

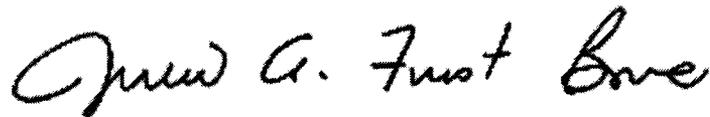
The Acceptance of Online Graduate Coursework by
School Districts in Wisconsin and Illinois

By

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the results of a study into the acceptance of online graduate coursework by school districts in Wisconsin and Illinois. This study emphasizes the need for accountability in online course offerings from secondary education facilities, as well as documented policies for recognition of the online courses by school districts. The researcher employed an online survey to assess the perceptions of online courses and the differentiation in recognition of online course completion. The purpose of this study was to determine the acceptance of online courses for advancement within school districts. The results of this study can assist school districts in developing graduate course recognition policies, teachers considering graduate programs, and Universities whose programs of study include online courses.

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Chapter I: Introduction

The general attitude of the public in relation to online graduate coursework is believed to be dismissive. While universities believe the courses they offer online are equal to traditional classroom work and allow a wider audience to participate in the classes, there appears to be a gap between the public's perception of the online classes and the universities' belief in their online course content. For example some school districts have contract language that limits the number of credits a teacher may have from online courses. This illustrates that schools perceive online learning as inferior to traditional classroom environments. This gap provides the rationale for this thesis.

Hinsdale Central High School District #86 in Hinsdale Illinois has the following policy regarding online graduate coursework listed on their Pre-Approval of College Credit Form "Please note that lane changes will not be processed until all course approvals and official transcripts are received. In addition, the employee is responsible for tracking the number of hours they are taking for independent study, video courses, web-based learning, distance learning, and travel courses. A maximum of 6 hours of any combination of these courses are allowed for each 30-hour lane change. In addition, up to 6 hours of graduate credit may be earned for District designated Academy workshops for each 30 hour lane change. Adherence to these guidelines will ensure that your lane change is processed in a timely manner." This is just one example of how various school districts attempt to monitor and limit the number of graduate credits received from courses the district views as inferior to classroom based instruction.

As new and veteran teachers look for ways to climb the pay scale while continuing to improve their own education, online coursework is one solution for the

dilemma. Teachers can take courses after their papers are graded and their own families are taken care of from the comfort of their own homes. These professionals do not have time to drive hours a week to and from graduate programs. Many find that there are additional benefits, both monetary and personally, to getting a Masters degree in their current field. However, very few have a university Masters program readily available. These professionals are being responsible at advancing their own knowledge base by seeking out educational opportunities that benefit themselves and their respective schools. Many are unaware of the disparity in recognition of online coursework versus traditional coursework until they have completed the courses and are looking for professional advancement. This study looks to publicize the perceptions that create that disparity, and to encourage additional research by school districts, and teaching professionals, and university's when considering online courses.

An online survey was used to assess the acceptability of online graduate work by school districts in Wisconsin and Illinois. The survey was emailed to principals and district administrators in several districts within the two states. The hypothesis is that online coursework is singled out and is not as widely accepted as traditional coursework in relation to recognition in school districts in Wisconsin and Illinois.

Additionally, how school administrators formed their opinions of online coursework was questioned. A majority of those surveyed had read some sort of informational item, research, articles, etc, regarding online learning. They expressed views that revolved around not only the informational pieces, but dialogue within their educational community, as sources for their knowledge of online courses. Many had been involved in online coursework themselves.

Initially, this research discusses what online coursework is and the disparities that occur under that single heading. Following this is a review of the data gleaned from the research involving perceptions of online graduate coursework, policies regarding recognition of online coursework and how those policies differ from recognition of traditional classroom based instruction.

Conclusions and recommendations include a look at the perceived employability of graduate students who take online courses or graduate from online graduate degree programs. Additional recommendations are geared toward school districts as they create policies to address online graduate coursework and the implications on hiring practices if online coursework is not accepted.

The outcome of this research is intended to help guide online programs to address the concerns of those school districts faced with employing online graduates; to help the students enrolling in online courses understand the possible limits to their employability and/or recognition between online and traditional coursework by school districts in Illinois and Wisconsin. This study will help illustrate the public's perception of online courses and identify some of the reasons for these biases. Additionally, this study will offer insight valuable to online course/degree graduates pertaining to their actual employability with an online degree and how it varies from the employability of an applicant with a traditional degree.

The findings of this study proved the hypothesis correct; there is a disparity between the acceptability of online coursework versus traditional coursework in relation to recognition in school districts in Wisconsin and Illinois.

