Frontiers of Distance Learning
in Business Education

Frontiers of Distance Learning in Business Education

Edited by

Hooman Estelami

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

To my father, Dr. Mohammad Estelami who taught me how to teach

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PREFACE

Distance education and online learning are interchangeable terms used to describe the delivery of educational content whereby the student and the instructor are separated by geography, time, or both. Within the domain of business education, approximately one-third of all business schools offer online business programs, and many more are expected to follow in this direction. Therefore considerable attention is being given by business educators to the refinement of pedagogical approaches in their distance learning offerings. The growing attention is reflected in the rising number of academic papers related to distance learning methods which appear in leading business journals, as well as the growing number of workshops, research seminars and online forums on the topic.

Despite the growing trends in the use of distance learning methods in business education, up until now, there had been no book that would serve as a resource to consolidate and disseminate related research findings. Much of the existing books and resources on online pedagogy have been general in nature without specific focus to business education. The objective of this book is therefore to consolidate state-of-the-art knowledge on distance learning methods, best practices, and research findings as they relate to online business education. This exposure would help inform business faculty, administrators and course designers on how to optimize distance courses in the various sub-disciplines of business to achieve the most beneficial results for business students.

The chapters included in this book are sourced from published research reflecting state-of-the-art thinking on distance business education. These research studies have undergone extensive scientific review at top academic journals and are recognizable for their unique focus on issues related to the advancement of distance learning capabilities among business schools. As such, the compilation of these articles enables us to better understand the unique dynamics by which business programs can be offered in the online world, and how pedagogical approaches can be modified to further enhance business students' learning outcomes. The authors of the individual chapters must be commended for their innovative thinking and methodical approach to researching specific aspects of distance learning in the context of business education.

It is important to acknowledge that the development of this book has been inspired by my own personal fascination with distance learning, and the opportunities that I see it presenting all educators. My own personal experience with the topic stemmed from designing, developing and offering several online marketing courses at Fordham University's Graduate School of Business. The encouraging feedback expressed by the students and the superior learning outcomes exhibited in their academic performance in my online courses over the years encouraged me to further educate myself on distance learning methods. This led to several years of study of the area, several research papers of my own, and eventually a conference hosted at Fordham university in 2012 on the use of distance learning methods in advancing business education. Several of the chapters in this book are based on papers presented at the 2012 conference.

I must thank several colleagues at Fordham University who have been instrumental in helping my though process and eventually the development of this book. These include Dr. Fleur Eshghi who has over the years provided me with the wisdom, guidance and constant support on the use of emerging instructional technologies available to faculty. Her deep understanding of the field of education and immense knowledge of instructional technology has helped guide my thinking tremendously. Dr. Steven D'Agustino has also been very instrumental in shaping much of my thinking on how distance education programs can be implemented to optimize student learning. His visionary thinking on the transformation process is unique and highly effective and I thank him for the many hours he has patiently spent with me educating me on the topic. I must also thank Dr. Aditya Saharia who first encouraged and inspired me to pursue the development of distance courses at Fordham. Had it not been for his encouragement I probably would not have found this path. The support and vision of Dean Donna Rapaciolli at Fordham's Gabelli School of Business and Dean David Gautschi at Fordham's Graduate School of Business have also been instrumental in paving the path which led to the development of this book. They have both allowed me to explore new teaching methods and have enabled me to share my experiences, vision and pedagogical approaches with other colleagues at Fordham and elsewhere.

Most of all, I would like to thank my father, Dr. Mohammad Estelami who as an esteemed educator and scholar is my role model. His approach to teaching has been exemplary for me. I clearly recall when as a child I would sit in some of his lectures and observe his teaching style, finding myself (and others) mesmerized by his superior communication abilities. Much of my own approach to teaching has been informed by his

pedagogical approaches which I was fortunate to observe at an early age. Later, as I grew and learned more about his scholarly contributions to his own field of study, I recognized how much catching up I have to do. However it is his supportive role as a loving and caring father that more than anything has made him my role model, and for this reason this book is dedicated to him.

