

Predictors of Intent to Enroll in a Distance Education
Master's Degree Program in
Agricultural and Extension Education

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Abstract

“If we build it, they will come” appears to be the stance of many in distance education. Yet marketing experts contend that a market analysis and needs assessment should be conducted first. This study reports on a needs assessment to determine if there is a need for an online Master's degree program in Agricultural and Extension Education. The researchers also sought to identify predictors of intent to enroll in such a program. Finally the researchers sought to learn more about the technology availability and characteristics of potential students.

It was found there is a strong demand for an online Master's program in Agricultural and Extension Education. A model was developed that identified potential enrollees. The five factors in the model were undergraduate GPA, years of professional experience, occupation, need for courses for continued employment, and administrative support. The more academically gifted individuals who were early in their careers and were teaching agriculture were more likely to enroll in the program. The need to take courses for continued employment and the perceived support by administrators for advanced education also helped explain if the student intended to enroll in a distance education program. Items that were not predictors of intent to enroll in a distance education program included gender, years of computer experience, level of computer skills, distance from the university, prior experience in a distance education class and age.

There were major differences between extension agents and agricultural teachers on computer operating systems used at work, CD-ROM availability, web browser use and software preferences. The design of the online courses should take into account the different platforms used (Unix versus Windows) as well as the different web browsers used (Netscape versus Explorer). However, a key finding is that both extension agents and teachers have ready access to computers at work and a majority (100% of extension agents and 95% of teachers) have access to the Internet, meaning that Internet access is not an obstacle to distance education for them. Since many still use dial-up connections to the Internet, especially from home, file size should be kept to a minimum.

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in Agricultural and Extension Education

Introduction

Distance education is defined by Telg and Cheek (1998) as “two-way communication between teacher and students who are separated by a geographical distance and/or time, where communication is mediated by technology to support educational process.” In many universities there is a growing demand not only to offer more courses via distance education but entire degree programs. In the past decade one of the most significant factors that has occurred in relation to distance education is the availability of the Internet. Online courses have provided conventional campuses with a medium to reach new audiences who require more flexible learning opportunities (Harry and Perraton, 1999).

Who exactly is in this new audience that requires more flexible learning opportunities? While many studies have addressed faculty attitudes and needs in regards to delivering distance education, very few studies have addressed the characteristics and needs of potential students of distance education courses. The prevailing attitude in distance education seems to be “build it and they will come.” What do we need to know about these potential students to make sure we deliver a product that gets them to come and stay? Sherry (1996) states “Too often, instructional designers and curriculum developers have become enamored of the latest technologies without dealing with the underlying issues of learner characteristics and need and their equity of access to interactive delivery systems.” Three questions need to be answered: is there a perceived need for distance education? Who are the students expressing that need? And do they have access to distance educational offerings?

The Agricultural and Extension Education Department at North Carolina State University is in the process of designing an online distance education Master’s degree program. Currently, the majority of the customers in the conventional Master’s degree program in Agricultural and Extension Education are employed as agricultural education teachers and Cooperative Extension agents and administrators. Extrapolating from that observation, our department has chosen to study the needs and characteristics of these consumers—a selected sample of agricultural education teachers and Cooperative Extension agents and administrators—and their access to the Internet, before designing and building an online Master’s degree program. We wanted to find out who the potential students are and to build a program based on their needs. Other universities who are considering offering distance education graduate degree programs could benefit from these findings.

Theoretical Framework/ Literature Review

Potential students for an online master’s degree program are essentially consumers. Consumer behavior is studied by marketing experts in order to predict the identity of the consumer and to employ appropriate marketing tools. The most popular contemporary model for consumer behavior is the Engel-Blackwell-Miniard Model, originally developed by Engel, Kollat and Blackwell in 1968. This model is based on the scheme that consumer behavior is a decision making process and consists of five activities. The first activity in this model is motivation and need recognition of the consumer followed by search for information, alternative evaluation, purchase and outcomes (Loudon and Betta, 1993). According to this theory, in order for a

consumer to begin the process of purchasing a good or service, he or she must first possess and realize a need. Therefore, those providing the goods and services should find out what the characteristics are of those who have realized this need. Who is the targeted market and if we build it, will they come?

Several researchers (Faseyitan, Libii, and Hirschbuhl 1996, Gist, Schwoerer and Rosen 1989) have found that computer self-efficacy was the key indicator of the intent of students to take online distance education courses. In further investigation, Lim (2001) found academic status, age, years of computer use, previous experience with online courses and academic self-concept to be predictors of computer self-efficacy as well as predictors of intent to enroll in an online distance education course. Peterson's Distance Learning (2002) concludes that the majority of students who enroll in online courses are employed, over 25 years old and have a previous college degree.

