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Editor's Note: This is a timely discussion of a complex question. Perhaps the proven quality of the training institution (branding) is actually a major factor in the choice of which professional will be hired.

Will You Hire The Services of Professionals Who Completed Their Professional Preparation Completely Online?

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Abstract

More and more people are obtaining their credentials online every year. This number is likely to continue to grow for several years before it begins to level off. Research has shown there is some skepticism and bias among potential employers against potential employees who have earned their credentials in fully online settings. Such research is restricted to employers in organizations. However, a number of individuals and families do also hire or contract the services of various professionals who serve individuals and families. The purpose of this exploratory study is to determine if individuals will or will not contract the services of professionals who completed their professional preparation fully online.

Introduction

The numbers of colleges and universities that are offering courses and even complete degree programs online in many disciplines and professional fields are growing every year. The numbers of students who are enrolling in online courses is also increasing and has not yet leveled off or reached a plateau. For example, according to Allen and Seaman (2010: 1), "Over 4.6 million students were taking at least one online course during the fall 2008 term; a 17 percent increase over the number reported the previous year." By comparison, during the same period the total population of students in institutions of higher education grew only by 1.2 percent (Allen and Seaman, 2010).

Purpose

Distance education is certainly a growing field, and all indications are that it will continue to grow at least for several more years into the future. However, some research studies have shown that those who are in a position to employ students who complete their education online have some concerns or biases towards candidates who were educated fully in online settings (Adams, DeFleur, and Heald, 2007; Adams & DeFleur, 2006; Carnevale, 2007; Flowers, 2007).

A few studies have been conducted to determine the acceptance of online graduates by potential employers in organizations, and these will be briefly reviewed in a following section of the paper. However, research about whether individuals will contract the services of various professionals who receive their training completely online is practically nonexistent.

The purpose of the study is to explore if the participants in the study will contract or hire the services of people in various occupations and professions, who completed their degree or earned their professional credentials completely online.

Background Information

Distance education is growing not only in the United States, but worldwide as well with large numbers of students being served across the world as well (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009: xvi):

"It is extremely difficult to calculate the numbers of students engaged in distance education worldwide but the existence of nearly 24 mega-universities, a number of which boast over one million students, speaks to a quantitatively significant phenomenon."

It is true that distance education is growing worldwide, and is likely to continue to grow for quite some time. Another indicator of the global growth of distance learning is the proliferation of journals devoted to the topic. The authors of this paper were able to identify without much effort journals focusing on distance education that are published in several countries such as Australia, Brazil, Britain, Canada, China, India, Italy, Malaysia, New Zealand, Spain, Turkey, and the United States. The list of countries publishing journals in the area of distance education is only likely to grow in the future.

A number of research studies that compared student performance in traditional face-to-face courses and distance education courses have been conducted and many of these, (for example Dell, Low, Wilker, 2010; Derwin, n.d.; Neuhauser, 2002; and Rivera, & Rice, 2002) tend to reinforce the notion of the "no significant difference phenomenon" identified by Russell (1999).

The cumulative results of such studies have also been summarized by other studies using meta-analysis, a technique that was originally developed by Glass (1976). Some of these meta-analyses (e.g. Bernard, Abrami, Lou, Borokhovski, Wade, Wozney, Fiest, & Huang, 2004; and Means et. al., 2009) have found that students who completed their coursework either fully or partially online performed better than those who completed their coursework only in face-to-face educational settings, thus raising skepticism regarding the once widely accepted "no significant difference phenomenon" (Russell, 1999).

However, skepticism and bias regarding the qualifications of graduates who earn their credentials completely online is still prevalent among potential employers (see for example Carnevale, 2005; Carnevale, 2007; and Huss, 2007) and among those who make graduate admissions decisions (DeFleur & Adams, 2004). Studies conducted by Adams and Defleur (2006), Adams, DeFleur & Heald (2007), Flowers (2007), Flowers & Baltzer (2006) also showed that potential employers were more likely to hire those who had earned their degrees or credentials after completing coursework in traditional face-to-face programs than those who had completed such degrees in completely online settings.

