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# Academic Fidelity and Integrity as Attributes of University Online Degree Program Offerings

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## Abstract

As stakeholders continue to discuss, debate, and advocate their positions related to the value of online learning at colleges and universities, one element that will continue to be discussed, regardless of the specific issue at hand, is *academic integrity and fidelity*. Academic fidelity of online degree program offerings is defined in this study as the extent or level to which university leaders have considered, involved, and entrusted their current academic assets to produce the new educational program offering. Academic fidelity measures the nature and extent of integrity or equivalency between on campus programs and online degree programs. This study aimed to determine the prominence of *academic fidelity* attributes in the online degree program offering, as presented to prospective students via universities' official websites. The study 1) assessed the *level of visibility* given to online degree programs on university websites; 2) identified the range of *attributes* of university online degree programs as presented on the university websites; and 3) measured how the *academic fidelity and integrity attributes* compare with other attributes used to market online degree program offerings to prospective students. Universities selected for analysis were those schools listed in the *U.S. News & World Report's* 2006 "E-Learning Guide" (N=240). *Eight major attributes* used by universities to market their online degree program offerings were identified and analyzed as part of the research: Academic Fidelity - 1) *Faculty*, 2) *Curriculum*, 3) *Quality*; University Branding/Reputation - 4) *Classroom*, 5) *Distance Learning Expertise*; Features/Benefits - 6) *Flexibility*, 7) *Convenience*, and 8) *Information/Operation*. The study found that very few institutions are leveraging their existing traditional programs (faculty and curriculum) and standards (quality) attributes when promoting their online degree programs, opting to use "convenience" and "flexibility" much more frequently to promote their online degree programs to prospective students. Furthermore, the study found a surprising lack of high visibility of online degree program offerings on university official websites, opting to use either a secondary link or have readers use a search feature. Although promoting the flexibility and convenience attributes of online degree programs is reasonable and considered "good marketing" as they relate to customer benefits, academic administrators may want to consider the extent to which academic fidelity attributes are used to promote their online degree programs and the rationale for why other attributes are much more prominent.

## Introduction

The number of students participating in college-level online courses has out-distanced all

other forms of distance learning, in a remarkably short amount of time (Waits & Lewis, 2003; Allen & Seaman, 2006 & 2008).

With such a fast introduction of a radically new instructional innovation for higher education, major stakeholders understandably were quick to assess distance learning via the Internet for its *quality* (AAUP, 1999; University of Illinois Faculty Seminar, 1999), *academic standards* (Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications, 1998; The Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2000), *affect on accreditation* (Eaton, 2000; 2001), *institutional strategic opportunities* (Richard N. Katz and Associates, 1999), *pedagogical potential* (The Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1999; Palloff, & Pratt, 1999), and *market value potential* (Eduventures, 2007; Primary Research Group, 2004).

As stakeholders continue to discuss, debate, and advocate for positions in these important issues for online learning, one element of online learning that is recurring regardless of the issue at hand is *academic integrity and fidelity*. By *academic integrity* we mean how consistent is the online degree program with its campus based counterpart and institutional and professional standards. By *academic fidelity* of the online degree program offerings, we mean the *extent or level to which university leaders have considered, involved, and entrusted the current academic assets to produce the new educational program offering*. Academic integrity exists when the educational program offering is truly equivalent to the quality and standards of the institution. Academic fidelity measures the nature and extent of integrity or equivalency between on campus programs and online degree programs. In this current study we are interested in exploring the issue of fidelity in online degree program offerings.

Assessing academic fidelity for online degree program offerings calls for a review of the extent to which the university has included its *academic asset ingredients*, so to speak, into the make up of the newly offered educational service. These ingredients include, among others, such factors as the

- level of involvement of current faculty in all aspects of shared governance in the gestation of this new educational program offering;
- degree to which decision making has followed the standard policies and procedures of the university—from faculty senate, to administration, to the Board of Trustees;
- qualifications and competencies of academic administrators having oversight for these program offerings;
- level of qualifications and competencies of faculty (existing or new) in teaching the new online degree programs and the corollary level of their orientation and training;
- extent of integration of the principals responsible for online learning into the full functioning of the university; and
- quality of the curriculum as compared with the curriculum of their current on-ground degree programs.

It is important to note that to ensure a high-level of academic fidelity and integrity for online degree programs is not simply a matter of the university transferring current academic assets to the new online degree programs—throwing it over the fence, so to speak. Transferring such academic assets to online degree programs will understandably call for changes, as the *inputs and outputs* of online degree program offerings by design can be

quite different. For example, Judith Eaton writing several monographs for the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (2000; 2001) reminds us: “Whatever our opinions may be about distance learning and its future, there is no disputing the evidence that some elements of the distance learning experience are significantly different from the site-based educational experience. The task for institutions and accreditors is to identify and scrutinize those differences to protect quality” (2001, p. 13).

Periodically, scholars and practitioners interested in online learning present a vision or make a prediction about the future of online learning (Hyatt, 1998; Downes, 1998; Valentine, 2002; Larreamendy-Joerns, & Leinhardt, 2006; Gaytan, 2007). These predictions include a host of critical success factors, such as the role and direction of the technology and courseware system; increased revenue as the primary driver; target student audience; faculty training, or administrative oversight structure. One factor that must be considered is the *academic fidelity* in offering online distance learning degree programs. Regardless of how these critical success factors for delivering online degree programs get resolved, the level of academic fidelity with this new delivery system for educational programs will have to be assessed.

To assess the extent and level of academic fidelity of an online distance degree program offered by a university would certainly call for a thorough review of the academic unit and its many relationships within the university. At one level, it is fair to say that these assessments are *ongoing* as the universities undertake their day-to-day operations, follow procedures for new program offerings, adhere to shared governance, and prepare for accrediting agency visits. However, our current interest is getting an *aggregate understanding* of how universities *present academic fidelity and integrity* when *promoting* their online degree program offerings.

In a former study we looked at current administrative structures used for online degree program offerings in higher education (Paolucci & Gambescia, 2007). We identified the range of *general administrative structures* that universities are currently using in offering online degree programs. A typology was identified to account for the *extent and nature* of general administrative structures through analyzing 239 universities selected for offering at least one graduate degree fully online. We identified six general administrative structures currently used: 1) *Academic Department*; 2) *Continuing Education/Professional Studies Unit*; 3) *Distance Education Unit*; 4) *Consortium*; 5) *Alliance* and 6) *Outsource*, and these divided into three internally based administrative arrangements (1-3 above) and three externally based arrangements (4-6 above). We learned that 90 percent of schools in our study are delivering their online degree programs with an *Internally*-based administrative arrangement. Only 10 percent of the schools we investigated were using some type of *External* administrative structure to offer their online degree programs. More specifically, when we looked at the locus of control for internally-based administrative programs, we saw that 62 percent of those schools analyzed for the study still have the *academic departments* in control. If one uses the type of administrative structure as a criterion for assessing academic fidelity of online learning, this study gives an aggregate look at that characteristic.

