THE ONLINE EDUCATION JOURNEY : EXPERIENCES OF UW-PARKSIDE'S BUSINESS DEPARTMENT

Abey Kuruvilla
Dirk Baldwin
Jordania Leon-Jordan
Department of Business
University of Wisconsin Parkside
900 Wood Rd, Kenosha, WI – 53141-2000
262-595-2105(Tel)
262-595-2680(Fax)
abey.kuruvilla@uwp.edu
baldwin@uwp.edu
leonj001@rangers.uwp.edu

ABSTRACT

This article presents a brief literature review of the history of online learning and its impact on higher education in the United States, followed by the study of current trends and issues in web-based courses, specifically based on the experiences of the Department of Business at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside.

Keywords: Online Education, Online Learning, Web-based Courses

INTRODUCTION

In the early 2000s business schools started to offer web-based courses, and in some instances entire programs went online (Eastman & Swift, 2001). Technological advances, internet access, competitive pressures, alternative sources of education and positive experiences are some of the factors that prompted, and continue to support, web-based courses as a tool of mainstream educational systems (Arbaugh & Duray, 2002).

Online enrollments in the United States have continued to increase in the last decade, from 9.6% of total enrollment in 2002 to 25.3% in 2008 (Allen & Seaman, 2010). Early studies suggested that perceived flexibility, which is associated with perceived learning and satisfaction in online classes, is a major factor for students choosing to enroll in web-based courses. Students are more likely to enroll in online classes if they can benefit from both the time and place independent nature of this medium (Arbaugh & Duray, 2002). Students value the flexibility they have, to arrange their work, school, home, and social schedules (Mahoney, 2009). Some students might not favor online classes, but they have taken courses as their last resource for continuing their education, such as students stationed in Afghanistan (Jenkins, 2010).

Another factor contributing to the increase in online enrollments is the widespread use of new technologies by students, especially by Generation Y'ers. This factor has made it possible for online education to rapidly spread not only in higher education, but also among secondary and elementary schools. According to the Education Department, thirty-two states have virtual-school programs, and 70 percent of all school districts offer online and distance-learning programs. In 2008, two million secondary students were enrolled in online-learning or blended programs. In 2000, that enrollment was only 50,000 students" (Hoover, 2009). New college students now expect and in some instances demand the use of new technologies in higher education.

As online enrollment continues to increase, new trends and issues are emerging in this educational environment. This article presents a literature review of the history of online education, and its impact on higher learning. Furthermore, this study reports on the trends and issues experienced in the Department of Business at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside (UW-Parkside).

LITERATURE REVIEW

History of Online Learning

The history of online learning has its roots in distance education efforts in the United States 150 years ago, the history of the Open University in England in the 1960s, and the humble but equally important founding of the Mauritius College of the Air in Africa. Distance Education development took place since the early years not only in these pioneer places, but also around the world. Canada, Russia, France, Mexico, and Australia are additional examples of countries that have contributed to the development of distance education worldwide (Visser, 2005). Early distance education included paper-based classes by correspondence. As new technological advancements took place, the nature of distance education courses evolved. The arrival of the internet exposed a new frontier, one that even

futurists 30 years ago didn't imagine (Duncan, 2005). The Computer Assisted Learning Center (CALC), founded in 1982 in Rindge, New Hampshire, led the way in online learning by developing a totally web-based course in 1995. In 1997, WebCT 1.0 was released and Blackboard was founded. Development of Moodle started in 1998, followed by the founding of D2L in Canada in 1999 (Online Learning, 2010). The U.S. Army was also a key player in the development of the initial offerings of web-based courses. Twenty years after the U.S. Army initiated its quest to take learning to the student; the technological capability now exists to offer education to anyone with internet access anywhere, anytime (Duncan, 2005).

Technological advancements continue to take place, giving paths to new trends in online learning. Open Content and mobile computing are trends that have started to emerge in online learning. Open Content refers to the offering of free online course materials. "It is a response to the rising costs of education, the desire for access to learning in areas where such access is difficult, and an expression of student choice about when and how to learn" (Parry, 2010). Examples of early Open Content projects are: Open Yale Courses (Yale University), OpenCoursWare (Utah State University), and the pioneering 1,940-class MIT OpenCourseWare project (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) (Parry, 2009). Mobile computing is not only a trend in online learning but also in the traditional classroom. It refers to the use of mobile devices, such as notebooks and smartphones, in learning activities by students. "The Horizon Report", an annual guide in technology trends, predicts that electronic books will also increase in popularity in the next two or three years. Looking further to 2015, technologies such as gesture-based computing and visual data analysis may also aid higher education. Questions regarding new technologies and their effectiveness still remain, but the trend shows that new technologies will continue to change how education is delivered in the traditional classroom and it would certainly enhance online learning (Parry, 2010).

