

Motivations and Expectations of Early Adopters of Distance Education

A survey was conducted of "early adopter" faculty at the University of Nebraska at Omaha to ascertain their motivations and expectations in adopting distance learning technologies. The results were compared to those of similar studies. For a complete summary of the research, see <http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/CSD1196.pdf>.

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To assess the characteristics of early adopters of distance learning technologies at the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO), a survey was distributed to 107 individuals (faculty and staff) who had signed up for a faculty development listserv on instructional technology. The listserv was formed for interested users from all colleges on campus to share experiences and resources related to the use of technology in teaching and learning.

The study found that UNO distance educators were similar to early adopters in other studies in that (1) their main motivation was instructor-perceived needs and (2) the respondents exhibited a previous pattern of early adoption of other innovations or new technologies.

The typical respondent to the UNO survey was a male 73 percent), full-time faculty member (92 percent) with more than 16 years at the institution (35 percent) who had an office computer, used e-mail, had keyboard skills, and used the World Wide Web. From a multiple choice list, the most common reason chosen for teaching via distance technologies was "a need that I perceive for my content knowledge outside the Omaha area that can be met only through distance education" (39 percent).

The most intriguing difference between the UNO early adopters and those of other studies was their senior status. Most studies from the business world have documented the early adopter profile as one of a younger user, particularly when the innovations are newer technologies.

The surveyed faculty revealed what they perceived as the difficulties involved in distance education in a series of forced-choice questions where they were asked to rank the three greatest challenges. "Adapting the presentation of the course," "learning how to use the technology," and "developing good class discussions" were top concerns. Respondents were also somewhat wary of potential administrative barriers, including:

- how extra costs would be charged to students,
- how students would find out about distance education courses,

- how costs would be covered for teaching via distance, and
- locations of send-receive sites.

The survey participants were also aware of the importance that interaction would play in a distance learning environment. Most saw discussion as important during class, and although most had no major concerns about eliciting this discussion, almost a third (30 percent) worried they would pay more attention to students at the local site than remote sites.

Survey participants were upbeat about what they felt their own contributions to this new delivery method could be. In another forced-choice item that asked them to rank their top three skills, respondents perceived their greatest skills as their abilities to learn to use technology, to adapt presentations for teaching via distance, to make the course interesting, to include students at remote sites, and to adapt assignments. Thus the senior status of these early adopters came through in their confidence in their own abilities and sophistication in perceiving potential difficulties related to this new form of teaching and learning.

This study appears to indicate that if institutions want to motivate faculty to engage in distance education activities, it will be important to convince them that there is a need for their course content that cannot be met by traditional means. Further, to help them do the job properly, faculty will look for support from the administration to manage course logistics and information as well as support from experienced specialists to make the courses interactive and engaging.

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