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Choosing an Online Doctorate: Five Things That All Counselors Should Know

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In recent years, there has been a proliferation of on-line degree programs. In the past decade enrollment at online programs continued to grow faster than projections (Rogers, 2005). Since 2001 enrollment in online university courses has tripled (Hsu cited in Simpson, 2006). Allen and Seaman (2003) estimated enrollment at 1.6 million in 2002 consisting of 1.32 million in Public colleges and universities, 240,000 in Private nonprofit and 37,000 in Private for profit schools. Approximately 272,096 of the 1.6 million participated in Masters Degree programs, while 209, 517 pursued Doctoral/Research degree programs. Of the approximately 578, 986 learners who took all their courses on-line in 2002, approximately 109, 250 pursued a Masters degree and 67, 703 pursued a Doctorate.

In a survey of 999 institutions of higher education, Allen and Seaman (2003) reported

one third of responders considered on-line courses critical to their long-term enrollment strategy and projected that the quality of on-line instruction would exceed face-to-face instruction in the coming three years. The definition of online course was any course in which 80 percent of the course content occurred on-line.

The continued growth of enrollment in on-line courses is reflected in the 2003 and 2004 enrollment, 1.98 and 2.35 million respectively (Allen & Seaman, 2005). That growth continued with a 35% increase to an estimated 3.2 million in 2005 based upon the responses of 2,200 colleges and universities (Allen & Seaman, 2006). Reflected in this growth trend is a tendency for larger institutions with enrollments over 1500 and doctoral programs to offer totally online degrees.

Why Choose an Online Degree

Characteristics of Online Learners

On-line learners are adult learners balancing the responsibilities of employment and families while attending school on-line. On-line learners are more disciplined than traditional students (Allen & Seaman, 2006). These learners represent a diverse population who for a host of reasons choose not to pursue traditional face-to-face instruction. Online programs capitalize on diverse learners to enhance the educational community. Diverse adult learners bring a wealth of cultural, professional and life experiences to their online programs. This enriches the online experience by adding a new dimension to the text and instructional media of the course.

Among those pursuing graduate online degrees are Professional Counselors, seeking career advancement. Many Masters level Counselors faced with a perceived glass ceiling seek a doctorate for career advancement and increased earning potential. The Occupational Outlook (Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, 2006a) for Counselors projects greater than average growth in all areas through 2014. Median Counselor salaries for 2004 ranged from \$27,870 for rehabilitation counselors to \$45,570 for educational, vocational, and school counselors. Dissatisfied with their earning potential many Counselor consider retraining for opportunities in the helping professions offering advancement opportunities with increased earning potential. With additional education, many Counselors transition into careers as Counselor Educators, Counseling Psychologists, or School Administrators.

Many Counselors face constraints that preclude participation in traditional face-to-face programs, a challenge shared by military personnel who seek online degrees to further their education (Carnevale, 2006). When asked, 76% of Chief Academic Officers reported online learners were people who might not attend a traditional campus based program (Allen & Seaman, 2006). A review of online degree seeking trends among adult learners can provide valuable information for those contemplating an online doctorate.

Program Features

Factors contributing to the continued growth of on-line degree programs include the increased acceptance of on-line degrees in the job market, the perceived quality of online instruction, and efforts of institutions to incorporate online instruction in their long-term growth strategies. Research has demonstrated a growing trend among educators and the general public to accept online degrees, and view the rigor of online programs more favorably (Allen & Seaman, 2006). While an estimated 86% of employers assert they would hire an employee with an on-line degree, 20% asserted that they actually had hired an employee with an online degree (eLearners.com, n.d.). With this rise in the acceptability of online degrees comes an increase in supply and demand for online degrees. Masters and Doctoral programs have experienced a consistent increase in enrollment. Reasons cited for pursuing on-line courses included maintenance of skills, acquiring skills for new jobs, earning an advanced degree, and expanding employment opportunities (eLearners.com, n.d.). Additionally, events, such as Hurricane Katrina and the War in Iraq, the availability of low cost online degrees, and extensive online advertising contribute to the rise in online enrollment (Rogers , 2005).