Statement of the Problem

Online courses provide teachers and other individuals with an opportunity to continue and advance their education despite barriers of location and time. More and more graduate students are opting for online education as a way to advance on the pay scale and to continue as lifelong learners without having to give up more time commuting to and from campuses. Some students find that graduate programs in their fields are unavailable within commuting distance. Online programs provide them with the opportunity to participate in programs that they, otherwise, would not be able to. However, many teachers are unaware of the implications of online coursework and the lack of acceptance within school districts.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to document the perceptions of online graduate coursework as well as document some of the limitations school districts in Wisconsin and Illinois place on graduate coursework completed online.

Research Hypothesis

The hypothesis of this research is the following.

1. Online coursework is singled out and is not as widely accepted as traditional coursework in relation to recognition in school districts in Wisconsin and Illinois.

Definition of Terms

For simplicity of understanding, the following terms have been defined by the researcher.

Online/On-line - Accessible via a computer, rather than on paper or other medium.

Traditional Education – Face to face lecture based instruction

Combination or Mixed Education – A mixture of face to face and online instruction

Coursework – University level graduate work for credit towards a degree

Diploma Mills – Unaccredited online degree programs that operate for profit

Accredited College/University – A secondary education institution recognized by the national university accrediting board and generally accepted as an educational institution.

Assumptions

The issues explored in this research will help educators determine their employability upon completion of online graduate level coursework. Additionally, this research will help school districts develop policies that address the reliability of online courses and Universities better understand the perception of the online courses offered by future employers of the Universities graduates.

Limitations of the Study

The researcher has identified some limitations. They include:

1. The research focuses on individual perceptions, which can change over time.
2. The research is conducted only in Wisconsin and Illinois.
3. The age of respondents was not considered in this study. There could be a disparity between respondents based on that factor.
4. A limited number of school districts were surveyed based on availability of electronic contact information available on the Web.

Methodology

Initial research was conducted via email to principals and district administrators requesting input into what would be valuable to them regarding online graduate coursework. Similar information was gathered from employed teachers who had either participated in online coursework or were considering online courses as part of their masters program. These inquiries led to the formation of the survey questions.

The survey was created with multiple format questions and administered online. School principals and administrators were selected via the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction website and two Illinois websites, including the governments' website and the Illinois High School Association website. The result was 108 responses to twenty-two questions. Quantitative data was then analyzed to prove the hypothesis.

Summary

This study was conducted to help teachers who are pursuing graduate coursework to evaluate the acceptability of that coursework or degree if it contains, in whole or part, online courses. The survey was administered to Wisconsin and Illinois principals and administrators via an online medium. The intended benefit to participants is to offer a guide to school districts as they prepare their own policies regarding online graduate coursework by their employees. Multiple limitations were discussed, 108 responses were received in response to twenty-two questions.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Due to the relatively new nature of online course work for credentialed teachers, there was very little research available on the acceptability of online courses by school districts. One peer reviewed published article was found along with one descriptive report. Additionally, several published short articles were found to be relevant.

The lack of literature on the topic helps justify the importance of this research. With numerous online courses for teachers being added daily, it is important to know the acceptability and employability outcomes for teachers with credits from these online courses. While there was no literature directly pertaining to my research topic, there was literature pertaining to post-secondary faculty perceptions of online programs and student satisfaction regarding online programs and the process involved in establishing an online degree program.

The research detailed here includes the recent finding of Adams and DeFleur (2005). They asked for active hiring committees to compare three resumes, with the only difference being the origin of their doctoral degrees. The research of Tamashiro and Erwin (1999) emphasizes the process Webster University went through to establish a credible online degree program. The article from Carnevale (2003), illustrates the lack of training for professors who teach online courses, as well as the lack of employability of those course graduates. Carnevale indicates that the students believe the degree is valuable, but that his experiences show that actual work experience was valued more by potential employers.

Information presented by Levinson (2001) indicates that there are millions of students taking online courses and enrolled in online degree programs. The benefits to

online education are plentiful. The students enrolled vary widely in their ages, interests, and reasons for enrolling. Just as varied are the accrediting processes of universities and colleges offering online courses and degrees. Some find that respected organizations, like the American Bar Association, have established guidelines that online degrees do not meet. This limits the employability of online degree program graduates. Scheeres (2002) refutes Levinson by stating that an online degree is better than having no degree at all on your resume. While that online degree might not catapult you to the head of the pile of possible employees, it still puts you above those who have no degree at all.

Adams and DeFleur (2005)

The authors attempted to assess *The Acceptability of a Doctoral Degree Earned Online as a Credential for Obtaining a Faculty Position* in this explanatory study. Taking into account the type of degree earned, the research sought to identify whether online, traditional, or a combination impacts the chances of being hired for a faculty position that required a Doctoral degree. Using over 2,000 advertisements for available positions from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* during a three month period in 2002, they chose about 300 that specified they were seeking applicants with a doctoral degree in a specialty area.

