HOW TO EXPRESS YOUR CHRISTIAN MISSION THROUGH ONLINE BUSINESS COURSES: FULFILLING YOUR CHRISTIAN (AND ACCREDITATION) DUTY

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ABSTRACT

Business schools that profess a Christian perspective have a unique responsibility to their student body – to not only educate their students but to do so with a Christ-centered worldview. Accreditation requirements ensure that the spiritual mission of such universities is incorporated into all areas of their institution, both inside the classroom and out. This goal is further complicated as more and more universities embrace online education. The purpose of this study is to determine which techniques work best to communicate a Christ-centered approach to online education. We hope to better understand how to create and maintain online classes that helps universities with a religious calling to positively pursue their mission of offering a quality education from a Christian perspective.

KEY WORDS: online education, Internet, Christian higher education, Christian culture

As more and more private Christian universities begin applying for and achieving their AACSB accreditation, these business schools must consider more fully how to support their mission through the use of strategic plans and learning goals. At the same time, many of these same institutions are branching out into the online arena as demand for distance learning increases. The mission statement of our university, along with many other Christian universities, is to provide a college-level education in a Christ-centered environment. In the classroom, we are able to talk about our Christian values, norms, etc. This culture is not as easy to express, however, in an online context where there is little personal interaction between professor and student. This reduced interaction, as Dunbar (2004) points out, is one of the greatest challenges to online classes. In an online format, students have few, if any, opportunities to deviate from the professor's presentation of the subject matter (Greene & Azevedo, 2007). The purpose of this study is to determine which techniques work best to communicate a Christ-centered approach to online business education. We hope to find a better understanding of how to create and maintain online classes in such a way that we positively pursue our mission of offering a quality education from a Christian perspective.

Online Education in America

Distance education has been available in the United States since the late 1800's when the University of Chicago enrolled over 3,000 students in correspondence courses (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2009). We have come a long way since then. Recent studies show that nearly 30% of all higher education students have taken at least one online course; a number which is expected to grow by ten percent every year for the next decade (Allen & Seaman, 2010). According to the National Center for Education Statistics' Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2013 saw over 20 million students enrolled in

some form of distance education in the United States alone (Allen & Seaman, 2015). Among all educational institutions, business schools have been the most proactive in generating online offerings to their students (Allen & Seaman, 2008).

While online education is definitely growing, our understanding of teaching concepts and best practices unique to this format is still very much in its infancy (Estelami, 2012). Arbaugh's (2005) review found that the conceptual work in this domain generally began around 1999 with empirical research first published in 2000. Ellis, Hughes, Weyers, and Riding (2009) further point out that the new approaches in educational technology have created new associations in university experiences that are not fully understood. Besides globalization and increased competition, technological change seems to be the most important challenge facing traditional business programs (Sharkey & Beeman, 2008). As researchers and educators, we know little with regard to how students perceive their professors, peers, and institutions in the technology-based online format. "Recognizing online education's potential, it is important to identify best practices and establish standards that assure quality, comply with accrediting bodies, support faculty initiatives, and provide business students with a product that leads to a satisfying and wholly worthwhile learning experience" (Grandzol & Grandzol, 2006, 1).

AACSB Accreditation

Established in 1916, AACSB Accreditation is considered to be the highest standard of achievement for business schools both in the United States and around the globe. Of the more than 15,000 business programs, less than 5% hold AACSB Accreditation and less than 1% maintain Accreditation in both business and accounting (Accreditation, 2013). Although most accredited schools are based in America, this trend is expected to change in the near future due to

the rapid growth in schools outside the United States seeking AACSB accreditation and slower growth in U.S. business schools seeking accreditation" (Farmer & Abdelsamad, 2014).

Although there is considerable time, effort, and expense for a business school to achieve Accreditation, schools must continue their initiatives in order to retain Accreditation. Schools are required to undergo a maintenance review every five years, conducted by a team appointed by AACSB. Accredited schools must show that their mission, expected outcomes, and strategic plan all align and that there is a focus on continue improvement. A mission is a single statement or set of statements which capture the school's core purpose, describe its distinguishing features, and serve as a guide for the school and its stakeholders. In other words, a school's mission serves to inform its strategic management (AACSB, 2015). Depending on the nature of the university, different schools will have different missions and therefore different ways of managing their school's strategy. With regard to learning goals for example, Brink, Palmer, & Costigan (2014, 428) explain that "some private schools may have a stronger liberal arts focus, others may focus more on social justice and service learning, while others may have a religious affiliation. To the extent that learning goals reflect the greater diversity of missions and stakeholders found in private schools, we would expect that private schools also have more differentiated learning goals."