In this current study we continued with gaining an *aggregate understanding of academic fidelity and integrity of online degree programs*. Specifically we wanted to see how universities were presenting their academic fidelity to prospective online students. One obvious, simple, and straightforward way to convey this important attribute is via the *university's official Website*. Therefore we set up a research study to look at the presentation

of the online degree program offerings at close to 240 university official Websites.

Certainly, there has been much discussion and much written about “how to” market and communicate online degree programs, but these efforts by and large have come from marketing & communication staff and outside consultants who write for industry publications or present at their industry conferences. There is a dearth of literature from our professional journals that have studied how universities and colleges are marketing and promoting their online degree programs to prospective students. Paden and Stell (2006) at Northern Arizona University are asking questions related to students’ perception of the traditional university and their selection of online programs as well as their perception of new or lesser known universities offering programs online. One of their works on *branding* notes that it is “important that (a) there is a clear understanding of the university’s brand image and the elements contributing to that image; (b) the university ensures that the distance program maintains/improves the image of the university; or (c) the university makes a decision to develop a separate identity/brand for the distance program that will stand on its own merit and not harm the university’s image if it malfunctions or fails.” Shaik (2005) recommends that universities push well beyond the perfunctory transactional marketing strategies to attract students to online degree programs by considering *relationship marketing* strategies “to promote student retention, encourage recruitment and enrollment of new students, and build long-term relationships with students.” Folkers (2005) discusses the managerial, organizational, and cultural issues that arise as colleges and universities seek to move from the physical “marketplace” to the virtual world of the “marketspace” given the explosive growth of distance education programs.

### **Purpose of Study**

Regardless of how complex and detailed a marketing campaign for a product or service, at some point *attributes* of the product/service are identified and used to attract consumers to buy the product or use a service. These attributes range from the tangible *features* of a product/service to the demonstrated *benefits* gained by the user of the product/service, to the overall *value* perceived by the consumer, during or after using the product or service (Kotler & Keller, 2008).

This study aimed to determine the prominence of *academic fidelity* attributes in the online degree program offering as presented to prospective students via universities’ official websites. The study:

1. assessed the *level of visibility* given to online degree programs on universities’ websites; it looked at the prominence of online learning information, assessing how easy or difficult it was to find the information about online learning on the universities’ homepages.
2. identified the range of *attributes* of university online degree programs as presented on the university websites; it looked for any recognizable *typology* of attributes.

measured to what *degree academic fidelity and integrity attributes* are used to promote this educational service via the official university website; the study compared the academic fidelity attribute with any other attributes used to market the fully online degree programs to prospective students.

### **Method to Measure Attributes Presented on University Websites**

Universities selected for analysis came from the list of schools reported by *U.S. News & World Report's* 2006 "E-Learning Guide." We retrieved this list online during July 2006 at (U.S. News & World Report, 2006).

*U.S. News & World Report* has been conducting surveys and reviews of universities and colleges that offer "ONLINE Bachelor's & Master's Degrees" since 1999. This U.S. national magazine's annual report surveys regional accredited school personnel for select information on online graduate programs for several areas of study: Business, Public Health, Nursing, Library Sciences, Engineering, and Education. We decided to include in our study, those schools offering fully online graduate degrees in the following areas: Business, Engineering, and Education.

*U.S. News & World Report's* E-Learning Guide reports a number of characteristics about these schools that offer fully online programs including the official university website. We had successfully used this list of schools for a former research project and have found the group reliable for providing online degree programs fully online (Paolucci & Gambescia, 2007).

From this list and using the criteria of schools offering a graduate degree *fully online* in the study areas of Business, Engineering, or Education, we identified 239 schools to review for the purposes of our present study.

Our protocol for reviewing these schools' websites to answer the three research questions listed above (level of visibility, typology of attributes, prominence of academic fidelity attribute) was as follows.

1. Go to the official homepage of the university under review
2. Carefully examine the homepage to determine the level of visibility that online learning has on its website (three levels identified as high, moderate, low). Record the level of visibility.
3. Once link is found, carefully review material presented about the online degree programs. Review and read material with a prospective student's eye. Attend to material that is most prominent or the *front and center* material that is used to attract eligible students to enroll in an online degree program at the university. Record the attributes (one of eight explained above) used to promote the university's online degree program. Note that more than one attribute can be presented by the university. Re-review the material to ensure that all attributes in the main promotional material on the website have been identified and correctly categorized.

Authors conducted reviews of all schools. Authors discussed any questionable attributes that were used by the universities to promote their online degree programs. Authors jointly reviewed 20 of the 239 schools in the sample to ensure assessment and categorization reliability.

### **Method to Measure Visibility of Online Degree Programs on Official University Websites**

*What level of visibility is given to online degree programs on universities' Websites?*

To assess the level of visibility of online degree offerings by universities we visited and

examined the official homepage for each university in our sample (N=239). To determine the number/type of construct for each level of visibility we examined 20 university websites. From this examination emerged three clear *levels of visibility* for this assessment:

1. Home page link (high visibility)
2. Secondary page link (moderate visibility)
3. Not linked (poor visibility)

After accessing the URL for the university's official homepage, we worked through a close reading of all material on its website. A rating of the *highest level* of visibility would naturally be awarded to a university that had presented *up front* a link to information about their online degree programs on the university's home page. This link could be as prominent as a picture or icon to click for online degree program information—front and center-- or nominally listed on a horizontal or vertical link on the homepage. Nominally these links appeared most commonly as:

- Online learning
- Distance learning
- eLearning

If there was no visible descriptive link related to the university's online degree offerings on the home page, we continued to read material on the home page and moved through to intuitive links that may include information about online degree programs. These *secondary links* were typically found under

- Prospective students
- Academics
- Professional Studies
- Continuing Education
- Outreach or External programs

If there was no visible secondary link that would take you to information related to the university's online degree offerings, we continued to read and search through material on their website (e.g. use of their search engine). At some point, it became clear that getting to information related to the university's online degree programs involved either a word search or "drilling down through" the website at no intuitive spot on the pages. Thus the visibility of the online degree programs on their website was poor. High visibility naturally would mean having a link on the home page or at least having a secondary link using an intuitive descriptor, e.g. prospective students or academics.