The researchers contacted the hiring committee chairs and 109 of the 300+ agreed to participate in the study. Questionnaires were mailed and returned, describing three candidates for a faculty position where each had a different type of doctoral degree. Candidates were equal in all areas aside from origin of degree earned. Respondents knew that was the focus of the research. The questionnaire was formatted as “forced-choice.” Once choice of applicant had been made, respondents were asked to choose a main reason for selecting the applicant that they did. Space was allowed for a written explanation of choice.

Written responses were analyzed for similarities using the CATPAC research tool. Limitations were discussed regarding additional information on the institution that the degree was earned from and method of instruction. Ethical and legal concerns were also discussed regarding advertising of online programs as acceptable to hiring institutions while yet, no research to support that claim. Findings are clear. 98 percent of respondents would choose the traditional degreed candidate over an online degreed

candidate. Eleven percent of respondents would choose the traditional degreed candidate over a combination degreed candidate. Additional findings were reported in regard to importance of issuing institution of degree

Tamashiro and Erwin (1999)

The authors explain the experiences and outcomes of Webster University, a North Central Regional Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA) accredited institution, as it established its first online degree program. The program was a teacher education program with graduation resulting in students becoming licensable teachers. Due to the fact that licensing is through state agencies and the University was accredited by the NCA, the curriculum had to meet state and NCA standards.

One NCA standard is that “Programs provide for timely and appropriate interaction between students and faculty and among students.” (Tamashiro and Erwin (1999)) Webster met this standard by setting this guideline for their online courses. “All on-line courses will involve interaction between students and faculty, and among students using email, small group and whole class discussion forum. Some classes will also include audio or video conferencing.” Knowing that some complete online degree programs meet state and accrediting institution standards, universities should indicate that those programs will be as acceptable as the traditional methods of degree attainment to students.

This report does not address the employability of Webster University students after graduation, who obtained online degrees, which is the focus of this paper. The report is an extensive explanation of Webster’s experience with creating and administering an online program. It does not include employability options after

graduation. This further emphasizes research into their program and others like it is necessary.

Carnevale (2003)

This article featured in The Chronicle of Higher Education looks at existing online certification programs that certify instructors in distance (including online) education and their acceptability by employers. Many professors and others believe that earning an advanced degree or certification in distance (online) education will make them more desirable. Many have found that certification does not inevitably lead to employment, especially if it was earned online.

An interesting phenomenon is happening in the higher education institutions of today... For instance, Penn State faculty who teach online receive a few days training before instructing the online courses that are part of the institutions distance education certification program. The program is geared toward students who want to teach or “run a distance-education program.”

At the University of Wisconsin-Madison they offer a professional development program over the course of a year with an emphasis on “...learn(ing) the basics of teaching at a distance.” One of the most important aspects of many of these programs is seeing the technology from the student perspective before they become instructors. Many students believe that obtaining a degree or certification in distance education is better than work experience as it offers concrete evidence of knowledge. There are very few cases to support that employers will favor credentialed or degreed candidates over those with work experience and a more diverse degree. While this article looked at a specific

industry, the stigma associated with online learning can be carried over to our research of online programs.

Levinson (2001)

According to Arlene Levinson's article published by the Associated Press, "...millions (of students) are signing up for "brick to click" classes." Levinson touches on the age of online class students, the availability of courses, and the acceptability of degrees from online programs by accrediting associations, including the American Bar Association. This article highlights the amazing growth in the industry that had occurred by 2001. We can assume the trend had continued, if not strengthened, with the ever advancing technology needs of business and industry.

Online courses appeal to traditional undergraduate age students (18-24) as well as non-traditional students in both undergraduate and graduate programs. Students feel they can fit more classes into their schedules if they can take them on their own time, rather than during a scheduled period. This flexibility allows students of any age to complete courses in the middle of the night, after work, or the middle of the day between traditional classes. Over 1.4 million were enrolled in college level online courses in 1997-98. It is assumed that this figure is now much higher than that.

The large number of students taking online courses has driven colleges and universities to offer them in growing numbers. According to Robert Tucker of InterEd, a company that specializes in helping schools and other businesses develop online programs, 75 percent of this country's secondary education facilities offer online courses or degree programs. This includes the Concord University School of Law, which has

been offering complete Law degree programs online since 1998. This school is operated by a Division of the Washington Post Company and is operated for profit.

Concord University faces challenges. Their graduates may not receive certification by the American Bar Association, “which requires that students be physically present in schools.” However, graduates of the Concord University School of Law can still find work by taking state specified bar exams. Some states do not require ABA certification in order to practice law.

