Distance-education students utilize computer-mediated communication

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There has been recent popularity explosion of university distance education courses. Universities increasingly use distance learning courses in an effort to increase enrollments and provide convenient access for students. One recent survey found that more than 3 million higher education students—about 20% of all postsecondary students in the U.S.—enrolled in at least one online course during the Fall 2006 term. This statistic represented an almost 10% increase in online course participation from the previous year, far exceeding the 1.5% growth in overall higher education enrollment for the same period.

It is commonly held that online courses are convenient and useful for increasing student enrollment, but there are challenges to implementing effective distance education programs. University faculty may need additional release time and workload adjustment to develop new courses, or additional training in technology and/or instructional methods. Researchers at Texas Tech University published an article in the latest issue of *HortTechnology* that contains several key recommendations for faculty and administrators of university distance education courses.

The research team of Cynthia B. McKenney, Ellen B. Peffley, and Igino Teolis from the Department of Plant and Soil Science at Texas Tech set out to analyze communication methods between students and faculty in three distance learning modalities: web-facilitated, online, and interactive video conferencing (IVC) courses. They also studied the amount of time invested by faculty in course delivery, grading, student communications, and administrative activities across the three

modalities.

Regarding student to faculty communications, the research showed that the number of e-mails and phone calls from students in the online sections were significantly greater than those in the web-facilitated sections. "The number of phone or e-mail contacts increase when students have a reduced amount of direct faculty/student contact. It would appear that when students have less access to faculty synchronously in class, they resort to alternative methods of communication", explained McKenney. This increase in "computer-mediated communication" (CMC) by the online students confirmed previous studies that showed an increased use of e-mail by students enrolled in online courses. Interestingly, the study found that students in the interactive video conferencing courses were unwilling to contact a faculty member by phone; none of the students in either of the two IVC sections phoned a faculty member during the semester. The researchers observed that this phenomenon "substantiated the increased use of e-mail by students enrolled in distance courses and emphasized the need for timely faculty response to computer-mediated communication."

In regard to instructor/faculty time investment, the research showed that time spent on online courses was significantly less than time spent on web-facilitated courses. Class preparation, grading, and teaching required all required less time for the online teaching mode compared to IVC. McKenney explained: "IVC in and of itself does not save faculty time. The value of this instructional mode is in the ability to have synchronous communication with students who are at a remote location. Therefore, it is vital that workshops on online course development skills are available for faculty. These workshops, and access to course design consultants, would decrease faculty frustration and time investment."

McKenney concluded by noting that distance education is part of the future of higher education, and computer-mediated communication can

help bridge the gap between faculty and students. "As students compensate for the loss of live student/faculty communication by increasing their asynchronous contact via CMC, it is critically important for faculty members to respond immediately to any form of asynchronous contact by their students."

  More information: The complete study and abstract are available on the ASHS HortTechnology electronic journal web site: horttech.ashspublications.org/ … nt/abstract/20/1/245

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