Areas with the greatest penetration of online programs (face-to-face programs that offer an online degree), include Associates degrees and Masters Degrees (Allen & Seaman, 2006). The most common degree programs are MBA and Psychology degrees. Current trends indicate that the third most researched on-line degree program is psychology (Tracking the Trends in Online Learning, 2004). Additionally, among the fast growing totally online programs are Masters and Doctorates (Allen & Seaman, 2006). For many Counselors a doctorate in Counseling Psychology is a logical next career step. Employment opportunities for Counseling Psychologists are expected to grow 18 to 26% (more than average) through the year 2014 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, 2006b). When considering an online doctorate in Counseling Psychology, Counselor Education, Educational Administration, or any related field, it is important for Counselors and the mentors to make informed decisions.

Five Key Issues

Counselors seeking career advancement through online education and mentors advising them need a clear understanding of key factors involved in the selection of an online program. Prior to considering an online doctorate Counselors should assess their passionate interests, their fit with online education itself, and their career opportunities with an online doctorate (D. Sarnoff, personal communication, November 6, 2007). When choosing an on-line doctorate, five key issues warrant consideration: accreditation, licensure, transfer credits, quality of instruction (Quality of Instruction Needs Improvement, Online Learners Say. 2006), and customer service (Symonds, 2003). The following is a brief overview of these key issues with suggested areas for exploration.

Accreditation

The first thing to consider when reviewing online programs is program credibility. No one wants to invest a lot of time and money into a worthless degree. A quick measure of credibility is accreditation. In the United States, there are two kinds of accreditation: institutional and specialized (CACREP, 2006). Institutions are accredited by regional and national accrediting commissions, while professional programs are accredited by specialty accreditation. There are six regional accreditation agencies recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (Terrel, 2006). The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs and the American Psychological Association award specialty accreditation. CACREP (2006) accredits two online programs, the Mental Health Counseling and marital, Family and Couples Counseling / Therapy programs through Capella University. While APA (2007) does not accredit any fully online programs, APA has accredited Fielding Graduate University's "distributed learning" Clinical Psychology PhD Program (Fielding Graduate University, 2007).

Prior to choosing an online program, it is important to confirm the status of accreditation with one of these programs. First, review the program website for information on accreditation. After identifying the accrediting body, visit their website to confirm the status of the institutions accreditation.

In addition to accreditation, one must consider the reputation of the program. What do people in the profession say about the quality of the programs, its graduates, and its degree? Will a degree from this institution help or hinder my career advancement? Thus when assessing credibility of the program one might ask:

- Who is the accrediting body?
- What is the status of its accreditation?
- What is the program's reputation the community?
- How will a degree from this institution help my career plans?

Transfer Credit

As more learners pursue online degrees, the issue of transfer of credit gains increasing importance (Rogers, 2005). Transferability of credit is often limited to programs accredited by institutions recognized by CHEA and/or the U. S. Department of Education (CACREP, 2006). When considering an online program, one must consider the likelihood that credit will transfer to another institution in the event the program is not completed. Additionally, many learners must consider the number of incoming transfer credit the program will apply to the degree. Those entering a graduate program must carefully assess the credit awarded for a previous Masters or post bachelors credit.

- Will online courses taken at this institution transfer to other institutions? Keep in

mind that regional accreditation is key here (D. Sarnoff, personal communication, November 6, 2007)

- How many of my previous credits will apply to the online degree?

Licensure

Licensure is important to many who wish to provide direct clinical services as a Counselor or Psychologist. Many Professional Counselors obtain licensure based upon their Masters and do not seek additional licensure based on the online doctorate. Since many third-party payers base fees on level of licensure, many clinicians seek licensure based upon the online doctorate. Thus when considering online programs it is important to consider eligibility for licensure. Accredited specialty programs demonstrate a standard of content and quality evaluated by the specialty organization (CACREP, 2006a). Attaining that standard has benefits to the learner. APA (2007b) cautions individuals that some states require a degree from an APA-accredited program to obtain licensure. The National Board of Certified Counselors and some states waive up to two years of post-graduate supervision for graduates of CACREP programs (CACREP, 2006a). Ultimately, state licensing organizations determine eligibility for licensure in their jurisdiction. For those seeking licensure it is vital to contact the licensing body directly to confirm the eligibility for licensure prior to enrollment in any online program. Important questions include:

- Will I seek licensure based upon this degree?
- With this degree, am I eligible for licensure in my desired locality?
- What steps are necessary to obtain licensure with this degree?