Online Learning in Higher Education

Online learning in higher education in the US grew at an average annual rate of almost 19 percent over the seven year period from 2002 to 2008, with an estimated total of about 4.6 million students having taken online courses in Fall 2008. The online enrollment of 4.6 million reflected a 17 percent increase from Fall 2007, a jump that is much higher than the 1.5 percent growth in the overall higher education student population in the same period (Allen & Seaman, 2010).

Slightly more than half of all colleges rated online learning as essential to their overall strategy. Among public and for-profit institutions, more than 60 percent rated online learning as essential, compared with less than 40 percent of private, non-profit colleges. Generally, the larger the college, the more important online learning was to its strategy (Carlson, 2004). According to the same survey, 70 percent of colleges reported that competition for the growing pool of students interested in online learning is increasing (Kolowich, 2009). About 90 percent of public higher education institutions and 89 percent of private for-profit schools now offer online courses. The laggards are private nonprofit schools, of which only 53 percent offer classes online (Rodgers, 2005).

Educators Consortia are now becoming a new trend of US educational organizations within states or geographical regions, whereby schools partner to undertake an enterprise or activity that would offer courses for students using a common platform. An educator tool like D2L, Blackboard, WebCt or Moodle can be used for offering courses.

UW-PARKSIDE

A Brief History

UW-Parkside was founded in 1968 to serve the population in southeastern Wisconsin, a state in the upper Midwest region of the United States, bordering Lake Michigan on its east. It offers undergraduate and graduate degree programs in traditional, web facilitated, hybrid, and online settings. The 700-acre campus is located in Somers, Wisconsin, just a mile from the Lake Michigan shoreline. With a current enrollment of 5175 undergraduate and 125 graduate students, and faculty strength of 125, the faculty student ratio is 19/1. Annual budget is approximately $71 million (about 40% state-supported). The university is accredited by the North Central Association of the Higher Learning Commission (University of Wisconsin-Parkside, 2010).

Department of Business

The business and MBA programs are accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business-International (AACSB). The department has the largest enrollment in the University, 660 in Business and MIS majors as of Fall 2009. The department is growing in enrollment, recording a 17% increase from Fall 2006 to Fall 2009. With 95 MBAs, it is the largest graduate program in the University that recorded a 24 student increase (+34%) from Fall 2005 to Fall 2009. Combined, the

enrollment has a growth of 5% per year. The department awards the most degrees in the University with 135 Business & MIS graduates per year over the past 10 years, 5 years being the average time to graduate (w/3.14 GPA). The department also offers 7.3 degrees annually per full time equivalent faculty member (second highest in University). A total of 91% of Business graduates are employed within six months of graduation and 95% of MBA students are employed upon graduation (University of Wisconsin-Parkside, 2010).

ONLINE EDUCATION AT THE DEPARTMENT OF BUSINESS

Online classes were created to solve a business need, rather than to follow the online trend. Prior to 2001, UW-Parkside offered all MBA prerequisite courses, required courses and electives, onsite. The School had difficulty staffing the MBA classes and few electives were offered. The department struggled to have a faculty size that would meet the students' need for more electives. This led to a partnership with UW-Eau Claire, another school in the University of Wisconsin System, to offer distance courses. Collaboration through distance classes in the late 1990s involved a real time compressed video format. Computer network technology was not adequate and software to teach online classes was not available. As software and technology improved, classes became more internet based and moved away from the video feed. Collaboration with UW-Eau Claire and other UW campuses allowed the universities to share faculty resources, freeing more time to teach onsite electives. Further, the collaboration enhanced the students' elective choices through the creation of online electives.