CHAPTER ONE

THE ROLE OF DISTANCE LEARNING IN BUSINESS EDUCATION

HOOMAN ESTELAMI

The creation of a book on distance learning, specifically focused on business education, is in response to the growing level of participation of business schools around the world in distance modes of education. While business education shares a great deal with education in other fields, there are distinct characteristics of this discipline which warrant a focused examination of the pedagogical approaches used. The field of business, as an educational domain is one of the richest disciplines in the degree of diversity by which it draws from other disciplines. Business students are exposed to a wide range of tools, from sophisticated statistical modeling and accounting tools to the qualitative methods used in understanding human behavior and organizational leadership. In gaining such exposure business students learn from a variety of fields such as statistics, economics, psychology, sociology, and arguably even philosophy.

While business education draws from a wide spectrum of scientific and liberal arts disciplines for which distance education methods may have been long established, the focus of business training is considerably different from these fields. For one thing, the criteria by which 'success' is defined are more clearly stated in business settings. For many, business success is measured by objective indicators such as profits and market share, and in some cases, subject to other important objectives such as meeting social responsibility mandates and maximizing customer satisfaction. The very fact that these objectives can be clearly stated and often accurately measured requires business professionals to be focused on the end goals by which organizational success is assessed. As a result, in preparing business professionals of the future, business schools have to develop very tight curricula addressing the pressing needs of businesses for graduates capable of achieving the end goals being sought. Business education is therefore considerably more focused and often leaner than

educational approaches in other fields, especially those in non-professional domains where learning may occur through introspection and reflection. In contrast business education focuses on teaching students the application of specific tools which make organizations more efficient and competitive. This need for a focused approach to learning clearly differentiates business education from education in many other disciplines.

The pressure on business educators to adopt distance forms of course delivery is increasing due to the challenges that environmental forces have brought onto the business world. Many of these challenges relate to technological forces which have made the workforce more efficient and mandate increased technology use by business professionals. Electronic means of information exchange and the ability for global organizations to operate continuously without interruption through their multiple offices around the world spanning the time zones has made the work environment far more agile than a decade ago. Elements of this technology have directly affected corporate training programs allowing organizations to synchronously train their geographically dispersed pool of employees using tools such as webinars and podcasts.

The need for change has however become even more pressing in light of the financial crisis of the last decade which resulted in massive workforce reductions. This made it necessary for organizations to demand more output from the remaining employees. The training of these employees has therefore transitioned from costly seminar-based in-person delivery to distance modes whereby less travel and logistical challenges exist and a larger number of employees can be trained. As the economy recovers and as the rate of employment improves, the need to deploy such modes of training for newly hired or rehired employees becomes even greater. The net effect is the expansion of the workforce receiving their training through distance learning modes.

For the same reasons that the world of business has transitioned into distance learning modes of employee training, distance learning methods offer many opportunities in formal business education in preparing the future business professional. Business schools have the ability to efficiently deliver their curriculum to a large number of students. Given that research across many fields indicates that distance learning outcomes are generally equivalent, and in some cases superior, to traditional face-to-face teaching significant economies of scale can be recognized by business schools that proactively adopt distance learning methods. Furthermore, the reliance on distance learning methods requires students and instructors to focus on applicable content and skill development and enhances the direct practical applications of the disseminated knowledge. This focus on

application rather than theory has been shown to be an effective form of teaching in other professional fields such as engineering and medicine where distance learning methods are heavily utilized today.

It is therefore clear that a book on distance learning focused on business education is long overdue. The accumulation of research in recent years on the effectiveness of different distance learning approaches enables us to gain a clearer perspective on which pedagogical approaches work best. Formal and methodical research on the use of distance learning methods in business education helps inform the science by which educational administrators in business schools can shape and mold the curricula offered to their students. The research can also guide the development of programs that best suit the evolving needs of industry.