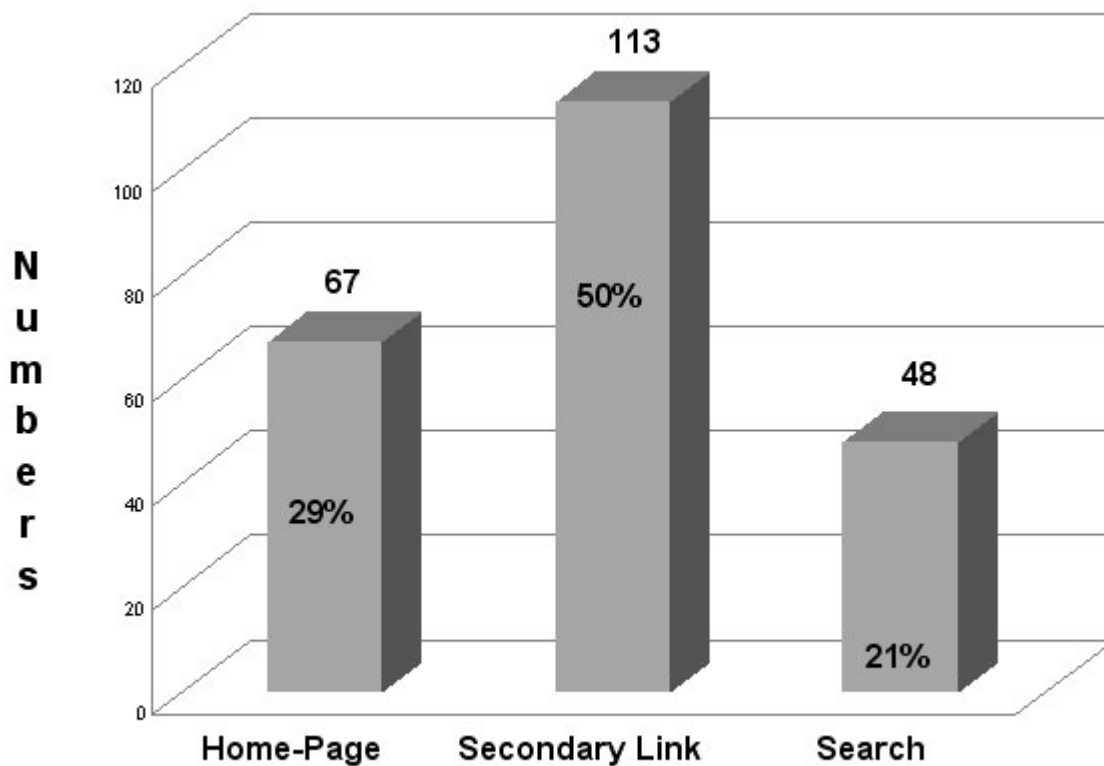
In examining the results, the most popular level of visibility on the homepages was the secondary link level where almost 50 percent of the universities in this study positioned online learning this way (See graph 1). It is worthwhile noting that only 29 % of the 228 universities studied displayed an online learning link on their university main homepage. The corollary finding is that 21% of the universities in this study had positioned information about their online degree programs so poorly that you needed to use the "search" feature of the website or continue clicking through pages with no intuitive pathway before finding such information.

We find the lack of high visibility of university online degree program offerings surprising,

given the continuing attention that online education receives “in the marketplace” and the prominence of online education offerings in most universities’ strategic plans. For example, the 2005 Sloan Foundation survey and review of online education in the United States found evidence from higher education’s academic leaders that there is a strong trend upwards in considering online education as part of a school’s *long-term strategy* (Allen & Seaman, 2006). This growth existed in all types of schools. The overall percentage of schools identifying online education as a critical long-term strategy grew from 49% in 2003 to 56% in 2005. The more recent Sloan survey (2008) concluded that that while they found a marginal decrease in colleges reporting the crucial strategic importance of online learning, the overall upward pattern for the past four years is clearly steady. Conferences, trade publications, marketing & communication and student recruitment consultants have been creating a buzz about the opportunities for universities to significantly increase enrollment via online degree program offerings. It is surprising that not even one-third of the universities had an online education offering reference on their homepage—a very easy and low-level marketing tactic. Similarly, what reason(s) could there be for one-fifth of the universities not to have even a modest interest in getting prospective students connected to their online degree program offerings? Certainly universities will have varying academic offerings priorities and online learning may not be high on the priorities list of some universities; thus visibility may not be as important. Results of this study give at least a general understanding of the level of visibility for a large number of universities offering online degree programs.

Graph 1

*Level of Visibility of Online Degree Program Offerings on Universities’ Websites (N= 228)*



### Identification of Typology of Attributes

As mentioned earlier, universities can choose from a number of attributes of their online degree programs to attract eligible students to enroll in these programs. In the vernacular of marketing, such attributes can be *features specific*. In this analysis we are seeing what particular attribute or attributes about the educational service, i.e. online degree program delivery, is emphasized to the prospective students. Features are tangible attributes such as the courseware technology used or the curriculum offered or that the courses are taught by experienced faculty. Attributes can also be *benefits* realized by person using the educational service. This is usually something non-tangible, such as flexibility or convenience of online learning or that online learning allows you to keep working and attend to family responsibilities but still work toward your degree. The university emphasizes that online learning fits a prospective student's lifestyle (usually adult continuing education student); this is a benefit. Another attribute can be something non-tangible and somewhat subjective such as "quality." Quality of a service can have either objective or subjective measures.

Having identified our group of universities to examine for the study (239), we randomly selected 20 universities from this group and made a close examination of their website to identify types of attributes currently used to promote their online programs. After examining this test group a *number of attributes emerged*. These attributes would serve as the basis of the *typology* from which we can make an *accounting* of what are the most common attributes presented to prospective students about online degree programs via their websites. It was understood that we would adjust (add, subtract, refine) the constructs identified by the sample group analysis, either during or after the examination of the complete group of universities. After the pilot phase, we confirmed the applicability of the constructs initially identified or to see if other constructs needed to be added, subtracted, or adjusted.

We identified *eight major attributes*, about the universities' online degree program offerings, that were clearly evident on the official university websites. There may be only one attribute about the online degree program evident, but more often the universities used a combination of attributes to promote their programs and attract eligible students. These attributes are Academic Fidelity - 1) *Faculty*, 2) *Curriculum*, 3) *Quality*; University Branding/Reputation - 4) *Classroom*, 5) *Distance Learning Expertise*; Features/Benefits - 6) *Flexibility*, 7) *Convenience*, and 8) *Information/Operation*. These eight attributes are listed and described below with examples given to demonstrate the nature of the attribute.

### ***Attributes Presented For University Online Distance Learning Degree Programs***

#### *Academic Fidelity Presentation*

*Faculty*: This quite natural attribute exists when the university promotes to the student the experienced, credentialed, and quality faculty who teach the courses in the online degree program. Academic fidelity is high when the university makes special note that the faculty who teach the online courses are "the same as" the faculty who teach the "traditional" or "regular" on- ground courses for the university. Using "the same" recognized and highly valued faculty of the university for online programs is a hallmark of high academic fidelity and integrity of the university.

Example: Earn your accredited online degree or certificate from one of the nation's top-ranked universities, the University of Massachusetts. UMassOnline allows you to attend the same high-quality programs and **learn from the same world-class faculty as students** at the University of Massachusetts' Amherst,



Boston, Dartmouth, Lowell or Worcester campuses.

University of Massachusetts at <http://www.umassonline.net/>

*Curriculum:* This high level feature is realized when the university makes note that online degree program courses use “the same” curriculum and learner objectives as the “traditional” or on-ground courses. Using “the same” curriculum is another hallmark of high academic fidelity and integrity of the university.

Example: Fairleigh Dickinson University has become a pioneer in the integration of online learning into its curriculum. Whether through our many fully online degree and certificate programs that enroll students from across the country, or through our first-in-the-nation online learning requirement for on-campus students, we work hard to ensure that the online teaching and learning experience is rich and highly interactive. Fairleigh Dickinson University offers a wide variety of online degrees and professional certificates to students around the world. **All of our online offerings meet the same rigorous standards that characterize our campus based academic programs.** Online learning the FDU way is very interactive, with small class size and frequent contact with fellow students and instructor. It is always an interesting personal experience.