PARTNERING WITH THE CONSORTIUM

A small university, like UW-Parkside, faces significant difficulties when starting new technology based initiatives. With regard to online classes, the business department at UW-Parkside did not have the human resources, expertise, or servers to run an internet-based program. UW-Whitewater, a larger university, was already in the process of developing its own online MBA degree. This program, as well as other online programs, was viewed as a threat to capture UW-Parkside's part-time students. Other universities in the state faced similar pressures. A few of these other universities realized that there could be significant benefits to partnering. Four of these universities, UW-Eau Claire, UW-Oshkosh, UW-La Crosse and UW-Parkside, decided to pool their resources, collaborate forces and toyed with the idea of offering a totally online program. A consortium that would offer an online MBA program was formed in 2001. The Consortium works together, sharing faculty resources, and offering a joint set of courses across universities. Today, students can enroll in the Consortium MBA degree, ultimately receiving a consortium degree, or students can enroll in the MBA program at the respective institutions, combining online and onsite classes. All of these students are eligible to enroll in an MBA online class.

 A consortium/partnership can significantly benefit small schools. Students in these schools have access to a range of classes that may have only been available previously to larger universities. In addition, partnering leads to the economies of scale necessary to profitably support the technical and human infrastructure required for online learning. The Consortium functions through a channel, like Desire2Learn (D2L), which is a user-centric, web-based Learning Management System (LMS) for the delivery of online teaching and learning uniformity within/among members.

As an educator product, D2L performs the functions of a complete web-based suite consisting of easy-to-use teaching and learning tools for course development, delivery, and management. D2L provides tools to help facilitate communication, collaboration and community building (Desire2Learn, 2010).

In the beginning, the Consortium turned to Learning Innovations (LI), a company that focused on online education. LI supported the creation and design of courses with good online pedagogy and with a consistent format that was attractive to the user. LI had their own servers, which were staffed 24 hours/day. Also LI handled many logistics such as coordinating students registering across four different campuses. The universities paid LI a distance education fee. This cost was transferred to students through a special distance education fee that was added to the traditional university tuition. However, at a later date, the Consortium decided to discontinue the partnership with LI. The

consortium developed their own expertise and now hosts the Consortium classes on servers managed and located on the UW-Eau Claire campus.

COURSE DEVELOPMENT GRANT

Participation in the MBA Consortium online program allowed the business faculty to obtain experience with online course development and teaching. This experience led to new initiatives at the undergraduate level. In 2005-2006, the UW-Extension (the outreach portion of the University of Wisconsin System) sponsored a grant to support online education. The initiative focused on the problem that Wisconsin ranked #30 in the nation in the percent of students with a four-year degree. The initiative was designed to support additional education especially for individuals who already had two year degrees. Many of these students were place bound and could not attend traditional onsite classes. The goal was to develop more online undergraduate classes for such individuals. UW-Parkside wrote a grant proposal that included degree completion in Management Information Systems (MIS) and the development of a four course Project Management certificate. The department received a $225,000 grant as a result of the proposal, part of which is now utilized towards new course development. All four project management courses as well as eight MIS courses were developed. LI hosts the undergraduate online classes.

FACULTY ACCEPTANCE

Faculty acceptance of online classes at UW-Parkside was mixed. Of the 20 faculty members, there were some committed faculty, some who were willing to entertain what was happening and others who would not even consider the idea. A core group of approximately five faculty members recognized the opportunity. One of these became the leader and the other four were strong followers. There were also many interested but too busy to commit any time or effort to pursue the idea and several faculty members that were not interested in online education at all. It was estimated that about half of the faculty were in this last category. Over time, the number of faculty interested in developing or teaching online classes has increased. New faculty were hired under the condition that they were willing to teach online courses and several longer term faculty have seen the benefits to online education.

REVENUE AND EXPENSES

Online classes from the MBA Consortium and the undergraduate classes produce significant revenue. A distance education fee is charged for every online course, on top of the regular tuition. Currently the school charges an extra $100 fee per credit for undergraduate online classes. The Consortium charges $625 per credit for foundation courses and $650 per credit for electives (this is approximately $200 more than the onsite classes). From the Consortium alone, the department now makes about $200,000 of annual revenue. Online classes are costly, but there is a willingness to pay on the part of the student. Recent questions faced by the department include: Is the cost greater for online courses versus on-campus? We charge some fees, but a good portion goes to LI. Is it possible to support the online classes internally? If the service is moved internally, there would still be a cost to maintain, upgrade, serve materials, support online students and develop new courses. Does UW-Parkside have the expertise to perform these functions?

TRENDS

There are two significant trends in online classes at UW-Parkside.