Scheeres (2002)

While identifying the benefits of earning a degree online, Scheeres asks the question, “can a virtual education land someone a real job?” The answer plain and simple is yes. However, in a competitive industry, the established traditional education will win out. It is better to have a degree on your resume than none at all. According to Robert Tucker, president of InterEd, “you’ll still be second-tier if you’ve got a virtual education, because people making hiring decisions all went to traditional schools and have misgivings about online degrees, although there is no objective evidence to support that.”

One way around this is that universities are no longer distinguishing between online and traditional courses and degrees on students’ transcripts. Thus, employers cannot be sure of the mode of communication for the courses. As is indicated in this article, any degree is better than no degree, even if it is from an unaccredited source.

Summary

Based on the research conducted in the preceding studies, we can come to several assumptions. First, those candidates eligible for faculty positions that receive their doctoral degrees from traditional institutions are more likely to be hired than those who receive their doctoral degrees from online institutions. This carries over to help support our hypothesis that teachers who complete graduate coursework online will receive less compensation than those who complete similar types of graduate coursework via the traditional classroom instruction method.

The second assumption we can make is that established secondary education facilities who are all ready accredited by a recognized body, are held to the same standards when creating online courses as they are when establishing traditional courses. Therefore, the assumption should be made that the online course is equivalent to the traditional course. The Tamashiro and Erwin study highlighted the steps taken by Webster University to ensure that the learning that goes on in their on campus classrooms could be replicated in their virtual classrooms. However, institutions that are not accredited, like the Concord University Law School, may not be held to similar standards. Thus, their courses may not meet the needs of the industry. These institutions are commonly referred to as Diploma Mills.

Levinson highlighted the vast number of students taking online courses and enrolled in online degree programs. The numerous benefits to online education explain why the students enrolled vary widely in their ages, interests, and reasons for enrolling. Some accrediting bodies have established guidelines that online degrees do not meet. This limits the employability of online degree program graduates. Scheeres (2002) refutes

Levinson by stating that an online degree is better than no degree at all on your resume and that while online degrees might not catapult you to the head of the pile of possible employees, it still puts you above those who have no degree at all.

The final assumption we can draw from these articles is that the stigma of online education being inferior to traditional classroom based education is seen in any career, not just teaching. A business executive who earns his MBA online is likely to face the same barriers as a teacher who earns his/her graduate credits online. One factor that appears to be changing in this whole picture is that as we become a more technology based society. Employers are beginning to recognize the importance of tech-savvy employees in the workplace and that a good mix of traditional and online education may be just what they will be looking for. For now, research is showing that the traditional classroom is the preferred method of education.

Chapter III: Methodology

This chapter will include information about how the sample was selected, a description of the sample which was gleaned from survey responses, and a description of the survey questions. This is a qualitative study examining the relationship between internet based online coursework and school districts' acceptability of those courses. Acceptability will be defined as the unlimited willingness of a school district to employ teachers with any number of online courses. Questions focused on the perception and any policies the schools have regarding online coursework. The focus was not only on the hiring of teachers with online coursework, but the acceptability of online coursework for existing teachers as part of their continuing education credits. Of the school districts in Illinois and Wisconsin, over 300 were randomly chose from Illinois and Wisconsin State Department of Education school district listings. These listing were found on the department websites and cited in the resources section of this paper.

Subject Selection and Description

The principals and administrators were chosen at random. Every third school listed on the state websites was chosen to participate in the survey. The Principals/Administrators of those schools chosen were emailed an explanation of the research and a link to the online survey, which included implied consent information as seen in Appendix A. Initial contact was made on November 6, 2006, with follow up to encourage participation in the form of an email reminder. Participants will receive a copy of the research findings intended to help them in understanding the limitations they put on teaching candidates by imposing policies that limit the educational opportunities for

teachers. The findings will also help other education facilities create policies regarding online graduate coursework within their own districts.

Of the 108 total respondents, 81 were District Administrators, 27 were Principals, and two were in Human Resources. All were involved in the process of hiring teachers. The majority of respondents, 68.5 percent, were from rural areas. The remainder of respondents identified themselves as urban in location. The populations of the student body of the schools represented ranged from less than 500 to over 3000. One disparity in this data may be that administrators who responded indicated the population of their district versus an individual school as the principals would have reported.

Instrumentation

The original survey administered in this study was designed to be easy to fill out. In an attempt to increase validity, an initial request was sent to ten area principals and administrators requesting input into the questions to be asked. A number of the questions and topics suggested by those initial contacts were included in the survey. All questions appeared on one online web page, accessible via a link embedded in the introductory letter (Appendix A). There were twenty-two questions. Four required yes/no responses, nine requested written responses, two requested numerical responses chosen from four to five options listed, five of the questions contained responses ranging from superior/effective to inferior/ineffective, and the remainder included factual information with varied responses. A copy of the finalized survey is located in Appendix B.

