

# Faculty Attitudes Toward Distance Education at the State University of West Georgia

## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study was to identify possible factors that affect faculty attitudes toward distance education.

**Theoretical Framework:** Paramount to the success of distance education courses are the faculty who deliver them. According to Betts (1998), the success of a distance program is dependent upon the enthusiasm of the faculty teaching through distance media. Understanding the causes of faculty attitudes toward distance education, both negative and positive, can enable program administrators to develop an environment that fosters distance program excellence by being responsive to faculty needs.

**Data Source:** A survey, "Faculty Distance Learning Assessment," was given to 283 faculty (through campus mail) at The State University of West Georgia, in Carrollton, Georgia.

**Results and Conclusions:** Results indicated a significant difference in attitude among those who had taught distance courses and those who had not, leading to the conclusion that experience breeds acceptance. The primary factors inhibiting faculty participation in distance teaching were concern for course quality and workload. Motivating factors tended to more often be intrinsic (challenge, desire to keep up) for those who had distance teaching experience and extrinsic (release time, monetary reward) for those who had not. Faculty who had used WebCT for distance teaching were significantly more positive than those who had only used GSAMS.

## RESULTS - DATA

**Respondents:** Surveys were returned by 118 faculty. The respondents represented a cross-section of the three colleges (36% from Education; 15% from Business; and 49% from Arts & Sciences). They averaged eight years of teaching experience at the university with a range of zero to 33 years. Fifty-two of the 112 instructors had earned tenure. The majority held the rank of professor (37%) or assistant professor (36%). Eighteen percent were associate professors and nine percent were instructors.

Of the 118 respondents, 46 (39 %) reported that they had taught one or more classes at UWG through GSAMS and/or WebCT.

### Factors Motivating Faculty Participation

As seen in Table 1, the number one factor motivating faculty who had taught one or more classes utilizing GSAMS and/or WebCT was the ability to reach new audiences that cannot attend classes on campus. Eighty-seven percent of the faculty agreed or strongly agreed that this was a motivating factor. An education professor observed, "I do this for the students. Seeing how they appreciate the chance to take courses at a place convenient for them is my reward."

The other top five motivating factors were the desire to "keep up," personal motivation to use technology, flexible working conditions (hours, locations), and intellectual challenge. Closely following was pressure from administration. Of all respondents, 65 percent reported that they perceive pressure to become involved in distance education. Those in the College of Business perceived the most pressure (88 percent), followed by the College of Education (65 percent) and then the College of Arts and Sciences (56 percent).

Table 1

Top Factors Motivating Faculty Who Have Previously Taught via Distance (n=46)

Factor	Rank	Mean	SD	% Agree
Ability to reach new audiences that cannot attend class on campus	1	1.91	1.24	87
Desire to "keep up"	2	2.54	1.43	65
Encouragement from dept. head or dean	3	2.48	1.21	61
Personal motivation to use technology	4	2.70	1.38	54

Flexible working conditions	5	3.04	1.59	52
Intellectual challenge	6	2.96	1.52	52
Pressure from administration	7	2.67	1.38	51

When asked what factors would motivate them to participate in distance education, those faculty who had never taught via distance media shared the number one factor with those the distance instructors (see Table 2). However, their number two motivating factor was flexible working conditions, with sixty-seven percent agreeing or strongly agreeing that this was a motivating factor. Also included in their top five motivating factors was monetary support for participation (stipend, overload), the opportunity to receive training, and course development support.