1. Across the university more students are interested and are registering for online courses. Interest in our MBA program is also much higher.

2. The consortium has doubled in size and what started as modules that were offered once a year, now have to be offered every semester as classes have become full.

Figure 1: ONLINE COURSE OFFERINGS 2004-2009

Courses Offered - Department of Business 2004 - 2009
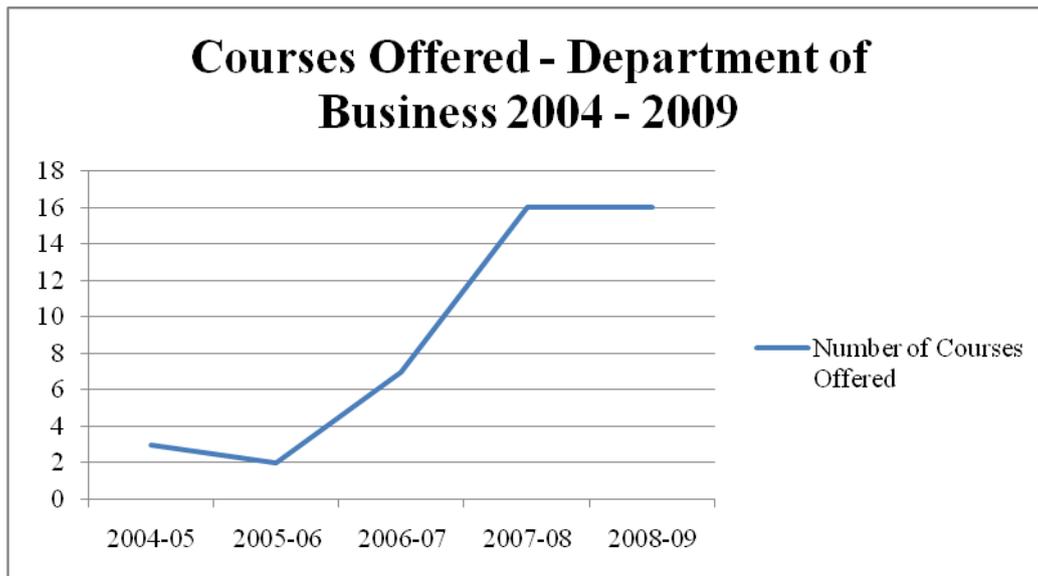
Source: Department of Business, UW-Parkside

The Number of online Courses offered increased from three in 2004-05 to 16 in 2008-09 as show in Figure 1. Some courses are also in the development stage. During the same period we experienced a dramatic increase in enrollment from 5 in academic year 2004-2005 to 284 in 2008-09, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: ONLINE STUDENT ENROLLMENT 2004-2009

Student Enrollment - Department of Business 2004 - 2009
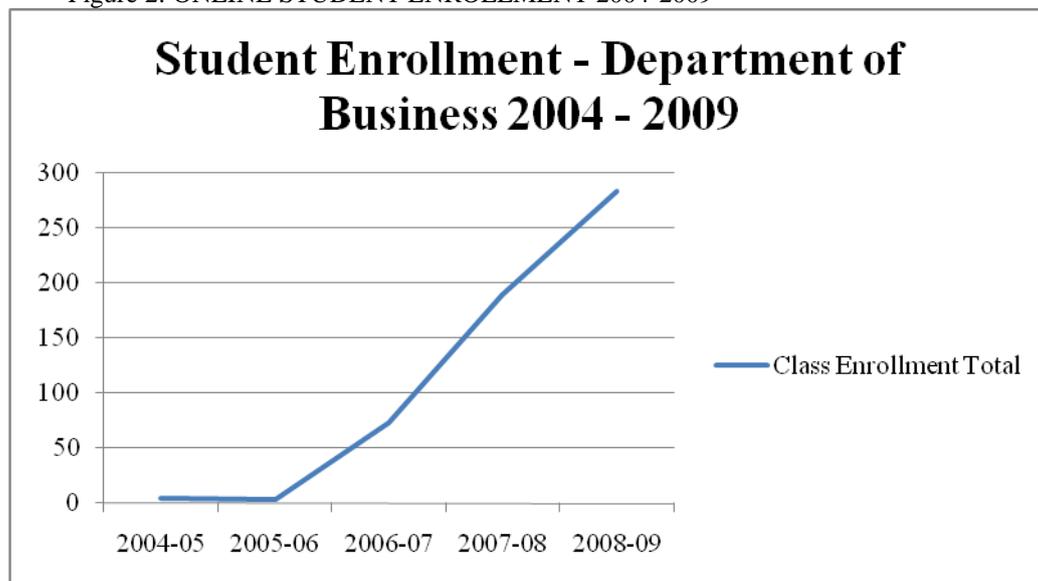
Source: Department of Business, UW Parkside

ISSUES

While there could be any number of issues a department can face in the process of "going virtual", we will attempt to list some of the major ones we faced through our experience.