Boyd and Murphrey (2001) did not find any significant relationships between the personal characteristics of undergraduates and their interest in taking online courses. These undergraduate students had previously taken the course in question on campus and had access to on-campus courses during the day. Born and Miller (1999) state that "distance education has long been based on the promise of delivering education to people who do not have access to or whose career does not allow them to participate in a campus-based curriculum." If this is the case, could the distance a student lives from campus be a factor in predicting the intent of potential students to enroll in an online distance education course?

Recent studies indicate that professionals in specific environments have access to technology that is necessary for participating in distance education (Perdue and Valentine, 2000). Not surprisingly, past studies have indicated that lack of access to technology is a barrier to distance education (Gray 1997, McCormick and Jones 1998, Wulf 1996).

Teacher certification and continuing education requirements for Cooperative Extension agents provide two examples of identified need for distance education. In 2000-2001, North Carolina public schools had a teacher turnover rate of 13.96%. Lateral entry teachers, who need additional courses to complete their certification, fill many of these vacant positions. Approximately 25% of all teachers in the state who obtain certification stay in the classroom and pursue master's degrees. One motivation for these teachers to obtain a master's degree is a 10% pay increase. In the Cooperative Extension service, agents are required to take one course at least every five years to maintain their employment. In order to be promoted to the rank of associate county agent, a Master's degree is needed. Most administrators and senior agents are encouraged to possess master's degrees.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to determine and describe the needs and characteristics of teachers and extension personnel who are likely to enroll in an online Master's degree program in Agricultural and Extension Education. Specific objectives of the study included:

1. Determine the need for a distance education online Master's degree program in Agricultural and Extension Education.
2. Identify factors that predict the intent of agricultural education teachers and extension personnel to enroll in an online Master's degree program in Agricultural and Extension Education.
3. Determine if there are differences in the needs and characteristics of agricultural education teachers and extension personnel that could affect the delivery of an online Master's degree program in Agricultural and Extension Education.

Procedures

This was a descriptive/correlational study using responses from agricultural teachers and extension personnel in the state. The entire population from both groups was surveyed which included 358 high school agricultural education teachers and 395 extension agents and administrators. The instrument was reviewed by a panel of experts and a group of selected graduate students for content validity. The revised instrument was then administered twice to a group of graduate students who were preparing for employment in these two fields and therefore were not included in the final survey population. The test-retest technique for determining instrument stability yielded a grand mean coefficient of stability of $r = .95$ (Pearson r) for those items that were non-demographic in nature. This indicates the instrument was stable.

The participants were sent a cover letter and a questionnaire by mail along with a self-addressed stamped return envelope. Those who had not responded by the requested deadline were contacted by a mailed post card to encourage their participation. Those that responded after this contact and within a three-week period after the deadline were considered late respondents. The total response rate for agricultural education teachers was 41% ($n=148$). The total response rate for extension personnel was 51% ($n=201$). The researchers would have liked a higher response rate; however in talking with members of the population it was found that many people who already possessed a Master's degree did not deem it necessary to respond.

Two different procedures were used to address the validity threat posed by non-responders. Early and late respondents, and respondents to non-respondents, were compared as the basis for controlling non-response error. According to Miller and Smith (1983), late respondents are similar to non-responders. No significant differences in the items were found between early and late responders. Thus the late respondents were included in the total response pool.

To further address the threat of the external validity of the study, respondents were compared to non-respondents (Lindner, Murphy and Briers, 2001). Twenty randomly sampled non-respondents were contacted by phone and were administered the entire survey. Their responses were compared to previous respondents. A comparison of differences between respondents and non-respondents revealed no significant differences. The resultant responding sample was assumed to be representative of the target population.

Descriptive statistics were used to determine the frequency and percentages of those likely to enroll in an online Master's degree program in Agricultural and Extension Education. Multiple regression analysis was used to determine the best model for explaining the variance associated

with the intent to enroll by a linear combination of the independent variables. Stepwise elimination was used to determine the multiple regression model that best explained the dependent variable of the intent to enroll. The chi square test for independence was used to determine if there were differences in the characteristics of agricultural education teachers and extension personnel that could affect the delivery of an online Master's degree program in Agricultural and Extension Education.

Results/Findings

1. Determine the need for a distance education online Master's degree program in Agricultural and Extension Education.

According to the respondents, there is a need for an online Master's program in Agricultural and Extension Education. One hundred and thirty-four (134) of the respondents indicated they would definitely apply or were likely to apply for an online Master's program. Fifty-six (56) percent of the agriculture teachers (80 out of 144) and 27 percent of the extension agents (54 out of 199) were interested in an online Master's program.