Data Collection Procedures

A 22 question survey was administered online from November 6, 2006 to November 22, 2006. The survey was hosted by Zoomerang.com. Administrators and

Principals from Illinois and Wisconsin involved in the hiring of teachers were chosen at random to respond.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved explanatory and numerical statistics to compare perceptions between online and traditional classroom based graduate level instruction. Significant differences were found between the acceptance of online graduate coursework and traditional classroom based instruction.

Limitations

There are multiple limitations to this instrument and sample of respondents. One limitation is that the survey questions personal perception, which is ever changing. Second, the survey was limited to Wisconsin and Illinois respondents. Third, responses could have been categorized by the age of the respondent, which this survey did not take into account.

Summary

Administrators and principals from both rural and urban schools in Wisconsin and Illinois participated in the 22 question survey administered. Upon analysis of the data, significant differences were found between the acceptance of online graduate coursework and traditional classroom based instruction. Limitations to the research were discussed.

Chapter IV: Results

The purpose of this research was to test the hypothesis that school districts in Wisconsin and Illinois perceive online graduate coursework to be inferior to traditional classroom based graduate coursework. The results of this research support the hypothesis proposed. The general perception expressed by administrators and principals in both rural and urban areas was that online graduate coursework or degrees were viewed as inferior to traditional classroom based instruction. In a few instances, this carried over to monetary compensation for teachers being denied when courses were online in nature.

Table one shows the breakdown of responses that supports this hypothesis. Only 16.5 percent of respondents viewed online courses to be equal to traditional classroom instruction, while 75.5 percent indicated online instruction was effective yet missing some components of classroom instruction and 8 percent viewed online courses as entirely ineffective. To further substantiate that the hypothesis held true, respondents indicated that of those school districts which currently have policies differentiating between online and traditional masters coursework. One respondent indicated they will not accept any online coursework. Two indicated online work is not accepted for the first Masters. Multiple respondents indicated there was a numerical limit that varied on the number of credits they would accept from online courses.

Additionally, a number of respondents mentioned that online coursework was accepted as part of an accredited program and that all Masters coursework, online or traditionally based, must be pre-approved, this resulted at times, in requiring a syllabus and interview of the instructor at the discretion of the administrator. Several respondents

indicated that this was a current topic of discussion and that their districts/schools were currently researching the topic to construct a policy regarding online coursework.

Table 1 Response to Survey Question #9.

Responses to question #9		How do you view online courses?
Superior to traditional classroom instruction	0	0 percent
Equal to traditional classroom instruction	20	16.5 percent
Missing some components of traditional classroom instruction, but still effective	80	75.5 percent
Ineffective form of instruction	7	8 percent

Item Analysis

In this section you will find the responses to the survey questions administered assembled in Table Two. Varied written responses are omitted due to the length of including all written responses to the nine open ended questions. Responses to those questions may be obtained by contacting the author of this study.

While 99.5 percent of respondents were involved in the hiring of teachers, one respondent did not complete any additional survey questions. Therefore, 100 percent of respondents for the remainder of the questions are involved in the hiring of teachers. This information was obtained in response to survey question number one “Are you involved in the hiring of teachers?”

Question number two asked “Does your school district have a policy regarding recognition for online graduate coursework (ie: salary scale increase, etc.) that is different than traditional graduate coursework?” While only 11 percent of the districts represented

have policies directly addressing online coursework, several are currently devising or researching such policies.

The majority of respondents to question number four, 79 percent, have read at least one article, research, etc., regarding the effectiveness of online courses or degrees, the results indicate that this is a current and widely discussed topic in the majority of educational facilities in Wisconsin and Illinois. It further supports the findings that several districts are attempting to construct, or have constructed policies to address online graduate coursework.

Question number five asked “How would you view a Masters degree earned **entirely** online from an accredited University versus one earned traditionally from the same University?” Masters degrees earned entirely online are viewed as inferior to traditional degrees by 86 percent of the respondents, and equal to traditional degrees by only 13.5 percent. None of the respondents view the online degrees as superior to traditional degrees. Many respondents indicated that there was uneasiness with online degree programs based on many different factors. As explained in their written responses, a majority of the dissent has to do with the importance of communication in education.

“Part of the benefit of graduate work is the interaction with the professor, students, and other faculty members. Understanding body language and creating dialogue is an important part of the educational experience.”

“Degrees earned completely online limit a student's experiences and training relative to communicating ideas within the context of working with a live audience.

Defending viewpoints, presenting ideas, etc., are much different processes through online communication versus direct interaction, and I believe a person who has

earned a degree without interacting in a face-to-face environment is missing an integral component needed for success in the working world of education--which by nature requires extremely effective human relations and communications skills.”