*Table 2  
Top Factors Which Would Motivate Faculty Who Have Not Previously Taught via Distance (n=72)*

Factor	Rank	Mean	SD	% Agree
Ability to reach new audiences that cannot attend classes on campus	1	2.09	1.11	71
Flexible working conditions (hours, location)	2	2.33	1.25	67
Monetary support for participation (stipend, overload)	3	2.48	1.67	67
Opportunity to receive training	4	2.41	1.12	62
Course development support	5	2.48	1.15	62
Personal motivation to use technology	6	2.54	1.30	59
Credit towards promotion/tenure	7	2.44	1.25	58

When asked whether or not faculty who teach via distance should be rewarded differently, 75 percent of all respondents said yes. When asked if distance faculty are adequately rewarded, most College of Business faculty (53 percent) and Arts and Sciences faculty (54 percent) who responded to the question said yes, while 68 percent of the College of Education faculty said no. One professor in the College of Education commented, "Reassigned time should be provided for planning and delivery, and more weight for tenure and promotion. Perhaps there should also be increased pay for teaching distance courses." A professor in the College of Business presented a different view: "Reward is not monetary, but satisfaction of keeping up with technology."

### **Factors Inhibiting Faculty Participation**

As shown in Table 3, the number one concern of faculty who have previously taught via distance media is decreased student interaction, followed closely by a lack of time to develop course. According to one assistant professor who has taught GSAMS classes, "The problem with distance is that it eats up time and creative juices in an activity that I am uninterested in, and at the expense of reading and writing in my field." The other top five inhibiting factors were a preference for the traditional setting, the concern that students need on-campus socialization experience, and concerns about reduced course quality. Other concerns agreed upon by more than 50 percent of the respondents were time away from research and publishing and increased class size.

*Table 3  
Top Factors Inhibiting Faculty Who Have Previously Taught via Distance*

Factor	Rank	Mean	SD	% Agree

Decreased student interaction	1	2.16	1.30	71
Lack of time to develop course	2	2.20	1.10	70
Preference for traditional setting	3	2.42	1.44	62
Concern that students needs on-campus socialization experience	4	2.36	1.31	61
Reduced course quality	5	2.46	1.49	60
Time away from research and publishing	6	2.64	1.25	55
Increased class size	7	2.52	1.33	54

The concerns of faculty who had never taught via distance were consistent with those of those who had. As shown in Table 4, the number one concern was decreased student interaction, followed by lack of time to develop course. The other top five factors were reduced course quality, a preference for traditional setting, and lack of release time. Other inhibiting factors listed by at least fifty percent of the respondents were the concern that students need on-campus socialization, time away from research and publishing, lack of time to teach course, and lack of necessary equipment in office.

*Table 4  
Top Factors Inhibiting Faculty Who Have Never Taught via Distance*

Factor	Rank	Mean	SD	% Agree
Decreased student interaction	1	1.86	1.12	77
Lack of time to develop course	2	2.13	1.40	69
Reduced course quality	3	2.23	1.28	66
Preference for traditional setting	4	2.27	1.31	61
Concern that students need on-campus socialization experience	5	2.21	1.12	58
Takes time away from reserach and publishing	6	2.33	1.24	56
Lack of release time	7	2.25	1.11	53
Lack of time to teach course	8	2.47	1.19	53
Don't have necessary equipment in office	9	2.63	1.45	53

### **Faculty Attitudes Toward Distance Education**

Of all respondents, 45 percent reported that their attitude toward distance education in general was positive, and 45 percent also reported that their attitude toward distance education at the university was positive. As shown in Table 5, respondents from the College of Arts and Sciences were least likely to report a positive attitude toward distance education in general (32 percent), or toward distance education at the university (34 percent). College of Business faculty were slightly more positive towards distance education at the university (58 percent) than were the College of Education faculty (54 percent). Those who had taught via distance were more positive toward distance education at the university (69 percent) than those who had not (34 percent). Faculty who had taught using WebCT (online) were significantly more positive than respondents in general. One College of Education professor remarked, "WebCT is great. It's GSAMS I hate." Eighty-one percent of WebCT users reported a positive attitude toward distance education in general, and 83 percent reported a positive attitude toward distance education at the university.