2. Identify factors that predict the intent of agricultural education teachers and extension personnel to enroll in an online Master's degree program in Agricultural and Extension Education.

With tight state budgets, it is important to identify who would be most likely to enroll in an online Master's program. This group could then be targeted for advertising and recruitment. The various variables identified in the literature review that were predictors of intent to enroll in a distance education program along with several additional variables selected by the researchers were analyzed using stepwise multiple regression. The variables entered in the regression model were undergraduate GPA, age, gender, computer capability, previous experience with distance education, distance from the university, years of experience in the profession, occupation (teacher or agent), administrative support, need for courses for advancement, and years of experience in using computers.

A statistically significant model ($p=.001$) containing five variables was generated with a R of .521. This model explained 27% of the variance. The first variable that entered the model was undergraduate GPA. Students with higher GPAs were more interested in enrolling in a distance education program. This variable had a R value of .336 and accounted for 11 percent of the variance. The complete model is presented in Table 1.

"Years of experience in the profession" was the second significant variable. Individuals with fewer years in the profession were more interested in an online program than were individuals with more years of experience. This variable explained an additional eight percent of the variance.

The third significant value was occupation. Teachers of agricultural education were more interested in a distance education program than were extension agents. This variable accounted for an additional six percent of the variance.

A variable that explained two percent of the variance was whether or not the agent or teacher needed course work in the near future for certification purposes, license renewal or as a job requirement. Individuals who needed such courses were more interested in a distance education degree program. This would probably insure that courses needed would be available in a convenient format

The final variable in the model was administrative support. If the individual perceived that their current employer encouraged continued education, then the individual indicated a likelihood of enrolling in a distance education program. This variable explained an additional one percent of the variable.

Items that were not predictors of intent to enroll in a distance education program included gender, years of computer experience, level of computer skills, distance from the university, prior experience in a distance education class and age. The final regression model is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Predictors of Intent to Enroll in a Distance Education Master's Program

Variable	R	R Squared	R Squared Change	Sig. F. Change
Undergraduate GPA	.336	.113	.113	.001
Years of Prof. Experience	.436	.190	.077	.001
Occupation (Teacher/Agent)	.495	.245	.055	.001
Need for Courses	.510	.260	.015	.010
Administrative Support	.521	.271	.011	.029

- Determine if there are differences in the needs and characteristics of agricultural education teachers and extension personnel that could affect the delivery of an online Master's degree program in Agricultural and Extension Education.

In planning a distance education Master's program, one should be cognizant of the technology and computer capabilities of the individuals who might be in the program. A number of the items in the instrument focused on these aspects of distance education. A number of differences and some similarities were found between agriculture teachers and extension agents. Each difference or similarity will be reported as a separate finding. These data are found in tabular form in Table 2. The Chi Square test for Independence was used to determine statistical significance of the differences. In the table, data are reported as percentages for ease of interpretation but actual frequencies were used in the Chi Square analysis.

Finding 3A. Both extension agents and teachers have ready access to computers at work.¹ All agents with the exception of one (99.5%) had daily access to a computer at work while 98%

¹ In Finding Number 2, it was noted that computer experience and computer skills were not a predictor but in fact, distance education depends on computer availability. Thus while it is not a predictor, computer availability is a dependency (or requirement).

of the teachers had daily access to computers. All of the extension agents with daily access to computers had Internet connections. However, eight of the teachers with computers at school did not have access to the Internet which reduced the percentage of teachers with computers and Internet access to 95%. See Table 2.

Finding 3B. Most agents and teachers have a computer at home with Internet Access. Eighty-two percent of the agents reported having a computer at home while 91% of the teachers indicated they had home computers. Sixteen of the 165 agents with computers at home did not have Internet access while six of the 134 agriculture teachers with computers at home did not have Internet access. See Table 2.