Customer Service

Among the major draws of online programs is their customer service approach to working with learners (Symonds, 2003). One aspect of successful customer service is small classrooms with individualized instructor feedback. Some institutions maintain an average class size of 11, while others have an average class size of 25. A second aspect of customer service is flexibility to adapt to the changing demands of an adult learner's lifestyle. Among the many advantages of online instruction is the diverse viewpoints of adult learners, faculty, and staff which is well suited for the increasingly diverse Counseling profession. Diversity allows online programs to consider new and novel approaches to address learner concerns and structure programs to meet the needs of nontraditional adult learners.

Since many online learners are adults with families and careers, they typically want the flexibility of asynchronous learning, allowing them to complete readings and assignments on their own timetable. Adult learners often schedule studies and post assignments on nights and weekends when they anticipate less demands on their time. It is critical that the university provide services, such as advising, financial assistance, and technical

support, outside of the standard 9 to 5 Monday through Friday business week. Of particular importance is the availability of assistance on nights and weekends, during high learner traffic times. Therefore, when assessing customer service, learners might ask:

- What is the average class size?
- Does the schedule of assignments and readings fit with my busy schedule?
- How accessible are university resources?
- Should a problem arise is assistance readily available during high volume times?

Quality of Instruction

The quality of instruction incorporates the overall learning experience; specifically peer interactions, course content, and instructor competence. Peer interaction is an important part of an effective online learning experience. Peer interaction distinguishes an online course from a correspondence or independent study course. A successful online experience creates a sense of community among learners allowing them to interact and contribute reciprocally to the learning process. Creating a respectful community in which learners grow from interaction with peers and the instructor is the primary responsibility of the course instructor or facilitator.

In an online environment, instructors facilitate the learning process, rather than simply transmit facts (Hopey & Ginsburg, 1996). Leading online programs often utilize subject matter experts and a design team to conceptualize and create the courseroom environment, while the instructor stimulates higher order learning and facilitates peer interactions. The use of subject matter experts promotes uniform quality across sections and instructors.

Recent years have seen an increase in diversity of university and college faculty (Kezar, 2001). The ethnicity, educational backgrounds, and professional experiences of adjunct faculty allow online programs to capitalize on that diversity in service to the online learner. While Allen and Seaman (2006) asserted that the 2200 universities surveyed taught the majority of their online courses using core faculty at a rate consistent with their face-to-face instruction, Symond (2003) reported some major online institutions utilize as much as 95% adjuncts to teach their courses. These adjuncts are professionals working in the community. Researchers (Hopey & Ginsburg, 1996) and learners agree that working professionals add to the learning experience by incorporating real world applications to the traditional texts. Overall, academicians and employers rate online programs roughly equivalent or superior to face-to-face instruction (Allen & Seaman, 2006). Potential challenges for online programs include learners' perception of the quality of instruction, timeliness of feedback, and responsiveness to learner needs (Quality of Instruction Needs Improvement, Online Learners Say, 2006). Yet, strengths of online programs include clarity of assignments, program expectations, and evaluation procedures.

When assessing the quality of instruction consider:

- What is the average class size?
- To what extend will I interact with other learners?
- Who teaches the classes?
- What are the opportunities to interact with faculty?

Summary

With the proliferation and increased credibility of online programs, many counselors consider online degrees as a viable option for career growth, financial advancement, and skills development. As truly informed decision-makers, counselors and their mentors must carefully assess potential online programs. Areas for consideration include program accreditation, eligibility for licensure, transfer of credit, customer service, and quality of instruction. No matter which program a learner chooses they must keep in mind that today an online doctorate program can be as challenging as a traditional program. Additionally, many employers are open to hiring graduates with online degrees. In some situations, such as applying for an online teaching position, applicants with an online degree may have an advantage over applicants from a traditional brick and mortar programs (D. Sarnoff, personal communication, November 6, 2007).

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