Fairleigh Dickinson University at <http://view.fdu.edu/default.aspx?id=1094>

#### *University Reputation/Branding*

*Classroom:* This macro level feature presented by a university purports that their online degree program is valuable because it is provided by a university with an existing good reputation for delivering on ground degrees. The university believes that it has a highly regarded brand name recognition; online degree programs will simply be an added offering (expanded product mix) to eligible students who already may know about the university’s good reputation.

Example: Drexel Online programs **follow the same policies and rigorous academic standards as those taught on campus at Drexel University.** When students complete this program, their diploma and University transcript **will be the same as those who earn their degrees on campus.**

<http://www.drexel.edu/admissions/difference/online-education.aspx>

*Distance Learning Expertise:* This macro level feature presented by a university makes the claim that they are expert in delivery distance learning programs. This is presented in two ways. One way is noting that the university has had a long-standing expertise and reputation in distance learning; we have been at this since the beginning (early providers in the market). A second way is noting that the university or the instructors have newly developed expertise (e.g. We have invested the time in gaining this new competency to meet the demands for online learning.).

Example: Regis University's College for Professional Studies offers **online** Bachelor's degrees, Master's degrees, and certificate programs for adult learners. U.S. News & World Report has **ranked Regis University as one of**

the "Best Colleges in the West" for twelve consecutive years.

<http://www.regis.edu/sps.htm>

#### *Benefits/Features Presentation*

*Flexibility:* This attribute emphasizes the timing and ease with which online learning can be "used," such as whenever the student has time to access course material or contribute to a learning activity. This feature of online learning is often referred to in the vernacular of distance learning as asynchronous learning.

Example: All online courses\* allow students to enroll continuously. This means you can register for any course at any time. You may choose any Monday during the semester to start your course. You will then have 15 weeks from that Monday to complete the course requirements. The courses are all self-paced so you will be able to work through them as quickly as you would like or you can take up to 15 weeks to complete the requirements. The choice is YOURS! Our goal is to **create an online experience which will allow the student maximum flexibility.**

Nichols College at <http://www.nichols.edu/eveningonline/online/index.html>

*Convenience/Lifestyle:* This attribute is a strong benefit to the learner which stems from the tangible feature mentioned above. The attribute is very customer centered. It explains in a win-win style that busy, working adults who have multiple responsibilities (family, work, social obligations) can still pursue a degree because online learning can take place "anyplace" and at "anytime."

Example: North Carolina Central University offers distance education programs designed for busy professionals, those who must balance their time between job, home and other personal obligations. The distance education programs at NCCU **conveniently fit into a student's professional and personal schedule.** Courses and programs are delivered through videoconferencing, the Internet, and at off-campus locations.

North Carolina Central University at  
<http://www.nccu.edu/Academics/Distance%20Education.cfm>

*Quality:* This attribute is a very general feature presented to the prospective student about the university's online degree program. It is usually manifested by reference to an external body such as a regional accrediting entity in higher education or that the degree is recognized by employers. Sometimes the term "quality" is used very generally with little reference to objective measures.

Example: It is our goal to extend to students an opportunity for learning via the online environment while meeting or **exceeding the quality standards of the traditional classroom.** Distance Education encompasses everything from traditional courses with online components, video conference courses, hybrid and completely online courses. As distance education continues to shape the

way in which we teach, DeSales University is dedicated to holding the **quality of all courses**, regardless of delivery method, to the highest standards.

DeSales University at <http://www.desales.edu/default.aspx?pageid=585>

*Operational:* This can be considered almost the “non-attribute” of the attributes used by universities to promote their online degree programs. In examining the information presented on the website by the university, there may be no overt promotion using some attribute to recruit the eligible student. Information about the online degree programs is presented in a perfunctory manner, simply describing what is available (e.g. course listings and schedules), how to access the educational service, and how to enroll in a degree program. There are no features or benefits presented to the prospective student. The information is simply operational in nature.

Example: Take 16 distance learning graduate degree programs delivered to you via Internet, satellite, video tape or teleconferencing technologies... **To learn more** about Distance Education **view the information** on the following pages:

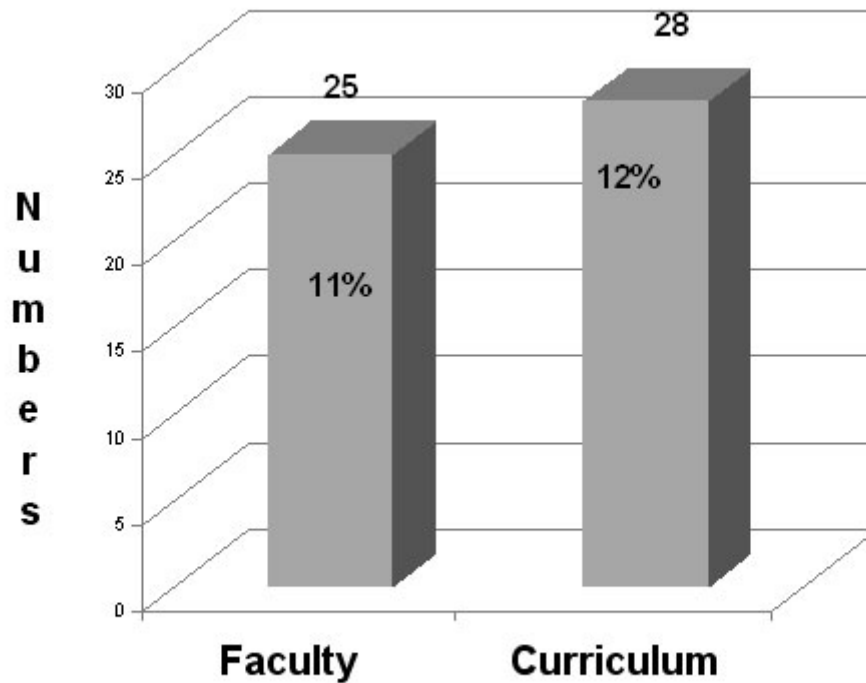
[http://www.clemson.edu/ccit/support\\_services/it\\_support/distance\\_education/](http://www.clemson.edu/ccit/support_services/it_support/distance_education/)