Table 2

Characteristics of Agriculture Teachers and Extension Agents That Could Affect the Delivery of a Distance Education Master's Degree

Variables	Extension Agents	Agriculture Teachers	X ²	P
Access to Computer at Work	99.5 %	98.0 %	2.48	.290
Access to Computer at Home	82.4 %	90.5 %	4.97	.080
Which Computer would be used in the DE Program?			16.59	.001
Work	25.3 %	9.2 %		
Home	11.3 %	20.4 %		
Both	63.4 %	70.4 %		
Type of Computer used at Work:			191.80	.001
Sun/Unix	79.7 %	0.0 %		
PC/Windows	19.8 %	95.0 %		
Mac	0.5 %	0.5 %		
Type of Computer used at Home			1.12	.289
PC/Windows	98.7 %	96.9 %		
Mac	1.3 %	3.1 %		
CD-ROM drive at work	41.3 %	100.0 %	128.40	.001
CD-ROM drive at home	98.2 %	99.2 %	0.65	.420
Internet Connection at Work			10.69	.005
Modem Dial Up	13.8 %	9.7 %		
High Speed Connection	79.7 %	70.8 %		
Don't Know	6.5 %	19.4 %		
Internet Connection at Home			0.91	.220
Modem Dial Up	84.7 %	88.7 %		
High Speed Connection	15.3 %	11.2 %		
Internet Browser Comfort				
Internet Explorer	62.5 %	76.2 %	7.34	.007
Netscape Navigator	83.0 %	62.6 %	18.52	.001
Word Processor Comfort				

Word Perfect	92.0 %	37.4 %	117.10	.001
Microsoft Word	78.0 %	95.9 %	22.06	.001
PowerPoint Comfort	54.5 %	66.7 %	5.22	.022
Self Rated Computer Efficacy			4.63	.200
Very Capable	27.0 %	35.5 %		
Capable	58.5 %	48.6 %		
Limited Capability	13.5 %	12.8 %		
Not Capable	1.0 %	2.0 %		
Previous Distance Ed. Course	33.2 %	41.9 %	2.78	.060

Finding 3C. Most agents and teachers would use both the computer at home and the computer at work to participate in a distance education program. Sixty-three percent of the agents and 70% of the teachers indicated they would use computers at both work and home to participate in the program. When comparing the use of the computer only at work or only at home it was found that agents were more like to participate in a distance education program from work while teachers were more likely to participate from home. See Table 2.

Finding 3D. There is a major difference in the computing platform used by agents and teachers at work. Most extension offices in the state (80%) have Sun computer terminals operating on Unix. Most teachers (95%) have PCs using the Windows operating system. There are virtually no Macintosh systems in use. At home nearly all agents and teachers have PC systems running Windows. See Table 2

Finding 3E. There is a difference between agents and teachers in whether or not the computer at work has a CD-ROM drive. All of the computers used by teachers at work have CD-ROM drives while only 41 percent of the agents have access to computers at work with CD-ROM drives. However, at home nearly all the teachers and agents have CD-ROM drives. See Table 2.

Finding 3F. Most teachers and agents have high-speed internet access at work but dial up modems at home. Over 70% of both teachers and agents have high-speed internet access at work but less than 15% of both groups have high-speed internet access at home. It was interesting to note that nearly 20 percent of the teachers didn't know what type of access they had at work. See Table 2.

Finding 3G. Agriculture teachers are more comfortable with Internet Explorer as their web browser while extension agents are more comfortable with Netscape Navigator as their web browser. The majority of the agents and teachers indicated comfort with both web browsers. However more agents were comfortable with Netscape (83%) than they were with Explorer (62.5%). Conversely, more teachers were comfortable with Explorer (76%) than they were with Netscape (63%). See Table 2.

Finding 3H. Agents are more comfortable with Word Perfect as their word processor while agriculture teachers prefer Microsoft Word. Ninety-two percent of the agents indicated they were comfortable using Word Perfect as compared to 37 percent of the agriculture teachers. Ninety-six percent of the teachers were comfortable with Microsoft Word while 78 percent of the agents

indicated they were comfortable with Word. It appears the agents use Word Perfect at work on their Unix workstations but use Word at home on their personal computers. See Table 2.

Finding 3I. Teachers are more comfortable with PowerPoint than are agents. Two-thirds of the teachers indicated they were comfortable with PowerPoint while a little over half of the agents indicated comfort in using PowerPoint. See Table 2.

Finding 3J. Both teachers and agents perceive they have good computer skills. Eighty-six percent of the agents and 84 percent of the teachers rated their computer skills as “Very Capable” or “Capable.” However, this is a self-reported rating. These individuals might not be as computer savvy as this indicates. One of the questions in the survey asked what type of operating system was on their computer at work and at home. Thirty-six percent of the agents reported the computer at work was operating on a Windows platform, yet less than 20% of the computers at work are PC machines. Forty-three percent of the agents identified Unix (or a variation thereof), as being their operating system at work while nearly 80 percent of their work machines are Sun workstations operating on Unix. About 90% of the agents and teachers were using a Windows operating system at home while about 10% were not sure of what their operating system was.