Faculty Involvement

As mentioned earlier, some of the faculty were very excited and came on board early while others were not willing to venture into online teaching. However, the percentage that is "very reluctant" has decreased, as new faculty were hired and existing faculty saw the benefits of online instruction. The perceived benefits included the desire to better serve the commuter student population, flexibility in the faculty's teaching schedule, and opportunities for extra income. A few classes were taught as overload to the standard teaching load and this resulted in increased compensation.

Consortium Issues
While partnerships offer significant opportunities in terms of shared resources, cooperation requires some sacrifice in autonomy. Decisions were made at the MBA Consortium level regarding elective offerings that influence the elective offering on-campus. We had to ask ourselves, how much control the university was willing to give up in a consortium arrangement? UW-Parkside decided not to align its onsite required courses with the MBA Consortium required courses and those of the other universities because it was not willing to sacrifice autonomy in this area. In addition to this issue, balancing online workload with onsite workload is critical. We did not want to teach online MBA consortium classes at the expense of assigning teachers to its onsite classes.

Faculty Hiring
When advertising new faculty positions, we began to list online teaching as a preferred or even a required qualification. As enrollment increased, we had to hire candidates that expressed an interest or currently have experience with online classes.

Assessment
Assessment has the potential to be a major problem when offering online classes. It is difficult to verify that the registered student is actually the one taking the course or the assessment. Students also have the opportunity to look up answers via the web during a test, for instance. Several techniques can be used to help mitigate this risk. First, instructors should establish a clear policy on cheating and enforce the policy. Second, the instructor can attempt to design assessment as part of the learning process (e.g., team projects). Students, in this case, are less likely to cheat because the exercise contributes to their understanding of the material. Third, technology can be used to reduce the risk. Online video, for example, could be used to verify a student's identity during an exam. Finally, some online classes require students to travel in order to take at least one onsite exam. This last technique is not used at UW-Parkside or in the MBA consortium because this travel can be too difficult for the students that the online classes are trying to reach.

Differences between Course Materials
While many concepts can be taught online, some students struggle with certain concepts. Some undergraduates at UW-Parkside have struggled with understanding mathematical concepts online, for example. However, even these concepts may be taught with newer technology such as animation, video, and voice simulation. UW-Parkside is currently implementing some of these technologies into the online classes.

Project Management
Managing course development can be challenging. Employees at LI for undergraduate classes and employees at UW-Eau Claire for the MBA consortium become overwhelmed in the few weeks prior to the beginning of a semester. Faculty members frequently wait until a week before the semester to send in course change requests for online classes. In addition, without proper management of timelines new courses are frequently finished just prior to the start of the semester. Designing incentives so that courses are finished in a timely manner well ahead of the start of the class is difficult. We are still trying to improve this process.

Faculty involvement in classes
One risk with online classes is that the faculty member may "check out" of the class for a period of time. All of the assignments, lecture notes, and instructional material are created and posted prior to the beginning of the online class. As the semester progresses and the faculty member become busy with other classes, research, and service, it is tempting to ignore the online class. In these cases, students complain that their professors are not very involved in the class. Active faculty involvement in discussions and in providing feedback is critical to learning and the success of the class. The development of guidelines on the frequency of faculty involvement in an online class is helpful. The use of faculty mentors for online classes and administrator follow-up with instructors regarding faculty involvement can help to prevent the "check-out" problem.

Observations Regarding Online Benefits

While online teaching possesses several challenges, faculty members site many benefits in addition to the time/space flexibility. A few of these benefits are described below.

When a student asks a question or makes a statement that requires a sensitive answer, the professor can easily address that without the possibility of embarrassment or tact that often is necessary in a classroom. In an online class, discussion primarily occurs through the discussion board. A faculty member can privately comment on an individual student's discussion post in an attempt to help the student improve their contribution to the discussion.

