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ABSTRACT

The advent of the Internet, the World Wide Web, and global infrastructures for e-learning are revolutionizing how colleges and universities deliver degree programs to adult students. Benefits of on-line degree programs to working adults include flexibility, convenience, and time and cost savings. New technologies that greatly affect how online degree programs function include archivability, searchability, replicability, hypertext linkability, communication devices, and representation and modeling tools. Blackboard and WebCT provide a network without instructors having to build their own infrastructure. Comparing online programs is best done with an assessment tool such as the one Diane Billings developed in 2000, which compares faculty support, use of technology, educational practices, outcomes, and student support. Use of that tool to find the best online human resource degree programs in the United States yields a list of bachelor's degree programs (Indiana State University; University of Maryland University College; Western Governors University; Southwestern College) and a list of master's degree programs (Kennedy-Western University; Western Carolina University; Walden University; Upper Iowa University; Capella University). (The information on programs, amounting to over half of the paper, includes program foci, statistics, enrollment procedures, telephone numbers, and website addresses. The document contains 22 references.) (AJ)

In Search Of the Best On-Line Degree Programs in Human Resources

by

Dr. James Kirk & Holly G. Waltemyer

Western Carolina University

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Abstract

The advent of the Internet, the World-Wide-Web, and related technologies is revolutionizing how colleges and universities deliver degree programs to adult students. This paper discusses some of the new technologies and the race among colleges and universities to put courses and degrees programs on-line. With such a proliferation of degree programs becoming available, the authors emphasize the need for students to carefully research and evaluate programs prior to sending in their application fees. To this end, readers are given an assessment framework for evaluating on-line programs. Finally, the results of a study in which the fore mentioned assessment tool was used to evaluate degree programs in human resources are presented.

On-line Degree Programs

Education is being reengineered through the introduction of web-based learning. This technological revolution provides a window of new opportunities for universities and students. Today hundreds of colleges and universities offer on-line degrees. Some providers are among the traditional non-profit universities, while others are for-profit organizations. Some examples of traditional universities offering on-line degree options are Duke University (www.duke.edu), Syracuse University (www.syracuse.edu), Indiana State University (www.indstate.edu), Penn State University (www.psu.edu), Florida State University (www.fsu.edu), University of Maryland (www.umuc.edu), and Western Governors University (www.wgu.edu). There is also a growing number of for-profit universities that strive to follow the traditional model of education. Such institutions include The University of Phoenix (www.phoenix.edu), Jones International University (www.jonesinternational.edu), and Walden University (www.waldenu.edu).

Many accredited colleges and universities are offering on-line degree programs because of the benefits it affords working adults. This nontraditional type of learning allows students the option to receive an education while working full-time. Learners are able to work on course work any time of day, when it best suits them. This flexibility and convenience empowers the learner no matter where they live and the resources available to them. Furthermore, a lessening of time and money needed for transportation and child care greatly appeals to the adult students in on-line programs (Benefits of an E-Learning, 2002).

According to Wilson (2001), “new technologies serve a number of functions: they empower people and open up new possibilities for action.” Wilson also speaks of a “digital shift”

which includes components of technology that greatly affect how on-line degree programs function. These new technologies include archivability, searchability, replicability, hypertext linkability, communication devices, and representation and modeling tools. Archivability means that all on-line interactions can be easily traced, which is evident in many on-line degree program discussion boards. Digital databases allow searchability throughout the World Wide Web. It is much easier for an instructor to simply send students a link to information than to make hard copies of documents. More information can be replicated to students at very little cost through on-line programs. Furthermore, on-line communication tools provide many options for enhancing education. Students can communicate via discussion boards in either real or asynchronous time. Communication can take place through live or archived webcasts. Modeling tools such as PowerPoint and Macromedia Flash enable instructors to create highly engaging web-based tutorials. Each of these digital elements contributes greatly to the value of an on-line degree program (Wilson, 2001).

Global infrastructures for e-learning programs are also becoming a key part of an on-line degree program. Applications such as Blackboard (www.blackboard.com) and WebCT (www.webct.com) provide a network on the web for students and instructors without instructors having to invest time in building their own infrastructure (Rosenberg 2001). This allows a common place for students to meet for discussion, a place for instructors to post lessons, assignments, tests, and grades.