The Evolutionary Nature of Distance Education

When discussing distance learning, the conversation often focuses on methods, technology and the emerging possibilities arising from mass adoption of communication tools. As a result the common belief is that distance learning is a recent phenomenon. Despite this popular belief, distance learning methods have in fact been in use in a variety of professional fields for nearly two centuries. The earliest documented cases date back to the early 1800s. At that time, several European institutions provided educational services in a range of professional disciplines using correspondence course formats. Some of the offerings included courses in short-hand writing, home economics, graphics design, history and mathematics (Edelson and Pittman 2008).

In the United States, the use of distance learning methods by educational institutions was first adopted in the early 1900s. The primary reason for their use was the logistical challenges facing the population, specifically in the mid-western regions of the country (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright and Zvacek 2009). Due to the westward expansion of the population of the United States at that time, states such as Iowa, Ohio, Illinois and Indiana had low density populations and potential students were dispersed over large geographic ranges. This made the task of offering face-to-face instruction a challenge and one that could only be addressed in the more populated metropolitan areas of these states. Serving the specialized educational needs of the remaining population using traditional needs in these states would have been impractical and uneconomical. As a result in the first half of the 20th century a number public and private universities located in the US mid-west utilized the newly introduced technology of radio to broadcast courses over the

airwaves. Radio enabled these institutions to deliver instruction on a wider geographic scale, far beyond the reach possible through campus-based instruction. Similar uses of the radio technology in supporting distance education have also been documented in European countries.

In the 1960s, with the global mass adoption of television, distance education became a more visual means of instructional delivery. Televised courses enabled distance learners to visually connect with their instructors. The visual communications means of television supplemented auditory communications and enhanced the richness of the medium and quality of the educational experience of the students. While broadcast instruction through television allowed the delivery of educational content to the masses, the use of closed-circuit TV in the 1970s and 1980s enabled more specialized instruction to be provided for well-defined and specific educational needs. As a result, students in various levels of schooling could receive instruction independently and the amount of distance-delivered course content grew both in numbers and specialization during this period (Allen and Seaman 2008).

In the 1990s distance education grew on a much larger scale. This was primarily due to the mass adoption of the Internet by the public. Though the Internet was originally developed for military applications by the US armed forces, its mass public adoption enabled educational institutions at all levels to deliver both text-based and multimedia based content at speeds beyond any other means possible. Since the turn of the century, the increased bandwidth offered by telecommunications providers has allowed communication speeds to become even greater. The increased bandwidth capacity now enables distance educators to offer synchronous web-based courses and to engage their geographically dispersed students in live communications, thereby eliminating the physical boundaries created by classroom walls. As a result, today online learning affects close to 7 million students in the United States (Allen and Seaman 2013).

The Revolutionary Impact of Distance Learning Methods in Business Education

An examination of the current state of distance learning tools in business education reveals that in many schools, technology is accessible at its maximum potential to serve the evolving needs of business students. While business schools vary in the intensity by which they deploy possibilities made available through these tools, the state-of-the-art technologies available today have greatly enhanced the reach and effectiveness of business educators who embrace them. These technologies

include the use of web-based synchronous communication tools to reach geographically dispersed student populations, advanced courseware systems to automate student performance assessment, the use of artificial intelligence systems by instructors to enhance performance feedback to students, plagiarism detection software, and the application of computer simulations to enable students to experience the dynamics of business decision making.

While many of the distance learning tools used by business educators have been applied in other fields, some are more applicable and beneficial in business education. Since business is a field in which the responsibility of managers is to make decisions and to mobilize organizations, the tools that enable the managers of the future (current business students) to enhance their decision making abilities have found a strong foothold in business education, especially in the distance form, where pedagogical efficiency is critical. Distance business education is considerably different from traditional teaching where the face-to-face interactions between the instructor and students can enhance student appreciation for decision making. In a distance education setting, where students are dispersed across geographic areas and the opportunity for in-person interaction does not exist it becomes essential to utilize tools that emulate such dynamics. For example, computer simulations facilitate such an experience and have grown in their use among business schools over the years. Similarly the use of web-based synchronous instruction has been found to present business educators with unique benefits as it allows the efficient delivery of technical instruction to geographically dispersed populations.