## **Findings**

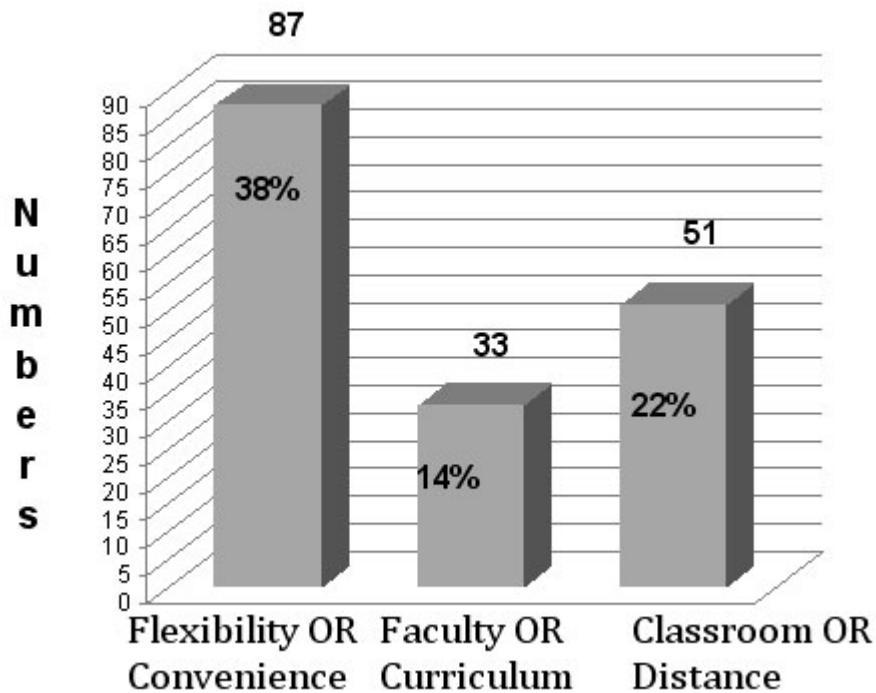
**Academic Fidelity Presentation:** As mentioned in the descriptions of attributes above, we would say that academic fidelity of an online program offering is presented through use of the “Faculty” and “Curriculum” attributes. In our research, we found that only 11% of universities made mention of faculty who teach the “traditional” or “regular” on-ground courses for the university also teach the comparable online courses within their fully online degree programs. And only 12% of the universities in this study made special note that their online degree program courses use “the same” curriculum and learner objectives as the “traditional” or on-ground courses (See graph 2). When accounting for *either* the faculty attribute *or* the curriculum attribute presented to prospective students, only 14% of the universities chose to highlight these benefits, among those identified by this study (See graph 3). Accounting for universities that chose to use both attributes (faculty *and* curriculum) a slight 4 % presented what we would consider leading academic fidelity indicators (See graph 4).

### Graph 2

*Percentage of Universities Using “Faculty,” “Curriculum” as Attributes to Promote Online Degree Offerings to Perspective Students. (N=230)*

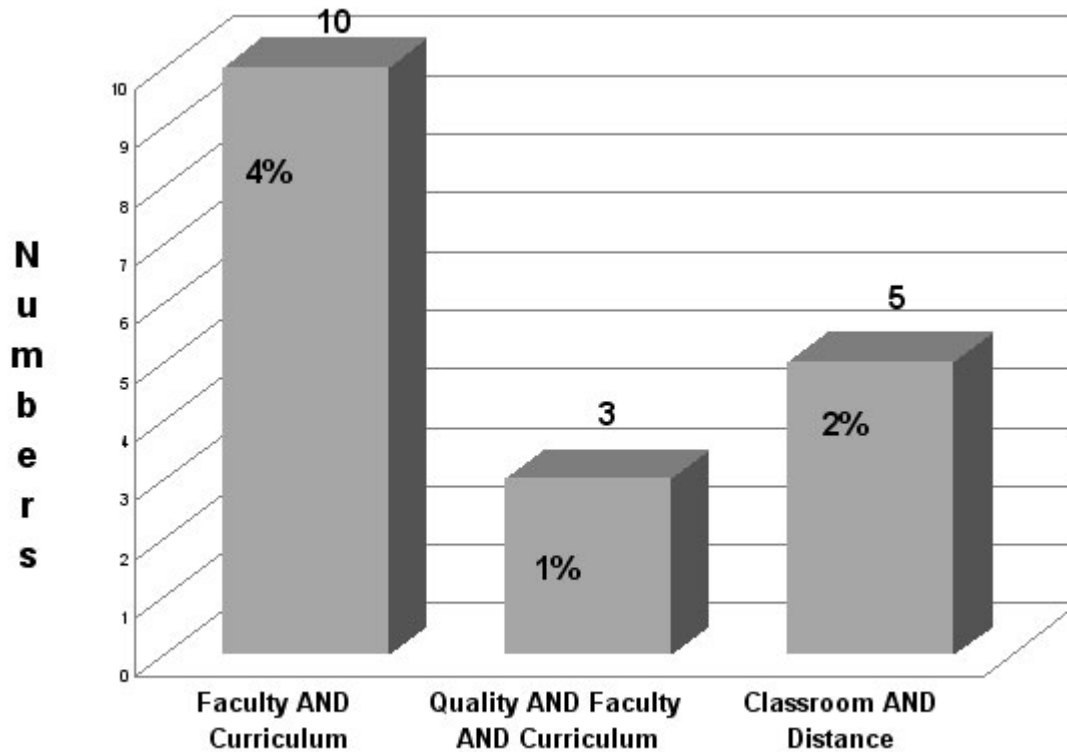


Graph 3  
*Percentage of Universities Using Either OR Combinations of Attributes (Curriculum/Faculty; Classroom/Distance; Flexibility/Convenience to Promote Online Degree Offerings to Perspective Students. (N=230)*



Graph 4

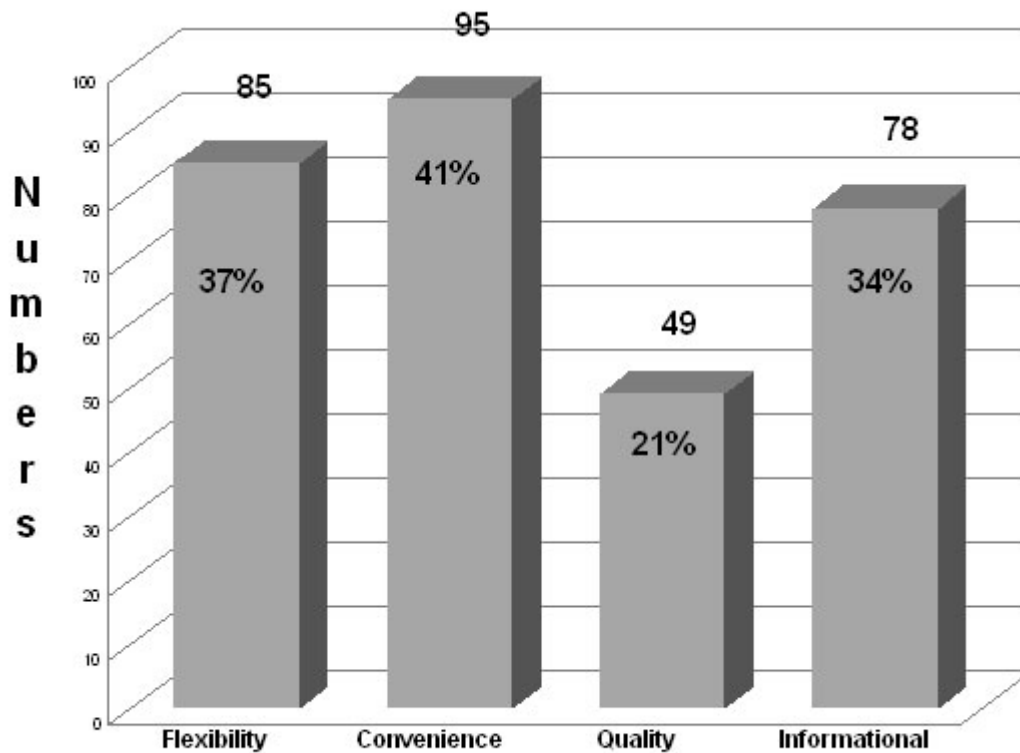
*Percentage of Universities Using Combined Attributes (2-3-2) to Promote Online Degree Offerings to Perspective Students. (N=230)*



**Quality:** Universities may use a very general attribute statement about the *quality* of their online degree programs. The context may be a reference to their regional accreditation or that an online degree diploma is equivalent (or at least their online degree diploma is equivalent) to an on-ground program, or that the degree is recognized by employers. In this study we learned that about one-fifth of the universities (21%) used this general quality attribute when presenting their online degree programs to prospective students. (See graph 5). When *combining quality with the two academic fidelity indicators* explained above (faculty and curriculum) a mere 1% of the universities chose to use this combination of benefits or features as descriptors (See graph 4).