AACSB as does not require nor wish for all schools to maintain the same mission, learning goals, or outcomes. They do not want cookie cutter business schools. Rather, they expect that schools will differentiate themselves based upon the needs of their stakeholders. What they do require, however, is that business schools do not simply play lip service to their mission but in fact incorporate their mission throughout their organization. If a school, for example, professes a focus on service, then the team of reviewers overseeing the school's

application or renewal must see features of this service focus throughout the various elements of the business school. With institutions professing a Christian mission, this is especially relevant. If a school's mission includes a Christian perspective, this perspective must be felt in the classroom, both face to face and online.

Online Education, AACSB Accreditation, and Religious Institutions

Due to their very nature, Christian business schools find themselves trying to balance a trifecta of maintaining Accreditation, offering their students a Christ-centered education, and embracing the technological advancements that today's students expect. This may mean simply offering one or two courses over the summer term to developing entirely online degree programs.

Unlike public institutions, private Christian institutions are in the distinct position of incorporating some form of spiritual or religious perspective throughout their organization. "The unique challenge for the Christian administrator or professor is to extend educational opportunities without compromising the affective and spiritual growth and development of students…To borrow a Jesuit concept, true Christian education involves *cura personalis* (care for the whole person) and this should occur even for distance learners" (Rovai, Baker, & Cox, 2008, 4). Because of the nature of educating from a spiritual perspective, Diekema and Caddell (2001) caution that religious universities in particular should move carefully in developing online programs.

While the caution is understood and appreciated, over 70% of academic leaders report that online learning is critical to their institutions long term strategy (Allen & Seaman, 2015). According to the most recent Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System dataset,

approximately 71% of degree-granting institutions have some type of distance offerings (Allen & Seaman, 2015). This level of online participation increases to nearly 84% when looking only at institutions with student populations between 1,000 and 4,999 – the general size of most private Christian universities. It would seem, therefore, that the majority of these universities have embraced learning in the online context.

The closest study to date conducted by Rovai, et al. (2008) asked the question of "How Christianly is Christian distance higher education?" Their focus was on differentiating the sense of community and perceived learning in on-campus and online courses at a private Christian and public state university. Their hypotheses supported a stronger sense of community both online and on-campus at the Christian university versus the state university. This increased community, however, did not result in greater perceived learning among students at the Christian university in either on-campus or online courses (Rovai, et al., 2008).

Business schools that profess a Christian perspective have a unique responsibility to their student body, i.e., to not only educate their students but to do so with a Christ-centered worldview. Accreditation requirements ensure that the spiritual mission of such universities is incorporated into all areas of their institution which is only further complicated as more universities embrace online education. The purpose of this study is to determine which techniques work best to communicate a Christ-centered approach to online education. We hope to better understand how to create and maintain online classes that helps universities with a religious calling to positively pursue their mission of offering a quality education from a Christian perspective. While the framework of this study is decidedly simple, it is important to note that this is the first study of its kind. From the results of this study, our goal is to begin developing and refining a list of best practices to improve student's perception that they are receiving a Christ-centered online education.

METHODS

The data collection for this study is currently in process and will be completed in time for presentation at the Orlando Conference in March.

Sample & Procedure

The sample for this study consists of both graduate and undergraduate students from a private university associated with the Southern Baptist Convention. Students were informed by their professor that that the class would be taking a non-mandatory survey on creating a Christian environment in online classes. The professor then passed out the survey to all willing participants. Those who did not wish to take the survey were still given a copy of the survey to review.

In addition to basic demographic data, the survey instrument offered students various scenarios and screen shots from a fabricated online business course to review. Participants were asked to rate on a five-point Likert scale the degree to which they: 1) noticed the Christian element in the online course; 2) thought that it was appropriate to an online course; 3) liked it; 4) thought that it supported the university's mission of providing a Christ-centered education; and 5) thought that it did not detract from the teaching element of the online course.

RESULTS & CONCLUSIONS

The results and conclusions from this study will be compiled and presented at the Orlando Conference in March.

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