It is important to consider the results of question six. The responses indicate that a combination of online and traditional instruction is preferable to just online instruction. The reason behind this could be the influence of technology today, and its use within the classroom environment. Therefore, experience with technology in education would be considered advantageous. In today’s public schools, computer use and navigation of the Web is integral to a successful classroom that prepares learners for the future. The number of respondents who viewed degrees earned both online and traditionally as equal or superior to an entirely traditional degree was 49 percent. The question was “How would you view a Masters degree earned partially online and partially in a traditional classroom from an accredited University?” Some of the reasons indicated included:

“I think a combination of the two delivery systems at least appears to offer a human, face-to-face component, which should be positive.”

“I feel a mix is the best. Oral communication and written communication and learning are both vital. One can not dominate the other in a great program.”

“I feel that a quality program will incorporate online experiences. I think there are alternatives as opposed to an either-or situation.”

The next question, asked respondents was “How do you view a traditional classroom based Masters degree from an accredited University?” Not surprisingly, 71 percent of respondents viewed the traditionally obtained degree as superior to an online

degree. Only eight percent of respondents viewed a traditional Masters degree as almost equal or inferior to an online Masters degree.

Alternately, 92 percent of respondents view individual online courses as effective or equal to traditional classroom based instruction when asked “How do you view online courses?” With the influx of technology in the classrooms, this is not a surprising finding. Many respondents indicated their views of online courses were shaped by their own experiences, some positive and some negative, both as students of the course and as teachers of online courses.

“I took one on-line course, which was a nightmare because of unrealistic timelines- the toughest thing I ever have had to do academically. If you can network and discuss with colle(a)gues on-line, there is no reason why it can't be as valuable as a traditional course(assuming that the traditional class has some value). Getting a master's degree is really an endurance test, more than a scholarly journey. Having to ignore family and spend tons of windshield time and giving up sleep does not make for a positive, cheerful learner.”

“Students learn as much as they want regardless of the medium. Access to teachers can be difficult or easy in any instructional form. The university and/or university teacher have more to do with the quality than the form it is taught by.”

“I see traditional lecture as being less effective as an instructional strategy.”

When addressing the employability of teachers who have earned their Masters degrees entirely online, only nine respondents had actually hired teachers who fit this category. Other respondents have teachers within their districts/schools who were hired by previous administration who received their Masters entirely online which is not

reflected in this data. Of the nine who have been involved in hiring online Masters Recipients, only two found them to be less effective than their traditionally educated counterparts. Those teachers educated entirely online appear to excel at certain aspects of classroom teaching that may not be addressed or developed by traditional classroom based education.

“As I mentioned, one of my best teachers earned his entire MS degree on-line, but I did not hire him, as he was already on the faculty when I was hired as principal. This teacher is much more advanced than his peers in the use of technology in the classroom. His students are expected to visit his web-site for information, or to correspond on his blog.”

The majority of responses to procedures for approving graduate coursework included a pre-approval by district administration. Some responses indicated that graduate coursework must be directly related to the field that the teacher is currently instructing in order to receive advancement on the pay scale. As indicated earlier, some districts limit the number of online credits it will recognize. Other districts investigate the rigor of online courses to compare to their traditional classroom based counterparts.

“Must be semester graduate level credits from and accredited university/college in the teacher's field or toward a graduate degree or such other credits as approved by the District Administrator in writing prior to taking. Only grades of B or above will be applied to salary schedule movement.”

“Manual examination and review of courses to determine alignment with field of work. Investigation of suspect course offerings include request of syllabus and interview with university and/or professors.”

Table 2 Summary of Responses to Survey Questions

Survey Question Number	Abbreviated Responses	Totals	Total percent
1	Yes	108	99.5
	No	1	0.5
2	Yes	4	11
	No	98	89
3	Open ended responses		
4	7+	17	14.5
	5 to 7	10	7.5
	1 to 4	59	57
	0	22	21
5	Superior	0	0
	Equal	18	13.5
	Almost Equal	27	25.5
	Inferior	62	61
6	Superior	2	1
	Equal	56	48
	Almost Equal	40	41
	Inferior	9	10
7	Superior	72	70.5
	Equal	28	22
	Almost Equal	5	6
	Inferior	2	2
8	Open ended responses		
9	Superior	0	0
	Equal	20	16.5
	Effective	80	75.5
	Ineffective	7	8.5
10	Open ended responses		
11	Yes	9	10.5
	No	97	89.5
12	As Effective	6	83.5
	Not as Effective	2	16.5
13-17	Open ended responses		
18	Yes	90	83.5
	No	17	16.5
19	Open ended responses		
20	Principal	27	30.5
	District Administrator	81	69.5
	Asst. Principal	0	0
	Human Resources	2	1.5
21	500 or less	24	24.5
	501-1000	32	25.5
	1000-2000	28	25
	2000-3000	12	14

22	3000+	12	10.5
	Rural	78	68.5
	Urban	30	32.5

Summary

In conclusion, the hypothesis that online graduate coursework is singled out and is not as widely accepted as traditional coursework in relation to recognition in school districts in Wisconsin and Illinois has been supported by the research. The research also shows that school administrators are aware of the trends toward online graduate coursework and that many districts are working to address the trend amongst teachers and within their contracts.

