

Perceptions of Distance Education Students on How a University Education will Help Achieve their Career Goals

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Achieving Career Goals Through Distance Education (DE) Programs

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Abstract: Students earning degrees through distance education (DE) have complex and sometimes contradicting views on how the degree will help them achieve career goals. We reviewed the responses from a scholarship application and found that although a human capital discourse permeates through their perspective, students' personal feelings associated with earning a degree are also prominent.

Keywords: career goals, adult students, distance education

Chief among the often cited truisms in adult education field is the idea that, compared to young learners, adults are much more pragmatic when it comes to academic decisions, and they expect the educational program that they are attending to change their lives in tangible ways (Knowles, 1980; Merriam & Brockett, 2007). This research, conducted at a dual-mode (Moore & Kearsley, 2012) public university in the US, investigated the student perceptions on the relationship between attending a degree program offered at a distance and career goals. We have found that although adults cite their career plans as a primary goal for their participation in higher education, their motivations are often complex and not always in line with this old adage of the adult education field.

Historically, adults in higher education have been characterized as non-traditional students, and even though the characteristics of people who are considered to be non-traditional have changed over time, they often include being over 24 years of age, working full time, having a veteran status, and often having dependents to support, including a spouse. The numbers of students who have, at least, some of these characteristics in the undergraduate student body in the last couple of decades have been such that it is no longer possible to call them "non-traditional"; both recent enrollment data and future projections indicate that they are more the norm than the exception (Ross-Gordon, 2012). Between 2000 and 2011, enrollment of adults aged 25 and over increased 41% as opposed to an increase of 35% in the enrollment of persons 25 years and younger (NCES, 2012). Even though according to NCES (2012) projections, the distance between these numbers is expected to narrow, adults will continue to have a significant presence on college campuses. In fact, currently the adult student population is so large in the student body that would be a mistake to consider them as a monolithic group (Ross-Gordon, 2012).

Nonetheless, there are some general characteristics of this population that would be significant for tertiary institutions serving them. They tend to be less involved in various college social activities and less interested in "having a good time" in college than traditional students. Relevant to the purposes of this research project, there is also evidence for a connection between educational goals and career aspirations for adult college students (Chao & Good, 2004). This connection is not well-understood for adults taking part in Distance Education (DE) programs. The DE programs where we conducted this research serves a significant number of non-traditional students with a rapidly expanding student body that reflects the changes in the nation in terms of the college attendance levels of adult students, and that provided us a window into how adults in higher education perceive the relationship between their return to school and career

goals.

The change in the composition of college students is inextricably linked to the increased availability of distance learning opportunities as well as changes in the demography of the US and the structure of the American economy. By 2011-12 academic year, all types of postsecondary education institutions have started to provide their students with distance learning opportunities (Ginder & Sykes, 2013). In the last ten years, enrollments in online courses have increased at rates far in excess of those of overall in higher education. The proportion of all students taking at least one online course is at an all-time high of 32.0 percent (Allen & Seaman, 2013). They found that in 2012, 62.4% of 2820 colleges and universities surveyed offered online courses and full programs, while 24.2% offered online courses, and only 13.4% did not have any online offerings at all. Based on the changes in higher education in terms of degrees and courses offered via distance education in the last decade, it is safe to assume that the number of students pursuing their educational goals from a distance will only increase in the near future along with the number of adult students.

The rapid changes in the higher education terrain require the institutions to continuously study what the students think about the offered educational programs in regards to their goals and aspirations. Using the responses to an open-ended question on the annual web-based scholarship application on how students are planning to use their education in achieving their career goals, this study focused on the intersection of educational and career goals of mostly adult students at a large university in the US serving students from across the nation and the world.

The data is limited to self-report of the applicants through a web-based scholarship application form. Furthermore, the applicants only comprised a fraction of the total number of students enrolled, and for this reason, we will refer to them as applicants rather than students while reporting the results. The data could not be triangulated with other data sources to determine whether what the applicants indicate in their responses match their actual life trajectories, yet it still allows us a glimpse into the ways students link achieving their career goals and their education in their own words. We also argue that DE is a central variable that needs to be taken into account in trying to understand how applicants are intending to use their education in relation to their career aspirations. Based on the responses from the applicants in this study, many of them are juggling a variety of roles in their lives, and the flexibility offered through distance education is one of the determining factors for them to be able to attend DE programs.

We have not found any prior research that systematically analyzed how DE students see the role of their education in achieving their career goals. We argue that studying the DE students' career-related motivations in attending an online program, and serving and guiding them more effectively with this understanding may improve other crucial outcomes such as increased student success in terms of time and cost to degree completion. .

