

Sloan Consortium (2010). Learning on Demand: Online Education in the United States, 2009. Retrieved March 26, 2010 from http://www.sloan-c.org/publications/survey/pdf/learningondemand.pdf

Smallwood, J. E. & Zargari, A. (2000). The Development and Delivery of a Distance Learning (DL) Course in Industrial Technology. *Journal of Industrial Technology*, *16*(3), 1-4.