Online discussions are frequently better than classroom discussions because the students are more prepared. The students have an opportunity to look up information and reread material prior to posting to the discussion. This is more difficult in a real time/class room environment.

Many students feel more comfortable discussing in a text format versus the oral presentations necessary in a class environment.

There is an opportunity to incorporate diverse teaching styles online. Lessons can be composed of text, summary slides, games, video lecturers, animations and simulations. While this is possible with onsite classes, the fixed time period for onsite instructions forces the instructor to make a choice on how the material is presented. In online and hybrid classes, the student could have a smorgasbord of learning materials.

CONCLUSION

With 90% of the school's students working full time, online courses are popular particularly with our non-traditional students chiefly because of flexibility. The Business department is developing a large portfolio of online courses (12 courses plus three currently in development), with the current Summer 2010 schedule including seven online business courses. With the way enrollment has increased in both our individual online as well consortium classes, and trends indicating a positive trend, we are poised for continued growth. We started out small with a few courses, but our growth reflects the overall trends in online enrollment in the US. There continues to be issues to deal with, like revenue versus cost and faculty involvement.

Our one takeaway from our experience in starting online classes as a small school is that collaboration with other similar schools in size and vision was the key to our growth. With continual positive feedback from our students and our enrollment trends in the last few years, we are confident that UW-Parkside's offerings and online enrollment numbers will continue to grow.

REFERENCES

Allen, I. E., & Seaman, J. (2010). *Learning on Demand, Online Education in the United States, 2009.* Babson Park: Babson Survey Research Group.

Arbaugh, J., & Duray, R. (2002). Technological and Structural Characteristics, Student Learning and Satisfaction with Web-based Courses. *Management Learning , 33* (3), 331-347.

Carlson, S. (2004). Online-Education Survey Finds Unexpectedly HighEnrollment Growth. *Chronicle of Higher Education , 51* (14), pA30-A30.

Desire2Learn. (2010). Retrieved July 15, 2010, from Solutions: http://www.desire2learn.com/products/

Duncan, S. (2005). The U.S. Army's Impact on the History of Distance Education. *The Quarterly Review of Distance Education , 6* (4), 397-404.

Eastman, J. K., & Swift, C. O. (2001). New Horizons in Distance Education: The Online Learner-Centered Marketing Class. *Journal of Marketing Education , 23* (1), 25-34.

Hoover, E. (2009, September 27). *The Next Admissions Challenge: Evaluating Online Education.* Retrieved July 27, 2010, from The Chronicle of Higher Education: http://chronicle.com/article/A-Technophobes-Guide-to-Ma/64549/

Jenkins, R. (2010, March 11). *A Technophobe's Guide to Managing Online Courses.* Retrieved July 27, 2010, from The Chronicle of Higher Education: http://chronicle.com/article/A-Technophobes-Guide-to-Ma/64549/

Kolowich, S. (2009). Recession May Drive More Adult Students to Take Online Classes. *Chronicle of Higher Education , 55* (19), pA11-A11.

Mahoney, S. (2009). Mindset Change: Influences on Student Buy-In to Online Classes. *The Quarterly Review of Distance Education , 10* (1), 75-83.

Online Learning . (2010). Retrieved July 16, 2010, from Moodle Web site : http://docs.moodle.org/en/Online_Learning_History

Parry, M. (2009, October 11). *Open Courses: Free, but Oh, So Costly.* Retrieved July 27, 2010, from The Chronicle of Higher Education: http://chronicle.com/article/free-online-courses-at-a-V/48777/

Parry, M. (2010, January 14). *'Horizon Report' Highlights 6 Technologies to Watch in Education.* Retrieved July 27, 2010, from The Chronicle of Higher Education: http://chronicle.com/blogPost/Horizon-Report-Highlights-6/20525/

Rodgers, G. (2005). Online Degrees Gaining Acceptance, Enrollment. *EduExec , 24* (12), 4.

University of Wisconsin-Parkside. (2010). Retrieved July 14, 2010, from University Mission: http://www.uwp.edu/mission.cfm

University of Wisconsin-Parkside. (2010). Retrieved August 21, 2010, from Business Department: http://www.uwp.edu/departments/business/

Visser, L. (2005). Introduction to the Special Issue . *The Quarterly Review of Distance Education , 6* (3), vii-viii.