Methods

First-time and returning students are asked to complete the annual web-based application for scholarship consideration. Students are encouraged to apply through email reminders in monthly newsletters, website announcements and social media activities, as well as personal contact with the student support offices. The application collects data elements, whether qualitative or quantitative, not captured in any other database at the institution, with an easy retrieval process and allows for the scholarship selection committee to match the applicant

profile to the requirements of each scholarship. The first part of the application form consists of drop-down questions on the demographic characteristics of the applicants, as well as their educational and military background. The second part contains open-ended questions regarding the impact of their family on their finances, any gaps in their education, career goals they may have as they relate to coming back to school as well as their community involvement. The application questions have been shaped by donor specifications and the desire to create a simple form to encourage all students to apply and be as inclusive as possible. The information contained in the scholarship application provides a valuable window for the selection committee to better understand the applicant and provides another means to understand first-time and continuing students in the context of their career-related goals.

We used qualitative content analysis (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to examine the contents of the application forms. The inquiry was guided by one research question: How are the students planning to achieve their career goals utilizing their distance education? The data source for the analysis was the pool of scholarship applications from the 2013-2014 academic year, 602 in total. One of the open-ended questions on the application asked how an education will help [the student] realize career goals. Answers were to be limited to five-hundred words and although the application form did not actually put a limit on the number of words applicants could type, we found that most responses were under the specified number of words and only some went over the recommended limit. Despite the lengthy answers by a few applicants, the average number of words in responses to the question in the application contained around half of the word limit suggested. It was evident that some of the applicants copied and pasted their cover letter to the program rather than answering the question on the online form; however, the vast majority of the respondents answered the question to the best of their ability as evidenced by thorough and articulate arguments on the way(s) they were planning to utilize education in achieving their career goals.

The textual data comprising the responses was stripped of all the identifying information (e.g. name, student ID) and the responses to the question were entered into NVivo 10, Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS). An initial reading of all the aggregated answers persuaded us that the question yielded a very rich set of responses on the motivational orientations of distance students in terms of the coupling of their distance education and career goals both in quality and quantity (142,659 words in total). Next, using the process explained by Graneheim and Lundman (2004), the data analysis started with a close reading of all the responses to get a general understanding of the whole, and then the data was organized into meaning units, categories, and themes. We chose an inductive approach while organizing the meaning units into categories and finally themes for two reasons. First, we could not find an adequate number of prior research with a student body similar to this study, and had no theoretical framework or theory to validate or conceptually extend (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Secondly, we wanted to stay as close to the original data because one of the aims of the research is to explore language used by the students while they are discussing their education in relation to achieving their career goals.

Results

Even though the themes and categories that emerge out of the data will be abstracted further (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004) to come up with a more concise breakdown, the analysis process is now complete. The qualitative content analysis yielded some noteworthy patterns on the stated career goals of applicants in relation to their distance education. Arguably, the most

noteworthy finding is the kind of metaphors applicants use to describe the relationship between their educational and career aspirations. In their classic book on metaphorical nature of human thought processes, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) explain that “the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (p.5). Metaphors, of course, are often used in daily life while trying to express ourselves and communicate with others. They have been very valuable for the purposes of this research since they provide insight into the way the applicants perceive the connection between their attendance in DE and career goals. We found three major metaphors in the way the applicants talked about how they will utilize their education to achieve career goals: to move “up the ladder;” increase their skills and knowledge to open “new doors;” and eliminating the “barrier” because of their lack of educational attainment, for themselves and their loved ones’ well-being and happiness.

Applicants often described a sense of forward motion while describing how their education will influence their career goals. This “forward motion” was tied to “lack of a degree” being a barrier for the applicants to pursue their dreams. The movement was sometimes described upwards, and in this conceptualization their education would help them move up a “ladder” or to a “new level.” For active duty military applicants, the movement corresponded to “advancing rank” while applicants in the private sector evoked the “corporate ladder” as something they wished to climb. For some applicants, only “the sky was the limit” as to how much they hoped to move upwards; they indicated their hope of becoming a CEO and evoked American cultural icons like Steve Jobs as possible models. Others, however, had more immediate plans. Just two weeks ago I had a conversation with the Vice President of Human Resources at [current company], and she advised me that the Vice President of Accounting spoke at their last executive meeting about how she wants me to follow in her footsteps after her retirement in the future. Their plan is to promote me to Director of Accounting after I graduate. Most applicants posited that lack of a college degree “is the number one thing holding (them) back from achieving the goals (they) have set for (themselves) and (their) family.” Describing the effect of not holding a college degree as “being held back” is more significant than depicting it as a barrier because in the former case, a lack of education is given more agency or is something with a powerful grip preventing them from “reaching (their) goals.” A sense of being stuck was discussed often and the applicants felt they were at a point in their career that in order to be able to move forward, they needed new skills, professional knowledge, and better connections.

The applicants’ emotional attachment to their education, and what it represents for them were all emphasized as recurring themes in the responses. This emotional connection was more apparent for first generation college students. In their case, the college degree stood for more than an education; *pride* and *honor* were often used together in describing the kinds of feelings being evoked and served as a proxy for something much larger, like a family’s upward mobility.