While the merits of distance learning methods in business education are rarely disputed, what characterizes the potential impact of these methods is what Christensen, Johnson and Horn (2008) refer to as a "disruptive change" in how education is likely to be delivered in the coming decades. We are, at his point in time in the midst of a revolutionary change in how business education is to be delivered. This change will most likely materialize over the next decade and favor institutions that embrace distance learning tools, not necessarily to completely replace all their face-to-face instructional capabilities but to enhance and empower them further. While a decade ago offering online courses was frowned upon by many high-level research-based universities, today many Ivy League universities are active providers of distance courses. It is no longer taboo to be involved in distance education. The embracing of this mode of teaching by the top institutions enables them in the long term to capitalize on more efficient and cost-effective means of offering their services, while at the same time expanding their reach far beyond their traditional geographic range. The resulting competitive

pressure on the remaining schools will require an accelerated adoption of this mode of instruction and create what is referred to as a tipping point (Gladwell 2002) in the wide acceptance of an innovation such as distance business education.

The ultimate question for most business schools is not whether to participate in this transition, but when. Resisting the forces of change, driven by technology, demographic shifts, and the favorable long-term economics of distance learning will in many ways resemble the state of mind that incumbents in many aging and obsolete industries exhibited when facing leapfrogging technological changes. Examples include vacuum tube technology (replaced by transistors), prerecorded music (replaced by digital music), silver-based film (replaced by digital photography) and rental movie distribution (replaced by video streaming services). In all these cases, competitors who were hesitant to embrace the revolutionizing technologies faced dire consequences, reflected by significant loss of market share, downsizing, and in many cases the eventual collapse of the business. There is therefore no reason to believe that business education will be any different from these earlier examples.

It is not beyond existing technological capabilities nor beyond imagination to expect that in the coming years a much larger number of business courses would be delivered in combined face-to-face and webcasted formats. This is because the instruction provided by a business professor in the confines of classroom walls can now be broadcasted live to remotely located students, at very little cost. Therefore, the students in the classroom are no longer the only group benefiting from the lecture content, and the lecture material can be accessed live or as recordings for future viewing by large numbers of students across the globe. Modern methods of student assessment and automated feedback and scoring tools can further ensure that students who remotely access the course meet the same academic standards as those in the classroom, thereby assuring equal learning outcomes. This provides business schools with the opportunity to experience leapfrogging improvements in the economics of how business education is delivered. To further accelerate the rate of change, many textbook publishers are taking on an active role in producing the course content that can be integrated into online course formats. Their participation will not only reduce the production cost of online courses, but can also question the role of traditional universities in offering business education, where the delivery of education is no longer a process executed by the professor in a classroom setting. As Christensen, Johnson and Horn (2008) speculate, the opportunities for change are great as are the dangers of ignoring the forces at work.

Overview of the Chapters in this Book

The chapters in this book have been written by a number of expert researchers whose work has focused on specific aspects of distance learning methods in the context of business education. The research produced by these authors has been recognized as contributions to the field of business education and many have been published in top scholarly journals in recent years. Broadly speaking, the themes of the various chapters can be divided into three different topic areas, as outlined below.

Online Education Models

Three chapters in this book focus on the administrative mindset as they relate to the offering of online business courses. These three chapters examine the impact of distance business courses to the main stakeholders, namely administrators, students and educators. In the chapter entitled "Important Characteristics in an MBA Program: The Perceptions of Online MBA Students," Eastman, Bocchi and Rydzewski examine how student perceptions of the program are formed in the unique environment of distance MBA programs. Utilizing a survey-based approach the authors identify the role of factors such as student perceptions of program length, costs, course offerings and program quality on how students perceive the online MBA program they are enrolled in. Their work provides guidance to administrators in distance business programs on how to improve MBA students' experience with the business curriculum and program delivery.

