

5. NEEDS ASSESSMENT

In order to make wise decisions about which of the planned distance education programs to deliver to which statewide locations and to assess other educational needs, needs assessment will be a fundamental part of this project.

Goal 5A. Conduct needs assessments in selected communities. These assessments will be conducted through interviews and surveys with the community leaders, surveys of professions, and interviews and surveys of business leaders. Where possible, surveys will be Web based for efficiency of data collection and analysis.

Needs Assessment and Evaluation

DCE did not engage in any formal needs assessment during 1999-2000, but did pave the way to conduct market research in the next reporting period. During this past year, DCE Marketing conducted focus groups in two regions (Salem and Bend), and created its first online evaluation tool, an online survey ranking student services.

Focus Groups. With the introduction of new publications and media strategies in 1999-2000, DCE Marketing felt it was critical to evaluate the effectiveness of its new directions. During this reporting period, DCE marketing conducted two focus groups, one in Salem and one in Central Oregon.

Participants. In both Salem and in Central Oregon, the groups were comprised of a mix of current DCE students and prospective distance students. In Salem, five current students and three prospective students were part of the first focus group. In Central Oregon (Bend), the group consisted of six current students, eight prospective students, and one graduate. DCE identified and invited prospective students who were listed on our in-house database of students expressing interest in OSU distance degree programs.

Summary of Responses

Below are some of the key findings that highlighted marketing opportunities for program and project improvement:

Handbook & Term Schedule. The majority of participants in both groups recognized that these were “companion pieces” and noticed the recurring blue sky themes. Overall first impressions were strongly favorable, with many using words like “professional,” “impressive”, and “informative” and “easy-to-use.” Some of the recurring or more critical questions/comments students had after looking through materials included the following:

- What's the next step after I've found a class I'm interested in? (Resulting action: DCE created "Step-by-Step." This two-page flyer for getting started is inserted in current and prospective packets and is also available online at <http://statewide.orst.edu/stepbystep.html>)
- Why so many TBAs in the Term Schedule under time? (Resulting action: DCE did a better job Summer Term in listing less TBAs, and also more heavily promoted the Website as the latest source for course updates and information)
- Show other terms course will be offered besides that term (Resulting action: DCE made plans to include subsequent term information, when available, in its Fall 2000 Term Schedule)

When asked if students preferred printed copies of the Handbook and Term Schedules mailed to them or a postcard reminder to go to the DCE Website for this information, 67% preferred print, 27% said both, and only 6% said URL postcard reminder. This has helped marketing decide to stay with a printed format for 2000-2001 until user testing indicates otherwise.

Website Summary. Approximately thirty minutes of the total two-hour focus group involved testing of the new DCE Website and its features. Following are some important summary points and suggested action steps based on results of the Website part of both focus groups:

Better Access to Course Information- A number of people described the need for better access to information about courses (books required, book prices, information about the instructor, teaching style, more?). In some cases the information may have been on the Website, but the person may have not been able to find it. A comprehensive assessment of the course information needs and desires of students should be made, and every attempt should be made to ensure that students and prospective students can access all possible information about each course in a convenient and timely manner. Such a result will help them make successful course choices from the beginning and achieve success once they have chosen.

Home Page Subheads- Some survey respondents expressed frustration that they were unable to click on subheadings underneath the main five home page headers to go directly to those subsections. It would not take much to change this situation. Assuming that a page existed (or was created) for each subheading, each could be made into a link that could be underlined or hidden (being a link without an underline).

A Few Times Per Term- Most students said they accessed the DCE site only a few times per term, a predictable finding given the current site content and capabilities. The current site is largely geared toward new and prospective

students, who likely visit the site primarily to support initial decision-making and orientation. For prospective students to visit the site more often there would need to be content and services that supported their day-to-day goals and activities, either as a prospective distance student or a current distance student of another school. The same is true for current students, whose day-to-day goals, needs, and activities could be addressed through a number of site improvements and new features. Previous DCE students may also find themselves returning to the site often in a future day when content and services addressing their ongoing needs becomes available.

Don't Make Me Work to Register, one user said, "Don't make me work to find the Web page or phone number for registration." This kind of statement cuts straight to the heart of a user experience designer. Suggestions: 1) make the word "registration" on the home page a link to the registration section; 2) Create a direct link from the second layer "Admission & Registration" page to Registration Login; and 3) Move the registration links near to the top of the third layer "Registration" page.

Universal Support for Current Site- Although the number of persons providing feedback remains limited, those who have been asked about the existing DCE Website have nearly universally praise it. All say it is easy to navigate and most say they like the colors, design, and inviting nature of the site. There are always more improvements to make to any Website, and the possibilities are enormous for the DCE site. Still, it appears that the current site is a fantastic place to start. Care should be taken in future site planning and development not to sacrifice user-centered improvements made in the current design. The only way to ensure this is to involve students and other strategic users in future site development. Imagining how users will use your site is not merely insufficient, it is impossible.

Online Survey

During this reporting period, DCE conducted its first online survey, which was promoted via a link on the homepage and e-mailed to students in the May 2000 edition of E-News. Respondents were asked to rate the helpfulness of various online student services.

From a marketing perspective, the survey served primarily as a pilot test and learning experience to pave the way for future DCE online surveys. As incentive for their participation, respondents were able to enter a drawing for an online gift certificate to the OSU Bookstore. A total of 122 participants responded to the survey, 117 of whom entered the drawing.

Although recognized for its limitations in collecting comprehensive DCE student and prospective student statistics, online surveys will be used again in the future.