Assessing On-line Degree Program

Diane Billings (1999) reports that, “distance education is becoming the norm rather than the exception.” As a student begins to search for the best match, it is likely that there will be many more on-line education options than initially anticipated. If not properly managed, a search for a quality degree program that best meets a person’s needs can be overwhelming. Fortunately, there are a number of digital databases available that can help an interested learner narrow the search. Following is a list of resources for researching degree programs that are offered on-line:

www.petersons.com, www.elearners.com, www.mindedge.com, www.classesusa.com, www.e-learning-distance-education-colleges-on-line-degrees.com.

While specialized search engines can help prospective students locate and collect information about on-line programs in various disciplines, there is still the matter of comparing and evaluating the individual offerings. This process is best achieved with the use of an assessment tool. One such assessment tool is that developed by Diane Billing (2000). This framework contains five major components, including faculty support, use of technology, educational practices, outcomes, and student support. Faculty support consists of faculty development, orientation to technology, ongoing technical support, workload recognition, and rewards. Use of technology includes the accessible and reliability of the infrastructure and to what degree the hardware and software enables students to be productive. Educational practices encompass topics such as active learning, time on task, feedback, student-faculty interaction, collaboration with peers, respect for diversity, and high expectations. Outcomes involve: how much learning is occurring; recruitment, retention, and graduation rates; convenience, preparedness for the real world, computer proficiency, and satisfaction. Finally, student support

consists of how the learners are informed, the availability of an orientation to technology, ongoing technical support, learning resources, and student services.

A Few Quality On-line HR Programs

Specialty on-line degree search engines and Diane Billing's on-line program assessment framework (2000) were used by the authors to ferret out the best on-line Human Resource programs in the United States. The final list of programs include four Bachelor Degree programs and five Master Degree programs: Bachelor Degree in Human Resource Development, Indiana State University; Bachelor Degree in Human Resource Management, University of Maryland University College; Bachelor of Business HR Management Emphasis, Western Governors University; Bachelor of Science in Human Resource Development, Southwestern College; Master of Human Resources Management, Kennedy-Western University; Master of Science in Human Resources, Western Carolina University; Master of Business Administration in Human Resource Management, Walden University; Master of Business Administration in Human Resources, Upper Iowa University; Master of Science in Organization and Management with a Specialization in Human Resource Management, Capella University. Each of these accredited on-line degree programs strive to succeed in programs that support Billing's criteria for a successful web-based program, which includes faculty support, use of technology, educational practices, outcomes, and student support. Because program costs depend upon a student's residency and are rapidly changing, cost was not taken into consideration when comparing programs.

Indiana State University's Bachelor Degree in Human Resource Development

This program is geared towards transfer students, especially students who have previously completed an associate degree. The human resources program is, “designed to meet the needs of a specialist working in the profession,” therefore the typical student is a working professional and has been working in the field for at least a few years. The focus of the curriculum is in the areas of education, psychology, and technical education (Human Resource Development, 2002). Quality, convenience, flexibility, and specialty in the ability to work with transfer students make Indiana State University's human resources program stand out as one of the best in the nation (About Degree Link, 2002). According to Carol Yaw, Assistant Professor at ISU, there are approximately 150 students enrolled in the HR program with forty to fifty graduating each year. Yaw also states that this cutting-edge degree began to offer on-line coursework in 1995 and a student could get the degree completely on-line by the year 1997. More information about this program can be found at <http://indstate.edu/degreelink/programsFrame.html> or by calling 888-237-8080.

The University of Maryland University College

This human resource major provides 21st-century skills, knowledge, and understanding of human resource functions in private and public-sector organizational settings. These functions include human resource planning; recruiting, selecting, and placing employees; orienting new employees; training employees in the context of their career development plans; developing and supporting performance appraisal systems; managing labor relations; managing compensation and benefit programs; and implementing personnel policies and procedures. The human resource

management major prepares students for work in business administration and human resources. Through the proper selection of courses, the student can prepare for the examinations for Human Resource Professional, Senior Human Resource Professional, and International Human Resource Professional certification, which are offered by the Society of Human Resource Management. The program provides a unique opportunity for the human resources professional to gain knowledge in the field through a practical, educational experience. UMUC information regarding the Bachelors in Human Resource Management can be found by visiting <http://www.umuc.edu/prog/ugp/majors/hrmn.shtml> or by contacting Tom Thompson, Assistant Director at 800-888-UMUC x7788 or tthompson@umuc.edu.