In the chapter entitled "Why Some Distance Education Programs Fail While Others Succeed in a Global Environment," Rovai and Downey highlight the strategic importance of distance education in the survival of modern educational institutions. By using filings with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) they identify the drivers of success in offering online programs. Their approach is novel and their findings are highly prescriptive in guiding educational administrators in their resource allocation decisions related to the offering of online programs within and beyond business education. Examining the financial aspect of online MBA programs, the chapter by Estelami and Rezvani entitled "An Exploratory Study of Perceptual and Structural Determinants of the Price of Online Business Education," examines how MBA program characteristics influence revenue streams. Using a database of program design characteristics and tuition levels, the role of factors such as MBA rankings, accreditation status, program length and program format on online MBA tuition levels are examined.

Course Design

The next two chapters in the book focus on the various choices that faculty may have with respect to course design. In the chapter entitled "Cooperative Learning at a Distance: An Experiment With Wikis," Campbell and Ellingson report on the use of wikis to enhance group work in an online MBA setting. They demonstrate how to effectively use a wiki to enhance cooperative learning in the seemingly distance environment of an online accounting course.   In the chapter entitled "Toward a Course Conversion Model for Distance Learning: A Review of Best Practices," D'Agustino provides a framework for administrators in both business and non-business programs on how to assess online program delivery. He provides a formal model on how existing face-to-face courses can be transitioned into the online format. This is an important concern for many business schools as the majority of courses in most business programs are in the face-to-face format and the transition to distance modes of education would often require the utilization of such a conversion model.

Technology Use

The next set of papers in the book focus on the effective use of distance learning technology to enhance online business education. Slotkin, Durie and Eisenberg in their chapter entitled "A Case Study of the Benefits of Short-term Study Abroad as a Blended Learning Experience" examine how distance education tools can be used in undergraduate business programs. Focusing specifically on study-abroad programs, the authors demonstrate how the strategic deployment of distance learning tools can enhance student experience by providing them access to course content that would not be accessible using alternative means. The authors demonstrate how such a blended approach can be both pedagogically effective and economically feasible in delivering specialized offerings to undergraduate business students.   The next chapter by Estelami entitled "An Exploratory Study of the Drivers of Student Satisfaction and Learning Experience in Hybrid-Online and Purely Online Marketing Courses," also focuses on technology use in the context of MBA programs. The chapter examines the boundaries of online education by questioning the extent by which online MBA students should be kept at a distant. In doing so it empirically determining the specific contexts in which hybrid-online courses (whereby a combination of distance teaching and face-to-face instruction is used) are perceived to be superior to purely online courses.

In the chapter entitled "Effects of LMS, Self-Efficacy, and Self-Regulated Learning on LMS Effectiveness in Business Education," Eom studies how e-learning technologies may impact the educational experience of business students. Using a large database, Eom identifies the drivers of student satisfaction with e-learning management systems and by doing so provides guidance on how such systems can be configured to optimize business students' learning experiences. The next chapter by Small, Dowell and Simmons entitled "Teacher Communication Preferred Over Peer Interaction: Student Satisfaction With Different Tools in a Virtual Learning Environment," focuses on the merits of various forms of interactivity in the online learning environment. The authors examine the myth that student-to-student interactivity is central to the distance learning environment. Using a large survey they find evidence for the greater impact that teacher-to-student interactivity has on students' perceptions of learning for both business and non-business students.

In the final chapter of the book, by Aviles and Eastman, entitled "Using Technology Effectively to Improve Millennials' Educational Performance: An Exploratory Study of Business Students' Perceptions," focus is given to the emerging population of business students. Millennials -- those born between the late 1970s and the late 1990s -- are commonly believed to interact using communications technology, including those used in online learning, in ways different from students of other age brackets. Due to their unique information processing needs, the authors demonstrate that millennial business students find certain dimensions of distance education highly conducive to their learning. The authors also demonstrate that many of the technology tools assumed by educators and administrators as ineffective are viewed favorably by the millennial business student due their unique mode of learning.