Graph 5

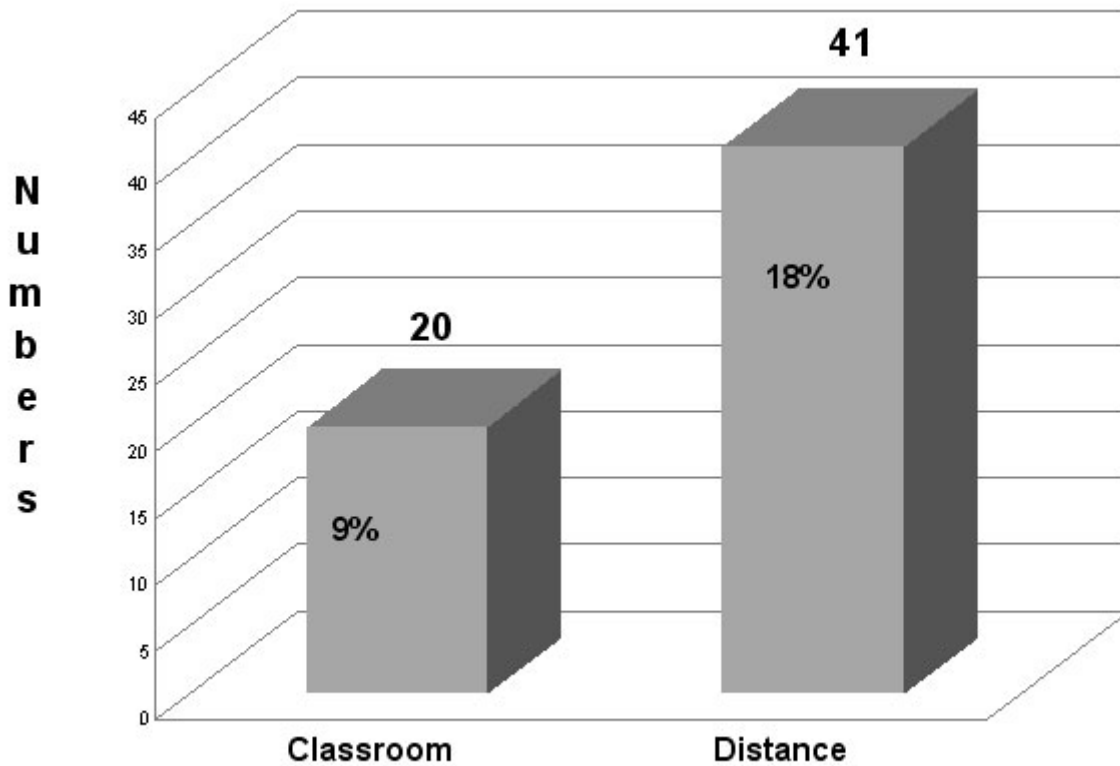
*Percentage of Universities Using Convenience, Flexibility, Quality, Informational as Attributes to Promote Online Degree Offerings to Perspective Students. (N=232)*



**University Reputation/Branding:** Universities may choose to use an institutional branding strategy to promote their online degree programs. One assumption could be that the university marketers feel that prospective students know their historical or existing reputation; therefore, any educational service delivered by the university (in this present study online degree programs) has to be valuable. We found that 9% of the universities made note of their *classroom brand* to promote online degree programs to prospective students (See graph 6). Another institutional branding strategy could be directly positioning the university as an *experienced and quality provider of online education*. These could be universities that feel that they have been doing this (distance learning) for a long time and are natural experts in offering this educational service, or that they have recently acquired the competency in this area. We found that 18% of the universities in the study were willing to make this claim to attract prospective students (See graph 6).

Graph 6

*Percentage of Universities Using “Classroom,” “Distance Learning” as Attributes (Institutional Branding) to Promote Online Degree Offerings to Perspective Students. (N=230)*



**Benefits/Features Presentation:** The descriptor “anytime, anyplace” education is evident not only from the providers’ perspective but is now used as the most common attribute presented on university websites for attracting prospective students to their online degree programs. The *convenience/lifestyle* attribute that explains in a win-win style that busy, working adults who have multiple responsibilities (family, work, social obligations) can still pursue a degree, now available online, is the most popular attribute of the eight identified in this study that is used by universities to present their online degree programs to prospective students. In this study, we found that 41% of the universities presented this benefit on their web pages (See graph 5). The next most popular attribute of the eight found in the study is the *flexibility* attribute that emphasizes the timing and ease with which online learning can be “used.” This was mentioned by 37% of the universities in this study (See graph 5). When accounting for *either* convenience *or* flexibility, the presence of these attributes on university websites is 38% (See graph 3). Again these convenience and flexibility benefits/features are the most popular attributes used to promote their online degree programs to prospective students.

**Informational:** A final attribute identified in this study, or lack thereof, that we will discuss is the straightforward, just the facts, presentation of *basic information* to prospective students. Here there is no overt promotion using some attribute to recruit the eligible student. Information about the online degree programs is presented in a perfunctory manner, simply describing what is available (e.g. course listings and schedules); how to access the educational service; and how to enroll in a degree program. The information is simply *operational* in nature. We found that 34% of the universities used this presentation style (See graph 5). We were surprised to find so many universities using such a low profile approach to presenting their online programs given the attention in university strategic

planning about the future of online delivery (either for hard to reach or un-served groups, or for revenue generation) education and the ongoing buzz about online learning potential from marketing and recruitment management consultants.