Applicants described at length their anticipation of how they would feel at the graduation ceremony in vivid language and usually mentioned their families, especially children. Parents felt that their current or intended hard-work in distance education was going to show their children that “if daddy can do it so can I” or the happiness they would feel to tell their children that they “...went back to school, even though it was difficult and required a great deal of sacrifice.” For some of the applicants, it was approval and admiration of their immediate family, their children and parents, that they desired most. Below is a typical response who stated after explaining the recent personal difficulties how this will affect her family:
There isn't a soul in my family for my 10 year old son to look up to and realize that even when

life has you down as far as you can go, you can still pick yourself up, dust yourself off and keep those blinders on and that determination alive. I desperately want my mom to be proud of me as well as my son ... and my beloved husband...

In fact, applicants' career aspirations and their wish to provide a better financial future for themselves and particularly their children went hand in hand. Talking about a child, one parent argued the education would "improve not just my quality of life but his as well" while another parent desired being "more independent as far as taking care of myself and my child." Familial concerns came up even for those without any kids of their own and believed their future happiness rested on their education; "I want to have a family one day and be able to provide for them the best I can, and I know at the level I am now, I won't be able to succeed at my very best." At least some of the same applicants had attempted a college degree before and their former "failures" made them feel that their success at graduating now was much more worthwhile. Here the purpose was to prove to themselves as much as to their families that they were "capable of completing something (they) started."

One of the applicants touched upon the major themes that can be observed in the responses: "Earning my degree will increase my skill set as an employee, increase the opportunities available to me, and make me a more desirable hire, allowing me to climb the ladder and grow as an employee and individual." Before expanding the themes implied in this response, it is necessary to highlight that the most salient reason in applicants' stated motivational reasons in which education can be used as a "stepping stone." This was related to earning another degree, usually at the graduate level. The majority of the applicants mentioned the specific graduate program they were interested in, whereas few mentioned a master or doctoral degree in general terms. In a few cases, the following educational goal was even vaguer after finishing the current degree; "I must complete my education by first obtaining a college diploma and then moving onto higher levels of learning." This ostensibly ambiguous answer was frequent for applicants whose "end education goal is unclear" for the moment. The applicants who were not as clear about their career goals were the ones that focused on their desire to receive their education specifically at this institution. The emphasis on the university may be associated with lack of a clear vision in terms of what the applicants are trying to accomplish through their degree.

The next most prominent theme emerging from the data was the use of DE as a tool to advance one's already started career. These applicants typically had a job, and thought they could move up the organization if they had a college degree. In fact, some applicants even knew what position they were aiming to obtain after finishing their degree. A few applicants were soldiers in which advancement in through the ranks necessitated a college degree. Others were professionals at various points in their careers who felt they had moved up as much as they possibly could without a college degree and the only way of continuing their upward movement was to complete a college degree. One of the applicants, for example, realized last year that "in order to move into an upper management position in (their) field, (they) would need to back up (their) experience with a degree." These applicants were convinced that even years of experience in a certain field was not necessarily enough for upper management positions at their current employer. "Advancing," "moving forward," and "continuing up the food chain" were some of the most shared phrases in describing their desire to obtain managerial positions and all implied a sense of drive and direction diametrically opposed to the feelings of being stuck in a job.

A closely related theme by these applicants was lack of a college degree limiting the career opportunities for them:

Though I do have an Associate's Degree in Business Administration and equivalent experience required per the job descriptions on the positions I would like to pursue, I feel my resume is often discarded due to my lack of a higher degree.

For these applicants, "an education" or lack thereof, is "the number one thing holding (them) back from achieving the goals (they) have set for (themselves) and (their) family." They feel extremely limited in what they can do and how much they can earn due to not having a college degree. Even when they are able to reach "a level of employment well beyond what (they) thought possible without a degree" they deem obtaining a university degree at a distance as essential in maintaining and furthering their careers.

In describing how their education will help achieve their career goals, applicants most frequently brought up enhanced skills and professional knowledge as the most crucial outcomes of their education. There was a very strong sense that this increased skills and information would give them an edge, in which their resumes would become "more competitive in an increasingly tough job market." Applicants often used the image of a door in describing their distance education; they positioned their degree as a tool that would open formerly closed doors in terms of their careers while a few of them mentioned getting their "foot in the door" or "open new doors" thanks to their future credentials.

Closing Thoughts

These prominent findings emerged from the way the applicants discussed their education in relation to their career goals, and their views are in line with human capital theory discussion (Baptiste, 2001) which permeates adult education discourse in the US. There is significant focus on the individual, rather than the community, and competition rather than collaboration in terms of career goals. However, the applicants also discussed a very strong desire to give back to their communities thanks to the success they hope to achieve in their careers through a college degree. Furthermore, although they put emphasis on their career goals in driving them to come back to the university, for many there was also a strong emotional component tied to personal and familial pride in receiving a university degree. Despite the reductionist view that conceptualizes higher education most closely linked to one's career goals, the students seem to be aware that having a university degree has value beyond the workplace. However, considering that many of these students are financing their degrees differently than traditional students, it is understandable that they think about their employment future, which will determine their ability to be able to pay their educational loans back.

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