Western Governors University's Bachelor of Business with HR Management

The typical student in this program is the adult learner who is looking to either advance in the human resources profession or preparing for a career change. Students must be self-disciplined and have the ability to work at their own pace. The Western Governors University is based completely on competencies rather than required courses. Students must feel comfortable taking a series of assessments. WGU learners are also matched with a mentor who helps them throughout the program. In addition, students enjoy the HR program because of the choice, convenience, flexibility, value, and access that it provides. Prior to the completion of the program students develop a comprehensive portfolio, met competency assessments, complete a capstone project, and complete a balanced study in the business arena with a focus on human resources (Bachelor of Science 2002). Bob Rinquest, Admissions Counselor, reveals that the on-line Bachelors of Business degree began in 1997, while the HR Management emphasis just started in 2001. They

currently have 15 students enrolled in the HR Management Bachelors of Business on-line degree. Since the HR emphasis just started last year, WGU has not had any graduates of the program to date. The average age of the WGU student is forty and most are already working professionals in the field. The program web site can be located at http://www.wgu.edu/wgu/academics/hr_bs_listing.html or more information can be obtained by calling 877-435-7948.

Southwestern College offers a Bachelor of Science in Human Resource Development

This is an on-line program that any student interested in the HR field might consider before choosing an educational institution. With a history that dates back until 1885 and a first graduation class in 1889, Southwestern College boasts a past rich in quality education. Initially Southwestern became an accredited college in 1917 and recently in January 2001 initiated degree programs through online learning (Southwest College Online, 2002). The human resources degree provides students with the skills needed to succeed in the area of management, people, and resources. The program encompasses coursework in technology, world economics, research, and legal issues in human resources. The main focus of the program is the human factor. Students and faculty work together to prepare the most needed outcome, to be able to apply the knowledge gained to the real world (Human Resources Development, 2002). More information about this online degree option can be found at <http://www.sckans.edu/online/hrd.html> or by contacting Candyce Duggan at 1-888-684-5335x112 or at online@sckans.edu.

Master of Human Resources Management Degree Kennedy-Western University

This Kennedy-Western University program provides a high quality academic program of study. The faculty strives to create a valuable learning experience for students. The typical student is the mid-career adult. Kennedy-Western has a commitment to provide learners with accessibility, flexibility, and convenience. A major draw for the program is its high quality mentoring services to students. The University is also committed to a diverse student body and staff (About Us, 2002). The human resources degree focuses on the areas of labor relations, training and development, performance appraisal systems, and employee participation concepts (Your Degree, 2002). Admissions Counselor, Carol Palmentiero states that, "Students start every day and graduate every day at Kennedy-Western." Palmentiero also reports that the K-W has been in existence since 1984; but is unsure of the exact year the program began. More information about Kennedy-Western's program can be found at http://www.kw.edu/degree/area_study.asp or by calling 800-635-2900x208.

MS Degree Human Resources Western Carolina University

Western offers the only graduate level human resources degree in North Carolina. The Master of Science in Human Resources program graduates an average of 12 students each year with approximately 40 students enrolled in the program. The typical student is a working full-time professional with many either looking for advancement, challenge, or a career change. The program at WCU began in the fall of 1984 and now can be taken either in a blended learning (classroom and on-line coursework) or completely on-line. There are three specialty areas that

include: E-Learning, Organization Performance, and Generalist Studies. The strengths of the program that make Western Carolina University's program among the best HR on-line degree programs are that it's flexible, meets the needs of the full-time working adult learner, is of high quality, knowledge can be applied to the real world, the curriculum is up-to-date, convenient, and the latest technologies are integrated into the coursework (Masters of Science Program in Human Resource, 2002). Additional information can be located at <http://paws.wcu.edu/kirk/index.html> or by contacting Dr. James Kirk at kirk@wcu.edu or at 828-251-6642.