## **Discussion**

### Academic Fidelity and Quality

The major focus of this research study is that of *academic fidelity and quality* of online degree programs. Academic fidelity exists when the online educational program offerings utilize the same assets and quality standards of the traditional programs in the institution. Although certainly not the only one, we believe that academic fidelity is a leading indicator of program integrity and quality. In our study we found much evidence indicating that a relatively minimal number of institutions communicate the attributes of academic integrity: “Faculty”, “Curriculum”, and “Quality”. In terms of academic fidelity, only 11% of institutions made mention of “faculty” who teach the traditional courses for their university also teach the comparable online courses within their fully online degree programs, while only 12% of the institutions in this study made special note that their online degree program courses using the same “curriculum” and learner objectives as the traditional programs. Additionally, 21% of institutions in our study used the general “quality” attribute when representing their online degree programs to prospective students. Finally, when these three academic integrity attributes (faculty, curriculum, and quality) are used in combination by the institutions in our study, the results are even more startling. Only 4% of institutions mention the combined attributes of “faculty *and* curriculum”, while a mere 1% mention the combined attributes of “faculty *and* curriculum *and* quality”. It is very clear from our data that very few institutions are leveraging their existing traditional programs (faculty and curriculum) and standards (quality) when creating and delivering their equivalent online programs. There may be good reasons for such a strategy, but whatever they may be, they may be shortsighted. It may be very expedient and less expensive for the institution to hire part-time faculty to teach online courses, create online programs that bypass the shared governance approval process of the institution, or hire consultants to design courses and curriculum. However, in the long term, this strategy may not benefit the institution, since it will not be making full utilization of existing quality standards, programmatic assets, and intellectual resources. It seems that many institutions, in their eagerness to get on the online distance learning “gravity train”, and in attempt to generate near-term additional revenue, are emphasizing expediency over academic quality and integrity.

### Flexibility and/or Convenience

Modern marketers are acutely more knowledgeable about *customer benefits* to using a product or service, as to focusing on the *features* of a particular product or service presented. Marketing professionals begin with the customer’s needs, wants, and values in mind before deciding the best promotional strategy to sell the product or service. Historically, education--viewed as either a product or service or some combination thereof--has had extremely high value in today’s society, as evidenced by the high number of people attending institutions of higher education, the large number of occupations requiring a four-year degree, and the price individuals and families are willing to pay for a college education. Moreover, the quality of the education, usually judged by faculty, curricula, and overall institutional reputation, has been an enduring attribute of higher education. Thus, it is thoroughly surprising to learn from this study that the two attributes, flexibility and *convenience*, are so prominently presented when promoting online degree programs. The



convenience attribute was used by 41% of the colleges and flexibility was used by 37%; whereas only 11% of the colleges promoted its faculty and 12% promoted the quality of the curriculum to prospective students.

It is understandable that the flexibility and convenience factor afforded by online learning is a natural selling point and would be of interest to prospective students, but should these attributes be much more prominent than those factors that speak to academic fidelity? If a possible answer relates to exploiting the newness factor of this educational service, it is similarly surprising that flexibility and convenience are used much more frequently than the *branding* attributes (18% distance learning expertise and 9% parity with their classroom based offerings) which speaks to the institution's newly found expertise in delivering online degree programs. This branding attribute is more closely aligned with academic quality than the simple customer benefit of flexible learning and learning fitting conveniently into a lifestyle.

A major benefit of college level online learning that cannot be overstated is that this new delivery method has accelerated the democratization of a college education. Although no major study has been conducted to quantify the full extent of online degree program offerings improving access to a college degree, it is reasonable to infer that a significant number of people are receiving a college degree that otherwise would not be earning one, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels, if it were not for the online degree program offerings. Again, although promoting the flexibility and convenience attributes of online degree programs is reasonable and considered "good marketing," academic administrators may want to consider the extent to which these two benefits as attributes are prominent, as compared with other attributes that speak to the quality of education offered.

An academic associate dean of nursing education programs at a mid-sized urban university notes some concern about how their online degree programs are perceived by students (Smith-Glasgow, 2008). She explains that prospective students see images of themselves "working on courses in their pajamas" and approaching their coursework in a very "relaxed manner," given the advertising and promotions that express anytime, anywhere learning. However, she emphasizes that it is a mistake not to communicate to these prospective students that online learning does not mean less time devoted to the subject matter or less rigorous assessments of their learning. Flexibility and the prospect of earning a degree along with all of one's other obligations are valuable benefits, but not at the expense of knowing the quality of the program and the performance expectations for succeeding in an online degree program.

### Reputation and Branding

Another focus of this research study is the *reputation and branding* of those institutions that offer online graduate degree programs. It was suspected that many universities would choose to use and extend their historical or existing reputation as an institutional branding strategy to promote their online degree programs. However, we found that only 9% of the institutions in our study made note of their traditional "classroom education" brand to promote online degree programs to prospective students. Additionally, a significantly higher number, 18% of the institutions in the study were willing to tout their reputation and experience as a quality provider of "distance education" to attract prospective students. Finally, when these two attributes (traditional, classroom) are used in combination by the institutions in our study, the results are that a reasonable number (22%) mention either of the combined attributes "traditional *or* classroom" in promoting themselves, while only a

mere 2% promote the combined attributes of “traditional *and* classroom.” The results show that very few institutions are either capable or confident or comfortable enough to extend their traditional brand and reputation to the online distance learning programs. When viewed in the light of the results dealing with the Academic Fidelity and Quality attributes of this study, it may be reasonable to conclude that very few institutions have enough confidence in the integrity and quality of their distance learning program that they are willing to stake the reputation of their traditional classroom program on it (9%), and even fewer (2%) that can or wish to do both. This is surely a significant indicator of how tenuous, timid, and unsure many institutions may be in communicating and connecting the reputation of their classroom program to their online distance learning programs. Alternatively, this may be a deliberate choice on the part of the institution, where it purposefully separates their distance learning programs from their equivalent classroom programs, in order to potentially protect their academic reputation or at least avoid tarnishing it. This observation seems to be supported and made more plausible by research that show institutions increasingly using the Distance Education Unit rather than the Academic Department as the preferred administrative structure in delivering their online distance learning programs (Paolucci and Gambescia, 2006).

### Visibility and Informational

Another surprising finding from this research is the *lack of high visibility* of online degree program offerings on university and college official websites, given that online learning and program offerings ostensibly play a prominent role in most universities’ and colleges’ strategic plans. (Allen & Seaman, 2006 & 2008).

Conferences, trade publications, marketing and communication firms, and student recruitment consultants have been *creating a buzz* since at least 1996 about the opportunities (or missed opportunities) for universities to *significantly increase enrollment via online degree program offerings*. The management guru Peter Drucker in some of his last books, articles, and lectures before his death predicted that with the Internet and online education, the university as we know it today, would become obsolete. He believed that the greatest impact and opportunity for e-commerce would be in the higher education and health care “industries” (Drucker, 2002). It is surprising that not even one-third of the universities had an online education offering reference on their homepage—a very easy and low-level marketing tactic. Similarly, what reason(s) could there be for one-fifth of the universities not to have even a modest interest in getting prospective students connected to their online degree program offerings? We learned from this study that of the universities researched, at 21% of them a prospective student would have to use their websites’ search feature to obtain information about the online degree program offerings. There was no intuitive pathway to connect to information about their fully online degree program offerings.

Furthermore, once you arrive at the page that “promotes” or gives information about the university’s online degree programs, regardless of level of visibility, we learned that 34% of the institutions had no remarkable attribute to promote to prospective students about their online degree programs. These schools simply presented information in a perfunctory manner. There was little attempt to market this educational delivery to the prospective students. For example, they gave a listing of degrees offered, course schedules, how to apply, and/or how to enroll in courses during the upcoming term. They presented basic “operational” information with no reference to benefits, features of online learning, or espouse the quality or academic fidelity attributes of the program offerings.