Conclusion

The various chapters in this book have provided specialized and methodical focus on issues that administrators and faculty in the business schools of today and tomorrow will need to grapple with. The forces of change mobilized by the efficiencies, economies and pedagogical outcomes of distance learning have made it impossible for business educators to ignore what the future has to hold. As the capabilities of distance learning technology further improve, and as business students become more acclimated with this mode of learning, the demand on faculty and administrators to respond to the change becomes greater. While the needed changes in course delivery may be viewed by some as a

disruption to the traditional modes of teaching, they also present great opportunities for those who embrace these changes. The ultimate question for many educators in the field of business therefore becomes an issue of timing. If history is to inform us on this matter, one would have to conclude that adaptation sooner is indeed better that later.

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CHAPTER TWO

IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTICS IN AN MBA PROGRAM: THE PERCEPTIVE FROM ONLINE STUDENTS[1]

JACQUELINE K. EASTMAN, JOSEPH BOCCHI AND DANIELLE N. RYDZEWSKI

Online education is becoming more common as technology advances. "Web-based classes are becoming popular in business schools as alternatives or supplements to traditional on-campus courses" (Rossin, Ro, Klein, and Guo, 2009, 87). As early as 2001 there were over 986 distance-teaching institutions in 107 countries, showing that the convenience of the online atmosphere provides students who might not have the ability to attend a formal class the opportunity to gain education through online means (Sprague, Maddux, Ferdig and Albion, 2007, 157). "Online learning is growing, with enrollments increasing 33% per year as part of an estimated $2 billion business" (Bocchi, Eastman, and Swift, 2004, 245). Online courses offer the benefit of convenience while being flexible and provide anytime, anywhere learning (Bocchi, Eastman, and Swift, 2004). Thus, online classes are becoming more appealing due to the convenience of online programs.

The recession has also helped to increase the number of individuals participating in MBA programs. The online program has given students the ability to keep working, while others hope that if they stay in school the economy may pick up when they get done with their degree (Yoon, 2008). For managers, online MBA programs have given them the opportunity to improve their education and careers, while still working for their company (Kathawala, 2001). Thus, online MBA programs have

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given non-traditional students the ability to gain their MBA degree without having to change their daily schedules.

The purpose of this exploratory paper is to look at what characteristics of an online MBA program are important to online graduate students in terms of availability, program quality, program length, cost, and course curriculum.   The paper will examine these characteristics so that we can gain a better understanding of why individuals may choose an online MBA program.   We do this through consideration of one online MBA program in-depth, the Georgia WebMBA program.   Finally this paper examines if there are any differences in what characteristics are important based on demographic variables.

Literature Review

The main aspects for choosing a school for someone considering an online MBA program are accreditation, flexibility, and services (Gerencher, 1998).   When choosing, students want to make sure that the school is credible, the program can fit into their schedule, and that the services provided by the program are worth the time and effort.   We also propose that the cost of the program and the courses offered are also critical components.

Availability

The time constraints of everyday life are a major factor in determining if one can take on an MBA program.   Dash (2006) suggests that flexibility of online scheduling is a key factor in the growth of online MBA programs.   Having classes online has given those who may not have the ability to travel to campus or have a set schedule to sign up for a class the opportunity to gain an MBA degree without having to change their current schedules.   Online graduate education has attracted a variety of individuals that may not have been able to gain an MBA degree through the traditional classroom setting.   Many online students say their main priority when it came to selecting a program was convenience (Kerkman, 2004).

"Selection differs from one student to another, but the major criteria is, first, the flexibility to enroll in the program and courses" (Abdou, Elmuti, and Kathawala, 2002, 14).   "It is estimated that five of six online students are employed and would not be able to attend traditional classes," which has made online programs more appealing (Bocchi, Eastman, and Swift, 2004, 245).   By offering an online MBA program individuals are able to

enhance their career opportunities and balance their non-work life making the program doable (Bonk, Kim, Lui, and Magjuka, 2005).