Master of Business Administration in Human Resource Management; Walden University

This program provides a unique educational opportunity. The University began in 1970 and became accredited in 1990 and is experienced in distance learning. The main goal is to create a program for each learner that is customized and directly related to career goals. The University has students from more than thirty countries and all fifty states (Introduction, 2002). Walden University allows busy professionals to balance work, family, and education. The Human Resources program contains rich material in the areas of recruitment, retention, turnover, performance evaluation, compensation and benefits, job design, and training (Master of Business Administration, 2002).

Students spend approximately fifteen to twenty hours on assignments; however, they can finish in as little as fifteen to twenty-four months. Walden University provides quality education as recognized by the fact that they recently were one of only ten facilities selected to participate in the U.S. Department of Education's Distance Education Demonstration Program (Accredited, 2002). Reggie White, Walden University Enrollment Advisor, notes that 5000 students are

currently enrolled in the MBA program and that the breakdown for just human resources students was not available at the time. The Human Resource Management program emphasis has been available since 2001. For more information visit

http://www.waldenu.edu/prospect/programs/mmba/intro_hr.html or call 866-4WALDEN.

Master of Business Administration in Human Resources Management; Upper Iowa University

Upper Iowa University has a unique vision to become a distinct entrepreneurial university. It is the largest private college in Iowa and has over 4400 graduate and independent study students (About UIU, 2002). Course topics of this program include the full spectrum of HR related classes. It is evident that the faculty support and student support services available are top notch. Celina Peerman, UIU's Director of Organizational Development boasts approximately one hundred students in the HR Management on-line degree program with about fifteen graduating each year. Peerman seems delighted that their enrollment numbers keep going up each year. The typical student is in their mid to late thirties. It is interesting that the MBA in HR Management program became a complete on-line program in 1999. Peerman is quick to point out that the IUI strength is that the quality university faculty strives to develop relationships with students. For more information on this small, but credible university please visit http://www.uiu.edu/fields/graduate/mba_hum_res_mgmt.html or call 800-773-9298.

Master of Science in Organization and Management; Capella University

Capella University provides quality on-line graduate level education. Capella University enrolls over 6000 learners in over forty countries. The typical student is a working professional striving to balance family, work, and education. Capella University began in 1993 by offering on-line degree programs in an effort to redefine adult education (Capella University, 2002). The specialization in Human Resource Management strives to apply theory and practical applications of successful HR organizations. The courses help students to become better strategic business partners and enhance skills in order to become a better partner in management decisions (School of Business, 2002). According to Ryan Graff, Assistant Enrollment Director, there are five to six hundred students enrolled in the Masters of Science in Organization and Management. In the past, the university has graduated about twenty students per year in this program. Enrollment has grown by ninety percent in the last six years. Three-fourths of the students are between the ages of thirty-five and forty-five. The Organization and Management degree became a completely on-line option in 1997. Graff seems especially proud to note that over 600 organizations send employees to Capella University, including IBM, AT&T, Boeing, Honeywell, NASA, and Yale University. Further information can be located at http://www.capellauniversity.edu/aspscripts/schools/business/hr_manage_masters.asp or by calling 888-CAPELLA.

Summary

On-line degree programs provide more opportunities than just an alternative to “seat time.” As universities strive to keep up with the latest technology, the public will only continue to see more web-based training develop at a rapid pace. Higher Education has embraced a new digital paradigm shift. The question has really become not whether organizations will implement on-line training, but who will do it most effectively? Students are faced with the challenge of finding the best on-line degree programs, while universities are faced with the challenge of not only web-based development, but also how to then market the courses in a virtual world. How will students know about the program? How will students know which programs are of high quality?

During this time of ever expanding on-line learning opportunities, it is important to remember that on-line learning is not for everyone. Many students prefer and will continue to favor learning the old fashion way – face-to-face. However, for those human resource professionals who thrive in the new virtual environment, there are many high quality programs from which to choose. Several have been highlighted in this paper.

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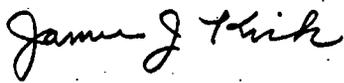
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