It is possible that these universities, by design, wish for their online degree program offerings to be understated-- maybe even de-marketed. Some schools may not have online learning as a major strategic objective. However, those academic administrators at schools, or at least with programs, that wish their online degree program offerings to be visible may want to re-evaluate how prospective students are able to access information about the programs and the attributes that they feel are important to them to promote to prospective students. As a practical matter, it is understandable that the academic administrators who need to serve a "wide variety of masters with often conflicting expectations" may not be in a position to influence the level of visibility and attributes used to promote their online degree programs that we studied (Hussamn & Miller, 2001).

Again, as mentioned earlier, given the increasing attention that online learning is getting in higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2006 & 2008) it is surprising that the *extent and nature of visibility* to promote this new delivery option, at least using the measure from this study, is not commensurate with perceived importance.

### **Research Limitations**

This study did not include all universities in the U.S. that offered a degree fully online. We chose to use universities included in the list of schools reported by *U.S. News & World Report's* 2006 "E-Learning Guide." This weekly national news periodical has been surveying universities about their online degree offerings since 1999. In sending their surveys to all, or most, four-year colleges in the U.S., we can assume that those receiving the survey had a *fair and equal opportunity to respond* to their data gathering survey. Staff working on this project can assume to be unbiased in their data gathering. Staff can also be considered persistent in trying to get the highest yield in participation for those schools that do offer a degree fully online. The *U.S. News* staff is highly skilled in administering surveys of this type.

We chose to use in this study schools offering *graduate degree programs* online because there is evidence that graduate programs are the more popular degrees offered fully online (Allen & Seaman, 2006). Furthermore, of the six majors reported by *U.S. News*-- business, public health, nursing, library sciences, engineering, and education-- we decided to include in our study three of these: business, engineering, and education. Our rationale is that these majors have much higher student enrollment and would give us a broader representation of the types of schools offering degree programs online. The study focused on how the universities promoted their online degree programs overall; we made no distinction between undergraduate and graduate degree programs offered by the sample study group.

The *U.S. News* "E-Learning Guide" reported information on 240 schools meeting our criteria. There was only one school in their report that did not offer its degree fully online and we, therefore, removed that school leaving us with 239 schools. This is a testimony to the accuracy and relevancy of this news periodical's reporting. In looking at this list of schools, it appears that smaller schools may not be well represented. Certainly there are some small schools in this study. The reason for any large scale absence, i.e. a school that does in fact offer one of these graduate degrees online but is not listed, would need further study.

The method used for reviewing the university websites is open to inter-subjectivity variance. The authors aimed to minimize this variance by first reviewing twenty university websites as a pilot and then comparing findings with each other to ensure accurate identification of attributes. Furthermore an additional 40 universities were reviewed by both

authors to determine significant variance and further resolution of identifying the attributes. Although some variance is quite possible, the study is able to give aggregate impressions of attributes used by the universities to promote their online degree programs.

We recognize that to assess the extent and level of academic fidelity of an online distance degree program offered by a university would call for a thorough review of the academic unit and its many relationships within the university. At one level, it is fair to say that these assessments are *ongoing* as the universities undertake their day-to-day operations, follow procedures for new program offerings, adhere to shared governance, and prepare for accrediting agency visits. However, our current interest is getting an *aggregate understanding* of how universities *present academic fidelity and integrity* when *promoting* their online degree program offerings. An argument can be made that a university has a high level of academic fidelity but the marketing message used does not reflect this. Similarly, an argument can be made that a university promotes its online degree program using academic fidelity attributes but does not, in fact, have a high level of academic fidelity. In other words, by simply reviewing the promotional message to prospective students on the official websites does not measure the true extent and nature of academic fidelity. However, in the aggregate and with this relatively large study group, we expect that the conclusions of our assessment are valid or at least we can conclude how universities ostensibly promote their online degree programs. A sharper understanding of academic integrity of online degree programs is needed and will be part of our further research.

This study included a relatively large number of universities in studying online degree offerings. Using a well recognized source for identifying what schools were offering degrees fully online the selection bias should be minimal. Our methodology should yield high quality on the validity and reliability of variables under study.

## **Summary**

The aim of our study was to determine the prominence of academic fidelity attributes in online degree program offerings, as presented to prospective students via universities' official websites. Academic fidelity was conceptualized as being a measure of the nature and extent of integrity or equivalency between on campus programs and online degree programs, and operationalized by the extent or level to which university leaders have considered, involved, and entrusted the current academic assets to produce the new educational program offering. The study identified eight major attributes currently used to promote online degree programs: Academic Fidelity - Faculty, Curriculum, and Quality; University Branding/Reputation – Classroom and Distance Learning Expertise; Features/Benefits - Flexibility, Convenience, and Information/Operation. Universities selected for analysis were schools listed in the *U.S. News & World Report's* 2006 "E-Learning Guide" (N=240). The study showed much evidence indicating that a relatively *minimal number of institutions* promote their online degree offerings using *academic fidelity attributes* either of "Faculty", "Curriculum", and/or "Quality." The findings of our study clearly show that very few institutions are leveraging their existing traditional programs (faculty and curriculum) and standards (quality) when creating and delivering their equivalent online programs, opting to use "convenience" and "flexibility" more frequently to promote their online degree programs to prospective students. Furthermore, the study found a surprising lack of high visibility of online degree program offerings on university official websites, opting to use either a secondary link or have readers use a search feature. Although promoting the flexibility and convenience attributes of online degree programs is reasonable and considered "good marketing" as they relate to customer

benefits, academic administrators may want to consider the extent to which academic fidelity attributes are used to promote their online degree programs and the rationale for why other attributes are much more prominent.

### **Implications for Practice**

Academic administrators and those responsible for the marketing of fully online degree programs as well as academic program directors and faculty teaching in these programs should be acutely aware of the level of visibility of their programs and the significant attributes used to market these programs to prospective students. Results of this study show that a thorough review of these aspects of marketing online degree program offerings would be beneficial. Such a review could include:

- *Visibility*: Access information related to your university's online degree programs from the perspective of a prospective student. How visible or prominent is information about your online degree programs? Is the information situated on the university website at a level appropriate to where the online degree program offerings fit in the scheme of the university's strategic plan? If not, consider who is responsible for placing this material on the webpage (and other media) and determine how best to advocate for change.
- *Academic Integrity Attributes*: Carefully review and have others, especially prospective students, review the attributes used to market your fully online degree programs. Do these attributes speak to the academic integrity of the university and sponsoring academic unit? If not, identify who is responsible for creating the messages used to market your programs and placing these messages in various media. Determine how best to advocate for change. Considering crafting language that you feel is a better fit for communicating the academic integrity of your programs.
- *Conflicts between "Effective" Marketing Language and Academic Speak*: If in-house or consultant marketing/recruiting personnel claim that academic fidelity is a low level of interest consumer (student) benefit or feature of your program, ask for a detailed evidenced-based rationale for why this is so. Consider first if academic fidelity actually exists with your programs and subsequently consider how this is best communicated to your prospective online degree program students.

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