Such negative perceptions may be changing with time. For example, Guendoo (2009) found that, now, community colleges were more open to hiring applicants who had completed their doctoral education online if the candidates also had the other necessary qualifications and experiences that educational institutions expect job applicants to possess.

It is not only universities and corporations that hire people, including those who earned their degrees and credentials online. Individuals and families also contract the services of various professionals, such as attorneys, nurses, physical therapists, surgeons, tax-preparers and tutors. Studies of hiring preferences of individuals is either very hard to find or do not exist at all. This study is an attempt to fill a big void in research on this topic.

Study Methods

Description of the Sample and Data Collection

The technique of convenience sampling was used to recruit 113 participants from undergraduate and graduate classes taught at a public, urban, research university located in a southeastern state in the United States. Seventy six of the study participants or 67.3% were females and 37 or 32.7% were males. More than two-thirds of the students were of Hispanic heritage. This should not be surprising because the city in which the university is located is home to immigrants from almost all countries in the Caribbean and the Latin American regions.

After obtaining approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB), selected faculty members who taught graduate and undergraduate classes were approached and their permission was sought to administer the survey in their classes. Students enrolled in the courses taught by the instructors who gave such permission were asked to complete the survey. An IRB-approved verbal consent statement was read to each group of students before the students completed the surveys. No rewards, incentives, or compensation were provided to the students who participated in the survey.

A question in the survey was designed to determine if the participants would contract the services of different professionals if they knew that the professional earned their credentials completely online. A number of professions were listed in the survey and the study participants were asked to indicate if they would or would not contract their services.

A third option of 'maybe' was also included in the survey. Participants who chose the third option were also asked to provide a brief written response explaining why they chose this response. Very few of those who participated in the survey provided written responses to this question. However, the few written responses that were provided will be reproduced while discussing the results of the study.

Data Analysis and Findings of the Study

As the data in Table 1 shows, the majority of respondents indicated that they would contract the services of accountants who were educated completely online. This is surprising because the work of accountants, if not done well, has serious consequences for the pocket book and a person's financial well-being. For example, an incorrectly prepared personal or business tax document can have unforeseeable and long-term repercussions such as fines levied, back taxes collected, wages garnished, and properties seized.

In spite of such potential risks, larger proportions of survey participants stated that they would contract the services of accountants. Sixty-one or 54.0% of the respondents agreed that they would contract the services of accounts. Forty-three or 38.1% of the study participants indicated that they would not contract for the services of their accountants. Nine or 8.0% chose the option "maybe."

Table 1

Frequencies – Would you contract the services of an Accountant who completed his or her professional preparation fully online?

Response to Question	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1 – Yes, I would contract services	61	54.0	54.0	54.0
2 – No, I would not contract services	43	38.1	38.1	92.0
3 – Maybe	9	8.0	8.0	100.0
Total	N = 113	100.0	100.0	

The frequencies data in Table 2 through Table 8 show that overwhelming majorities of study participants indicated that they will not hire the services of several of the other professionals, whose services are generally contracted by individuals and families, if such professionals completed their professional preparation fully online. These professionals included "architects," "counselors / therapists," "dentists," "nurses," "physicians," "Physical therapists," and "surgeons."

Table 2

Frequencies – Would you contract the services of an Architect who completed his or her professional preparation fully online?

Response to Question	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1 – Yes, I would contract services	31	27.4	27.4	27.4

Response to Question	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
2 – No, I would not contract services	72	63.7	63.7	63.7
3 – Maybe	10	8.8	8.8	100.0
Total	N = 113	100.0	100.0	

Table 3

Frequencies – Would you contract the services of a Counselor/Therapist who completed his or her professional preparation fully online?

Response to Question	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1 – Yes, I would contract services	35	31.0	31.3	31.3
2 – No, I would not contract services	69	61.1	61.6	92.9
3 – Maybe	8	7.1	7.1	100.0
Sub-Total	112	99.1	100.0	
9 – Missing	1	0.9		
Total	N = 113			

Table 4

Frequencies – Would you contract the services of a Dentist who completed his or her professional preparation fully online?