Quality

The quality of the MBA program is also an important factor that potential students look at when determining where they want to gain their degree. One major concern of gaining a web-based graduate degree is whether or not the quality is equal to that of a traditional program (Bocchi, Eastman, and Swift, 2004). Many experts say that there is no difference between online and traditional MBA's, and if any, "online distance learning is more rigorous than classroom learning, and draws more disciplined students" (Cowan, 2007, 1). Rossin, Ro, Klein, and Guo (2009) state that research has shown that online courses or campus-based courses show no significant difference between the two.

Students want to feel that they are working towards a degree that will give them an advantage in the future. To help students feel more confident about an online degree, finding out if the school is accredited by a recognized accrediting organization, like AACSB, can be helpful (Gangemi, 2005). "Accreditation is the number one verification of the quality of a higher education distance education provider" (Abdou, Elmuti, and Kathawala, 2002, 16). AACSB has developed specific standards for distant education students to insure that the schools are managing resources, advancing business and management knowledge, providing high-caliber teaching of quality and current curricula, cultivating meaningful interaction, and producing graduates who have achieved specified learning goals (Accreditation, 2009). A degree from a school with AACSB certification is looked at as a credible program for gaining an MBA online degree.

Length of Program

An online MBA programs also gives individuals the option to participate in an accelerated program, as the flexibility and reduced time constraints give students the opportunity to complete the program faster. Cornell University had a 50% increase in applications for its 2008-2009 accelerated MBA program, a quicker, more condensed version of a traditional 2-year MBA (Dizik, 2008). While one-year online MBA programs are time-consuming, they are cheaper than two-year MBA programs (Dizik, 2008).

Cost

The flexibility of the program is helpful to students choosing a program, but they still have to factor in the cost. The cost of an online degree can range from $5,600 to $115,000 depending on the university ("Should you Get an Online MBA Degree," 2008). The technology and preparation make the cost of an online MBA program about the same as a traditional program, even without the cost of a physical classroom. Finally, online instruction provides flexibility for students in that it reduces the often substantial transaction and opportunity costs one associates with traditional campus offerings (Terry, 2007, 222).

Courses

The course curriculum is another factor in choosing a certain MBA program. When talking an MBA program students want to feel a since of satisfaction in achieving their goal. Student satisfaction with online programs can be based on course rigor, fairness, interactions with professor and peers, and a support system (Endres, Chowdhury, Frye, and Hurtubis, 2009). The satisfaction that MBA students get from a course is considered to have multiple aspects like technology quality, high media richness, positive instructor attitudes, and high involvement and participation, to name a few (Endres, et. al, 2009). The multiple aspects that positively affect students opinion on the online course shows that when students choose a MBA program they are looking at a variety of different course structures that fit their needs.

Research Questions

After researching the online MBA program we will be looking into two research questions.

RQ1: Which characteristics are most important in an online MBA Program: Availability, program quality, program length, cost, and courses in the curriculum?

RQ2: Does importance of characteristics vary by demographic variables?

Methodology

The Georgia WebMBA program is now offered by six University System of Georgia universities: Columbus State University, Georgia College and State University, Georgia Southern University, Kennesaw State University, University of West Georgia, and Valdosta State University. A survey was conducted to determine how the Georgia WebMBA associates viewed the program. All past and current associates (approximately 325 in the ten cohorts) were invited by email to participate in an online survey at www.georgiawebmbasurvey.com; 105 surveys were completed for a response rate of 39.3%. Approximately one-third of the respondents were alumni and two-thirds were current students.

Sample

As Table 1 illustrates, we had a strong representation of males, at 67.6%. WebMBA alumni made up 34.3% of the respondents and 65.7% were current students in the program. Approximately three-fourths of the respondents were from the state of Georgia. The median age category was between 31 to 35 years old; almost three-fourths of the respondents were between the ages of 26 and 40. In terms of ethnic group, 81% of the respondents were Caucasians with the next highest being African Americans at 7.6%. The median income category for the respondents was between $50,000 and $100,000 a year. It is important to note, however, that there is a two-year work experience requirement for admission into the Georgia WebMBA program. The median category for work experience was seven to nine years, with ten years of work experience being the mode with almost 42% of the respondents.

