

Evaluation of Off-Campus Instruction: Student and Faculty Issues in Delivering Multisite Off-Campus Graduate Degree Programs

Two units at Michigan State University provide multisite graduate degree programs off campus. The primary goal for both the College of Nursing and the School of Social Work is to provide quality, cost-effective degree off-campus programs. Distance education technology offers several choices of delivery systems: satellite downlink for one-way video, sometimes combined with a call-in option; fiber optics with full audio and video interaction; T-1 phone lines which transmit a compressed signal decompressed at the receiving location. The major criterion for these programs was that full auditory and visual interaction be available. Consequently, the technological choice at MSU was the CODEC system over leased T-1 telephone lines.

Locations

Both units offer full degree programs at a distance. However, the College of Nursing offers both undergraduate completion and graduate degrees, while the School of Social Work provides only graduate degree programs. Students who live in the upper peninsula and northern lower peninsula of Michigan now have access to these and other MSU programs. Paul Freddolino is off-site program coordinator for the social work programs in Gaylord, Michigan, which is about 200 miles north of East Lansing, and Marquette, Michigan, approximately 400 miles north of East Lansing. Currently forty social work students are served at each site. The sites differ in the technology arrangements. In Marquette, Northern Michigan University built its own CODEC classroom and rents space to MSU. In Gaylord, a private consortium built a facility for local use. Not associated with any educational institution, this site is a virtual university. Muskegon, Battle Creek, and Lansing are other off-campus sites for the College of Nursing programs.

Joan Predko, off-site program director for nursing, noted that, prior to the establishment of the virtual college in Gaylord, a community college microwaved the CODEC signal from Roscommon to Grayling for nursing students. Weather often created severe problems for that system. Once the program moved to Gaylord with direct access to the CODEC, this problem disappeared. While nursing has not experienced major problems with the CODEC, social work had two evenings with extensive technological difficulties during the fall semester, 1994.

Recruiting and Marketing

Social work used a funnel approach to help decide on off-campus locations. Three hundred people in Gaylord and 400 in Marquette had expressed an early interest in the social work degree. Freddolino noted that "A site was identified and we offered foundation courses that could accommodate about fifty students per section. These courses paid for themselves since they were so large." This strategy allowed people to

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decide if the program really met their needs and to self-select out by the time the application process began. When asked about marketing and other front end expenses, he explained that an All-University Outreach Grant provided funding for those initial costs.

Nursing uses a different approach since a cohort of twenty-five is necessary for the nursing program to break even. Communities have approached the college asking for a program, and assist in the recruitment of students to establish a cohort. “We start with about thirty students and expect to end up with twenty-five,” Predko said.

Off-site Models

Both program directors agreed that being tied to on-campus groups is one key to meeting cost demands for off-campus delivery. They enroll about forty students at each off-campus site for the master’s degree in social work. A three-way linkage allows students at both distance sites and an on-campus class to learn together. A local practitioner, hired as an adjunct professor for each distance site, plays a critical role. According to Freddolino, “We’re on-line for one and one-half to two hours, then we go to what we call local time where the adjunct leads the session. Then we go back on-line to discuss the subject matter, similarities and differences, and applications to local situations. We use a team approach.”

The demand for smaller classes in the nursing program eliminated the use of such a three-way linkage. The college has tried several models and believes that someone in a helping role at distance locations is critical. In one case, a faculty member moved to the site, and served as coordinator, liaison, and facilitator for the local program. In another case, an educator with expertise in group process was hired for ten hours a week. Although not an expert in the subject matter, she provided local advising, set up the classroom, and handed out materials. Recently, at one site a student from the local community college was hired to work ten hours per week operating equipment and serving as local site coordinator and a link with campus. While costs are a concern, both off-site coordinators agree that faculty and students need a local coordinator. “It is critical to have someone in the classroom,” Predko maintained. “Students and faculty need support. If I don’t pay for it there, I’ll pay for it back here.”

Other support issues include keeping communications open and ensuring that students have the resources they need. The College of Nursing supplies an 800 telephone number to off-campus degree students. Although computer labs are not available at their current program locations, most of the students enrolled in the degree programs have access to computers with dial-up access to MSU at home or at work. When classes are held at a local college, there is generally an agreement that students may use the library. Students use e-mail to maintain contact with professors and to do library searches. The MSU library will, upon request, copy and mail articles to students at no cost.