Response to Question	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1 – Yes, I would contract services	7	6.2	6.3	6.3
2 – No, I would not contract services	96	85.0	86.5	92.8
3 – Maybe	8	7.1	7.2	100.0
Sub-Total	111	98.2	100.0	
9 – Missing	2	1.8		

Total	N = 113	100.0		
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Table 5

Frequencies – Would you contract the services of a Nurse who completed his or her professional preparation fully online?

Response to Question	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1 – Yes, I would contract services	12	10.6	10.6	10.6
2 – No, I would not contract services	93	82.3	82.3	92.9
3 – Maybe	8	7.1	7.1	100.0
Total	N = 113	100.0	100.0	

Table 6

Frequencies – Would you contract the services of a Physician who completed his or her professional preparation fully online?

Response to Question	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1 – Yes, I would contract services	6	5.3	5.3	5.3
2 – No, I would not contract services	99	87.6	87.6	92.9
3 – Maybe	8	7.1	7.1	100.0
Total	N = 113	100.0	100.0	

Table 7

Frequencies – Would you contract the services of a Physical Therapist who completed his or her professional preparation fully online?

Response to Question	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1 – Yes, I would contract services	8	7.1	7.1	7.1
2 – No, I would not contract services	95	84.1	84.1	91.2
3 – Maybe	10	8.8	8.8	100.0
Total	N = 113	100.0	100.0	

Response to Question	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1 – Yes, I would contract services	8	7.1	7.1	7.1
2 – No, I would not contract services	95	84.1	84.1	91.2
3 – Maybe	10	8.8	8.8	100.0
Total	N = 113	100.0	100.0	

Table 8

Frequencies – Would you contract the services of a Surgeon who completed his or her professional preparation fully online?

Response to Question	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1 – Yes, I would contract services	7	6.2	6.2	6.2
2 – No, I would not contract services	99	87.6	87.6	93.8
3 – Maybe	7	6.2	6.2	100.0
Total	N = 113	100.0	100.0	

Suggestions for Further Research

The sample of university students who participated in this study was predominantly of Hispanic heritage. Similar studies could be conducted using samples of students from other ethnic groups. To obtain a broader picture of what the society as a whole thinks of professionals who complete their training online, similar studies should be conducted with larger and more representative samples of participants drawn from society at large, and not just from one university. It would also be useful to know whether there are significant differences in the opinions of those who have earned their own degrees and credentials online as opposed to those who earned their degrees by attending face-to-face classes. Future studies could also look at differences between the two sexes and also study age-related differences. Larger lists of professionals could also be included in future studies. The findings of this study tell us which professionals the participants will or will not contract the services of, but it does not tell us why. It would be interesting to find out why participants decide whether or not they would contract the services of various professionals who completed their professional preparations in fully online settings.

Conclusion

The findings of this study are significant because it is perhaps one of the first studies, if not the first study, to identify skepticism among individuals who are in a position to contract the services of professionals who “. . . completed their entire professional preparation on-line,” as stated in the survey. Many of the professionals included in this study provide services to individuals and families. If individuals are skeptical about hiring professionals that were trained fully in online settings, then they are more likely not to hire such professionals. This has consequences for both the professionals and the

institutions that graduate them. The professionals who earn their credentials by being fully educated in online settings will be less competitive in the job market. The universities that offer such credentials may also be looked upon as being inferior to other institutions.

The findings of this study suggest that there is still some distrust of online training when it comes to hiring professionals in some fields. Colleges, universities, and other institutions that train professionals online can respond to such distrust in at least two ways. One way is for universities to stop offering online training and credentialing of professionals in these fields. This is not likely to happen because there is a lot of demand for distance and online education, and as a consequence, money to be made, by offering degrees online. Another option is to make concerted efforts to improve the quality where needed, and the credibility of online course and program offerings.

Colleges and universities could also use research, if such research exists, to show that professionals who earn their credentials by completing degrees online are as capable as those who complete their degrees the traditional way as far as on the job performance is concerned. Educational institutions that offer professional credentials online could also initiate longitudinal studies to find out how professional who are prepared completely online perform in their careers compared to their traditionally trained peers. Such studies will become necessary as the numbers of undergraduate and graduate degrees that are offered in fully online settings continue to grow.

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