Measures

To measure the importance of the five characteristics single item measures were created by the author. All the questions were scaled on a (not at all important) to three (somewhat important) to five (very important) scale (see Table 2).

To determine if there were significant differences in importance, paired sample t-tests were used. To test if the importance scores varied by demographics, independent sample t-tests were utilized.

Table 1: Descriptive Information on Sample

Items

        Gender:

Male	67.6%
Female	32.4%

        Age at Enrollment:

18-25	14.3%
26-30	29.5%
31-35	23.8%
36-40	21.0%
Over 40	11.4%

        Income at Enrollment:

Less than $25,000	2.9%
$25,001- $50,000	33.3%
$50,001- $100,000	49.5%
$101,000- $150,000	11.4%
More than $150,000	2.9%

        Georgia Resident:

Yes	75.2%
No	24.8%

        Years of Work Experience:

0-1	1.0%
2-3	21.0%
4-6	15.2%
7-9	21.0%
10+	41.9%

        Ethnic Group

African American	7.6%
Caucasian	81.0%
Asian	5.7%
Hispanic	1.9%
Other	3.8%

        Alumni Student Breakdown:

Alumni	34.3%
Current Students	65.7%

Table 2: Measurement Items

Items/(Mean/SD)

Course Availability

The availability of online learning was a strong determinant when choosing an MBA program. (4.63/.639)

Quality of Program

The quality of the online program was a strong determinant when choosing an online MBA program. (4.33/.828)

Length of Program
The length of the course program was a strong determinant when choosing an online MBA program. (4.21/.886)

Cost
The cost of tuition was a strong determinant when choosing an online MBA program.
(4.20/.934)

Course in Curriculum
The courses in the curriculum was a strong determinant when choosing an online MBA program.   (3.98/.930)

Results

In looking at the mean scores of the five items measured by importance, the rank in terms of mean importance score was Availability (4.63 mean, .639 standard deviation(sd)), Quality (4.33 mean, .828 sd), length (4.21 mean, .886 sd), cost (3.98 mean, .980 sd), and courses (3.98 mean, .930 sd). Paired t-tests were then run to see if there were significant differences between the different ranked items (see Table 3). The results illustrate that the mean difference between Availability and Quality was significant (t 3.30, p = .001), but not between Quality and Program Length or between Program Length and Cost. Finally, the mean difference between Cost and Courses was significant (t 2.126, p = .036). These results illustrate that the importance items broke down into three tiers. The most important item was Availability. Then, the next tier was Quality, Program Length, and Cost. Our results suggest that the respondents saw all three of these items as being similar in terms of

importance. The final tier in importance was Courses. It is important to note that even the lowest rated item in importance (Courses) still received a mean importance score of close to four on a one to five scale.

Table 3: Paired Sample T-tests

Pair	Mean Difference	SD	T	Df	Sign.
Availability/ Quality	**.295**	**.909**	**3.30**	**104**	**.001**
Quality/ Program Length	.124	1.034	1.23	104	.223
Program Length/ Cost	.010	.904	.108	104	.913
Cost/Courses	**.219**	**1.056**	**2.126**	**104**	**.036**

We then looked at if there were significant differences based on demographic differences looking at gender, years work experience, age, and income level upon starting the program. There were few demographic differences in importance (see Table 4). For years work experience, availability was more important to those who had more work experience (t , p). This result makes sense given that those who are advancing in their careers may have more limitations in terms of continuing their education. The only other differences were in gender in which for females quality (t , p), program length (t, p), and courses (t, p) were more important than they were for men.

Discussion

The results suggest that multiple factors are important to online MBA students as they require multiple needs to be addressed from an online MBA program. The research shows that availability, quality, program length, cost and courses in the curriculum are factors that vary in importance to students when choosing an MBA program.

In terms of availability, it was significant for all respondents and it was rated higher then the other factors. Having a program that can fit into the schedules of the students is very important in choosing an MBA program