As Robert Tucker alluded to, many administrators themselves are the products of traditional education systems. Until online course/degree graduates rise to those levels, there will continue to be undue bias towards online graduate coursework (Scheeres, 2002). Few respondents indicated they had taken an online course themselves, which leads the researcher to surmise that they are unfamiliar with online course requirements and delivery and thereby making themselves unable to adequately judge the acceptability of the courses in relation to the requirements of their schools and districts.

Chapter V: Discussion

Awareness of administrator's views regarding online graduate coursework is essential for understanding how teachers can get the most out of their graduate studies. As indicated earlier in this research, the nature of online course delivery is a relatively new method of education. Due to the tremendous benefits of online education, ease of accessibility, and flexibility in time allotted, online courses are becoming increasingly popular. A growing number of Universities and Colleges (over 75 percent of them) are expanding their offerings to include not only partially online degrees but complete degree programs online.

Teachers, as one potential audience for these online programs, need to be aware of the implications of earning all or part of their graduate degrees via online courses. This research set out to identify the perceptions of those courses and programs by administrators who will be evaluating and potentially hiring graduates of these courses and degree programs. This research supported our hypothesis. The perceptions expressed in this study concluded that online courses are inferior to traditional classroom courses and that recognition for the non traditional courses can be limited.

The majority of respondents indicated that their schools or districts did not have a current policy in place to discriminate between online and traditional graduate coursework. However, several respondents did have policies in place that limited the number of online credits they would recognize. One respondent indicated that "We do not have such a policy, but procedurally, we do not accept online courses for graduate credit unless they are part of a prescribed program." This indicates that while there is not a written policy, as with many respondents, the decision is up to the discretion of

administration approving courses and programs on an individual basis. Therefore, there may be a lack of consistency in recognition for online graduate coursework, leaving teachers with uncertainty following their course or degree completion.

Limitations

There are multiple limitations to this instrument and sample of respondents. One limitation is that the survey questions personal perception, which is ever changing. Second, the survey was limited to Wisconsin and Illinois respondents. Third, responses could have been categorized by the age of the respondent, which this survey did not take into account. It has been suggested that the personal experiences with online coursework may be lacking in older administration and, as a result, they may be less likely to accept online coursework due to their unfamiliarity with it.

Conclusions

From the data we can draw the conclusion that the perception is that individual courses taken in conjunction with traditional classroom delivered instruction is a preferred method of obtaining graduate credits for teachers in Wisconsin and Illinois as part of a program of study offered by an accredited secondary institution. Traditionally delivered classroom based instruction is preferred over online exclusive graduate level instruction, whether as an individual course or an entire degree program. Teachers who are considering a graduate level course of study need to be aware of the implications of online coursework as recognized within their schools/districts.

There has been a large body of research conducted regarding the development of online courses, the achievement levels of students in those courses, and the challenges faced by professors administering the courses. There is very little research into the

employability of graduates of online courses and degree programs. As this segment of education continues to grow and begins extending into the public high school system, research needs to be done to substantiate the continued growth and the effects of online education on the advancement opportunities of online graduates.

Recommendations

It is recommended that research continues into online education and the effectiveness of instruction received entirely online. Follow-up needs to be conducted with graduates of entire online degree programs and the benefits and drawbacks of online degree programs, including the struggles these graduates faced upon completion of the program. Additional regulations need to be drafted to differentiate between Diploma Mills and accredited University programs. There is an indication that there needs to be some sort of criteria for acceptable online learning environments that meet the same objectives of traditional classroom based learning experiences.

As technology advancements continue, web cams and chat rooms can continue to advance the online environment and recreate in each student's home the traditional classroom environment where students can see each other and read each other's body language and interact in real time. This, of course, would alter the flexibility of time commitments that contribute to the popularity of online courses.

As school districts begin recognizing a difference in graduate level formats, they must also be sure their regulations on those courses address a variety of concerns. The subjective opinions of administrators need to be translated into written policies that prospective graduate students can adhere to when attempting to obtain graduate level education.

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Appendix A: Introductory Survey Letter

Thesis Title: The Acceptance of Online Graduate Course Work by School

Districts in Wisconsin and Illinois.

