

CRITICAL THINKING AND DECISION MAKING: SELECTING A DISTANCE EDUCATION SCHOOL

By

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INTRODUCTION

The paper discusses the role of critical thinking skills in enhancing the decision making process. The application of critical thinking skills will be described in my decision to return to school and pursue a graduate degree. The discussion will highlight the rationale that led me to select the master's degree in psychology program at the University of Phoenix.

Making the decision to become a student in a graduate distance education degree program can be a challenging endeavor. Individuals want to select a university or college that effectively helps them to achieve their personal and professional goals. Educational organizations are realizing that the adult learners have high expectations and are striving to develop vibrant and new educational paradigms that take greater advantage of today's multimedia. Online education has demonstrated rapid growth during the past ten years. American higher education institutions are making significant financial investments into online education. Traditional universities who used to focus solely on face-to-face classrooms are adding online classes and degree programs. Seaman & Allen's (2006, p.1) observe that "nearly 3.2 million students were taking at least one online course during the fall 2005 term, a substantial increase over the 2.3 million reported the previous year."

It is important that prospective students ask reflective questions that will help them to evaluate whether a distance education school will meet their needs. Unfortunately, some students fail to take the time to explore their educational options which could lead them to make a school choice that is not in their best interests. Online education is not for every student and especially for those who are more dependent upon face-to-face interaction with their teacher and colleagues. Fisher

(2006, p. 155) relates that "most of us have not been taught how to make decisions well---in particular what questions to ask before deciding ..."

Students wonder about the academic credibility of online schools due to their nontraditional educational approach. It is a vital question that raises legitimate concerns about how well their degree will be received by prospective business and educational employers. The selection of a school is a major concern that requires using critical thinking skills to examine information on different schools. Lipman (1995) states "...critical thinking is skillful, responsible thinking that facilitates good judgment for three major reason, they are (1) relies upon criteria, (2) is self-correcting, and (3) is sensitive to context" (p. 146). Critical thinking is viewed as a dynamic process that involves having standards (criteria to measure quality), cognitive skills and making wise choices. (Muirhead & Murchu, 2005). Using critical thinking skills can help people to make better decisions because it requires being patient, objective and carefully studying contextual information. Individuals must avoid making hasty or emotional decisions that neglect considering alternative choices and their potential consequences. It can be very disappointing when a student does not realize until they have started a degree program that the school is a poor fit and fails to meet their expectations (Fisher, 2001).

An important step in the decision making process is gathering relevant information. UOP has just launched their graduate psychology degree but catalog program information is not available. Therefore, I asked academic counselors a number of questions about the new program during telephone conversations and exchanging email notes. In the future, prospective students will have access to more detailed information from catalogs. Perhaps, students might be able to

contact alumni who have graduated from the program. Alumni represent first hand educational experiences and can be valuable resources for students.

My second step, involved examining the quality of UOP's education by using the following criteria:

- regional accreditation
- adequate learner support staff for technical and academic issues
- course titles that would be easily recognized by educators and business personnel
- financial costs for the entire program
- program flexibility
- learner-centered philosophy
- interaction promoted within the classes
- experienced faculty (Muirhead, 2002, pp-68-69).

The eight criteria are key elements for having a credible degree program and fostering relevant educational experiences for students. UOP effectively meets each of these criteria such as requiring psychology faculty members to have doctoral degrees and offering excellent computer technology assistance for their students. It is a major reason that the university has experienced tremendous growth and is known as a leader in adult education.

My work in distance education did help me during the decision making process because it gave me the perspective of being a student and university instructor. I have had the opportunity to teach a diversity of online classes, complete a doctoral dissertation on interactivity in graduate distance education schools, completed two online graduate degrees (e.g. one from UOP) and mentor doctoral students and faculty members. I recently earned certificate in cognitive psychology at The Teachers College, Columbia University that increased my understanding of traditional schools who offered online courses. These extensive online educational experiences offer me a comprehensive picture about important issues that must be addressed when considering attending a distance education school.

Why did the University of Phoenix psychology degree

program appeal to me?

UOP places a strong emphasis on student centered learning. Students are given greater control over their educational experiences and this increases motivation to work diligently at their course work. Students are encouraged to connect their school work with their goals. This is important to me because it enables me to create papers and projects that are close to my professional writing goals (e.g. publishing journal articles). Also, instructors give students the freedom to take intellectual risks in their assignments. This increases the possibility that they will become cultural creators who can make a positive difference in their local communities. It is intellectually stimulating to be working with people who are creative thinkers who are dedicated to their professional development.

UOP has made a focus on relevant educational experiences which make learning much more valuable. I have completed seven academic degrees and have found that some online instructors from other universities have a flawed vision of academic achievement. I once took an independent doctoral class and the instructor assigned reading eight large books and required me to complete 11 papers. The instructor related the huge workload was to make up for not having been in a formal class and missing seat time. There is place for hard work in graduate school but unrealistic academic expectations can undermine an individual's motivation to be a life-long learner (Martinez, 2006).

The UOP model supports my educational philosophy. Students are provided learning opportunities that improve their critical thinking skills while helping them to develop attitudes and study techniques that foster confidence and self-directed learning (Atwell, 2006). Distance education can empower individual growth in five ways according to Cross (2007, p.77):

- Knowing and choosing the best way to learn (individual, group, debate, or triage, for example) and the best sources of information.
- Personal knowledge management (capturing and

reflecting on one's tool kit).

- Forming personal relationships (with mentors, colleagues, and information sources)
- Continuous reflection (double loop, goal of self-improvement).
- Moving to a reinforcing learning environment.

The five categories of learning reveal a stress on individualized instruction and having immediate access to knowledge resources. These are instructional features found in UOP online classes where students can study any time during the day or night and have access to the online library.

In closing, my decision to select the UOP graduate psychology degree program was based upon evaluation of established criteria and my distance education experiences. Best practices in critical thinking and decision making involve cultivating wisdom which is the practical application of knowledge. Critical thinking played a vital role in helping me to evaluate the decision from a multidimensional perspective. UOP offers educational opportunities that affirm my professional goals and I am excited about pursuing my eighth degree!

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