Financial Matters

Actual program expenses include \$35.00 per hour connect charges, and off-site room fees, which may cost up to \$30.00 per hour, including fees for use of the technology and classroom space. T-1 line charges are \$1,000 per month, paid for by the university.

Tuition for these programs is not market driven. Off-campus students pay the same in tuition and fees as students on campus. Both presenters agreed that their programs are not based on “what the market will bear,” but are driven by the need for increased access. Seventy-five cents out of every dollar paid by students enrolled in off-campus programs is returned to the sponsoring college, not the university general fund. For both social work and nursing, monies returned to the college support off-site programs by paying for line charges, adjunct and client instructors, technology, and travel for faculty who are encouraged to teach from the off-campus location at least three times during the semester. Generally, university faculty teach as a part of load.

Impact of Technology

Because the use of two-way interactive television creates a new learning environment, it is critical to orient students to the technology at the beginning of the program. Their comfort and familiarity with the technology have long-range benefits for them, and often for faculty who are teaching through it for the first time. At first, the technology may prove to be bothersome for some students. Once it was recognized that seeing themselves on the monitors was an ongoing distraction to students in the nursing program, the monitors were simply moved to eliminate this problem. Predko said that “You can’t make it [technology] transparent. Use its strength and bypass its limitations.” Both presenters agreed that students’ sensitivity to the technology does diminish over time. Predko emphasized that “We make sure that students, on and off campus, know that this is the technology that they will see more of for delivery of health care and education. They’re getting something special” through experiencing its use in the program.

Faculty need special training, too. Nursing faculty work with a producer, who explains the technology and the benefits for students. In social work, “a collective buildup of experienced wisdom, knowledge and good practice” is being created by the institution through a mentoring system. In late spring, faculty who have previously taught via interactive television meet with faculty new to the system to discuss successful teaching methods. Other opportunities for interested faculty are available at MSU. Faculty-to-faculty seminars are sponsored by the College of Nursing and University Outreach, and the Computing and Technology unit sponsors workshops on various technologies throughout the year.

Unexpected benefits of using technology have included faculty being introduced to new tools. “Instead of an overhead projector, they all want

to use a camera now. It provides more detail,” Predko explained. Additionally, the learning needs of adults also became clearer by using the technology. Freddolino noted that “Students force us to attend to curriculum and our expected outcomes.”

Evaluation

Evaluation of their respective programs is a high priority. Social work is using a multimodal approach, that is, they will evaluate each course in multiple ways. Besides the standard instructional rating system required by MSU, students complete a series of feedback instruments for the first, second, and third week, midterm, tenth week and at the end of the course. This instrument provides feedback on issues such as content of course, relevance, and clarity. The classroom environment was also assessed using Darkenwald’s instrument to measure students’ perceptions.

Early results suggest that no differences exist in what students expected to get and what they received across the three sites. Off-campus students did give higher ratings for clarity and organization, but Freddolino was not surprised at that result. “Faculty who are teaching with the technology must be well-organized and prepared for this environment.”

The efforts to provide a wide range of evaluative data will be useful for the social work program in answering questions from their accreditation body. “We’re looking at five areas: class size; library resources; availability of faculty; professional socialization; and socialization to the university community.”

Findings from the nursing off-campus programs are very similar to those reported by social work. Predko added that students enrolled in the off-campus programs are more task-oriented and need less socialization than students on campus. Faculty evaluations are comparable or higher at the off-campus sites. “Outcomes are difficult to measure. We measure where they are starting out, how they see the program fitting into their career and life plans, and how they perceive the contributions made by the program.”

Joan Predko concluded by sharing the top five reasons suggested by faculty in the College of Nursing to use technology in teaching:

- You’re looking for something to fill up your spare time.
- Your therapist recommended that you try out your newly acquired high tolerance for frustration.
- Your horoscope said that you like to prepare for events at least a week in advance.
- Your lifelong dream has been to be a TV star.
- You enjoy the challenge of using new technology to meet the needs of distant learners.