Conclusions and Implications

It can be concluded there is a demand for a distance education Master’s program in Agricultural and Extension Education. Based solely on extension agent and agriculture teacher intent in this state, there is a critical mass of students who indicated they would enroll in such a program. It is likely that other individuals in agricultural businesses and service and individuals who would like to enter the profession would also have an interest in the program. Teachers and agents in other states might also enroll in the program. There is a solid demand for an online Master’s program in Agricultural and Extension Education and nearly all agents and teachers have computers with Internet access.

Based upon the findings, the marketing plan for a distance education Master’s program should first focus on academically gifted agricultural teachers who are early in their careers. This audience is most likely to avail themselves of the program.

Unlike findings in earlier research, distance to the university was not a factor in determining the students’ intent to enroll in a distance education program. Neither was age, years of computer use, or previous experience with online courses.

A number of factors need to be considered in designing the distance education program if it is to accomplish the goal of reaching both agriculture teachers and extension agents. Some of the factors to consider include:

1. Web content needs to be designed for viewing in both Netscape and Explorer. It is critical that the content be readily accessible on both browsers. If the web pages are optimized for viewing on one browser, the audience that uses the other browser will have an inferior product. Agents tend to use Netscape while teachers tend to use Explorer. This is a critical concept to remember when converting PowerPoint files to be viewed on the

web. By default, PowerPoint presentations saved as “Save as Web Page” are optimized for viewing in Explorer and are visually inferior in Netscape. This default setting can and should be changed.

2. The web course designers should keep the “bells and whistles” and large files to a minimum. Since over 75% of the agents and teachers plan to use their computers at home and the great majority of these computers use dial up modem access, designers need to keep this in mind. It will take some time for large files, big graphics, and slick animations to load. Accordingly, file size should be kept to a minimum.

3. Teachers of distance education courses should be willing to work with written assignments that are in both Word and WordPerfect formats. Teachers are more likely to submit assignments in Word while agents are more likely to submit assignments in Word Perfect. The instructor will need the capability to work with both types of files.

4. Distributing distance education materials on CD-ROM might be harder for extension agents to use, especially at work, since most of the work machines do not have CD-ROM drives.

5. If PowerPoint presentations are to be downloaded and viewed by students or if students are expected to prepare PowerPoint presentations for class assignments, some additional instruction may be needed since only 2/3 of the teachers and 1/2 of the agents indicated they were comfortable with PowerPoint. We cannot assume that distance education students are PowerPoint capable.

In a presentation at the 27th National Agricultural Education Research Conference, Cartmell and Garten (2000) assert, “Agricultural education programs at the university level must continue to diversify to maintain enrollment levels for survival.” They cite Newcomb (1993) who suggested that departments should scan the horizon and identify needs that are not being adequately served and foster relationships with new client groups. An online distance education Master’s program in Agricultural and Extension education is a step in this direction.

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**Predictors of Intent to Enroll in a Distance Education Master's Degree Program in
Agricultural and Extension Education
A Critique**

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The purpose of this study was to determine and describe the needs and characteristics of teachers and extension personnel who are likely to enroll in an online Master's degree program in Agricultural and Extension Education. There are very few published market research studies in distance education for the researchers to draw upon. Why? Publishing market research results gives away the competitive advantage that is a desired outcome of most market research.

The population for the study was all agriculture teachers and extension personnel in the state of North Carolina. The researchers did not achieve the response rate desired as they later found that many possible participants already possessed a Master's degree and did not deem it necessary to respond. The researchers did an excellent job of recognizing this validity threat to their study and did more than the "normal" non-response procedures to address this threat.

The findings of the study stated that 54 percent of the teachers and 27 percent of the extension agents were likely to apply for an online Master's programs. The true test to market research is when interest or even intent becomes a purchase or, in the case of a distance degree program, enrollment and completion. As this program becomes a reality, I would recommend that the researchers continue to monitor the positive respondents (likely to enroll) to follow them from interest to enrollment to retention (a problem in distance education) to completion.

Many of the recommendations offered by the researchers provide guidance to the instructional and administrative design of the online Master's program that will increase the success of this distance education effort. The question this research may generate for the profession is are we (teacher educators) willing to become truly competitive against each other through the vehicle of distance education. Will current teachers in California desire to enroll in North Carolina's online Master's program instead of attending one of the in-state institutions? Will extension agents with their Master's degree want to enroll in Texas's [Doc@Distance](#) program to pursue their doctoral degree? If the need or want is there in the students, are these and other distance-delivered programs ready and able to recruit, retain and eventually graduate students from another state or even another country? How will departments feel when someone else "steals" one of our potential graduate students – a "theft" that becomes easier with distance delivered programs.

Are we really ready to be a player in distance education?