**Research conducted by: Dawn A. Oler, CFCS
Under the supervision of Dr. Julie Furst-Bowe
University of Wisconsin Stout**

Dear Principal or School Administrator,

I am a graduate student in the Family Studies and Human Development program at the University of Wisconsin Stout. My thesis work is focused on on-line graduate coursework and the perception of those courses by hiring Principals in Wisconsin and Illinois. Your school was chosen from the Department of Education's district listings page, as a result I am asking for your participation in a brief survey. This survey is available online by following this link:

<http://www.zoomerang.com/survey.zgi?p=WEB225U43H9RDM>

Your input is confidential and your name will not be included on any documents. We do not believe that you can be identified from any of the information we collect. Your response to the survey is essential to my research and will help Universities and Colleges as well as graduate students in understanding the perceptions and employability of online graduate coursework. Once the research is completed a copy of the results will be emailed to you. By completing the survey you agree to participate in the project entitled **“The Acceptance of Online Graduate Course Work by School Districts in Wisconsin and Illinois.”**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to participate without any adverse consequences to you. However, should you choose to participate and later wish to withdraw from the study, there is no way to identify your anonymous survey answers after it has been turned into the investigator.

This study has been reviewed and approved by The University of Wisconsin-Stout's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB has determined that this study meets the ethical obligations required by federal law and University policies. If you have questions or concerns regarding this study please contact the Investigator or Advisor. If you have any questions, concerns, or reports regarding your rights as a research subject, please contact the IRB Administrator.

Thank you so very much for your time and consideration.

Dawn A. Oler, CFCS

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Appendix B: Thesis Survey Questions

Terms and their meanings as you go through this survey:

Online/On-line - Accessible via a computer, rather than on paper or other medium.

Traditional Education – Face to face lecture based instruction

Combination or Mixed Education – A mixture of face to face and online instruction

Coursework – University level graduate work for credit towards a degree, individual classes

Diploma Mills – Unaccredited online degree programs that operate for profit

Accredited College/University – A secondary education institution recognized by a regional accreditation agency and generally accepted as an educational institution

Courses/coursework refers to individual classes.

Degree means an entire masters degree is earned from this type of coursework.

1. Are you involved in the hiring of teachers?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No (If not, please forward this survey to the person within your organization who is.)

2. Does your school district have a policy regarding recognition for online graduate coursework (ie: salary scale increase, etc.) that is different than traditional graduate coursework?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

3. Briefly describe your policy.

4. How many informational items (articles, research, etc) have you read regarding the effectiveness of online classes and/or degrees?
 - a. 7+
 - b. 5-7
 - c. 1-4

- d. None
5. How would you view a Masters degree earned **entirely** online from an accredited University versus one earned traditionally from the same University?
 - a. Superior to a traditional degree
 - b. Equivalent to a traditional degree
 - c. Almost equal to a traditional degree
 - d. Inferior to a traditional degree
 6. How would you view a Masters degree earned **partially** online and partially in a traditional classroom from an accredited University?
 - a. Superior to a traditional degree
 - b. Equivalent to a traditional degree
 - c. Almost equal to a traditional degree
 - d. Inferior to a traditional degree
 7. How do you view a traditional classroom based Masters degree from an accredited University?
 - a. Superior to online degrees
 - b. Equivalent to online degrees
 - c. Almost equal to online degrees
 - d. Inferior to online degrees
 8. Please explain why you view online Masters degrees the way you do.
 9. How do you view online courses?
 - a. Superior to traditional classroom instruction
 - b. Equal to traditional classroom instruction
 - c. Missing some components of classroom instruction but still effective
 - d. Ineffective form of instruction
 10. Please explain why you view online classes/instruction the way you do.
 11. Have you hired a teacher who has earned his/her Masters degree **entirely** online?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 12. If yes, have the teachers instruction been:
 - a. As effective as his/her traditionally educated counterparts

- b. Not as effective as his/her traditionally educated counterparts
13. Please explain how the teacher(s) who have earned their Masters degree(s) **entirely** online differ in their instruction from those with traditional Masters Degrees.
 14. In your personal opinion, what do you feel are some of the shortcomings of earning a Masters degree online?
 15. In your personal opinion what do you feel are some of the advantages of earning a Masters degree online?
 16. Does your school or district have a procedure in place to approve/disapprove Masters coursework?
 17. Please explain your policy/procedures and criteria upon which the decision is made to approve or disapprove Masters coursework.
 18. Does your school/district provide compensation for graduate coursework?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 19. If yes, is there a policy differentiating between online and traditional graduate coursework?
 20. What is your position within the school district?
 - a. Principal
 - b. District Administrator
 - c. Assistant Principal
 - d. Human Resources
 21. What is the size of the student population in your school?
 - a. 500 or less
 - b. 501-1000
 - c. 1000-2000
 - d. 2000-3000
 - e. 3000+
 22. Is your district _____
 - a. Rural
 - b. Urban