As shown in Table 5, there also appeared to be a relationship between the number of years teaching at UWG and the attitude toward distance education. Fifty-four percent of those with five or less years of teaching experience at UWG reported a positive attitude toward distance education, compared to only 26 percent of those with 15 or more years teaching experience. Also, those with tenure (40 percent) appear to be less accepting of distance education as those without (51%). One tenured professor in arts & sciences

with more than 20 years at UWG commented, "No form of 'incentive' mentioned on your survey would motivate me to participate in distance education . . . I think we better serve our students by developing learning-enhancing relationships with them and among them through face-to-face dialogue and interaction."

Table 5

*Faculty Attitudes Towards Distance Education at UWG by College, Rank, Number of Years at University, Tenure Status, and Distance Teaching Experience*

Factor	Mean	SD	Positive	Negative
All faculty (n=117)	2.75	1.22	45%	27%
College of Education Faculty (n=42)	2.42	1.14	54%	19%
College of Business Faculty (n=17)	2.71	1.40	53%	30%
College of Arts & Sciences Faculty (n=56)	3.03	1.21	24%	34%
Tenured faculty (n=51)	2.90	1.70	36%	47%
Non-tenured faculty (n=59)	2.56	1.14	53%	30%
Professors (n=42)	2.93	1.37	39%	35%
Assistant Professors (n=41)	2.78	1.37	51%	41%
Associate professors (n=20)	2.80	1.11	45%	30%
Instructors (n=10)	2.40	1.08	40%	10%
Faculty who have never taught via distance (n=70)	2.90	1.05	34%	29%
Faculty who have taught using WebCT but not GSAMS (n=11)	2.01	1.12	83%	8%
Faculty who have taught using WebCT and GSAMS (n=18)	2.11	1.28	72%	11%
Faculty who have taught using GSAMS but not WebCT (n=17)	3.11	1.41	31%	40%
Faculty at UWG for 0-5 years (n=62)	2.57	1.14	54%	21%
Faculty at UWG for 6-15 years (n=27)	2.59	1.12	41%	18%
Faculty at UWG for more than 15 years (n=19)	3.32	1.38	26%	53%

As shown in Table 6, most respondents (87 percent) perceive the attitude of the UWG administration toward distance education to be positive. This did not vary significantly among the respondents of the various colleges or with experience in distance teaching. None of the respondents in any category perceived the attitude of the administration to be negative. Faculty perceptions of the attitude of other faculty toward distance education tended to be much more negative. Of all respondents, only 26 percent reported that the attitudes of UWG faculty were positive toward distance education. As shown in Table 7, faculty of the College of Arts & Sciences were least likely (14 percent) to report a positive attitude toward distance education on the part of their colleagues. There was little significant difference between the College of Education (39 percent) and the College of Business (35 percent).

Table 6

*Faculty Perception of the Attitude of UWG Administration Towards Distance Education*

Type of Faculty	Mean	SD	Postive	Negative
All faculty (n=115)	1.62	.71	87%	0%
College of Education Faculty (n=42)	1.44	.67	91%	0%

College of Business Faculty (n=17)	1.56	.63	94%	0%
College of Arts & Sciences Faculty (n=55)	1.69	.77	82%	0%

Table 7

*Faculty Perception of the Attitude of UWG Faculty Towards Distance Education*

Type of Faculty	Mean	SD	Positive	Negative
All faculty (n=116)	3.17	.989	26%	41%
College of Education Faculty (n=41)	2.90	1.11	39%	31%
College of Business Faculty (n=17)	3.29	1.21	35%	58%
College of Arts & Sciences Faculty (n=55)	3.31	.791	15%	41%

**Factors Changing Attitudes**

Overall, most faculty (55 percent) reported that their attitude toward distance education had not changed over the past three years. Thirty-three percent reported that their attitude had improved, while 16 percent said that their attitude toward distance education had worsened. As shown in Table 8, those most likely to report that their attitude had improved over the last three years were in the College of Education (43 percent) and/or users of WebCT (63 percent).

Many reasons were listed in the open-ended question regarding the cause of their changes in attitude. Among the reasons mentioned as prompting a more positive attitude were increased familiarity, positive experiences of other faculty, improved training and facilities, increased institutional support, positive feedback from students, positive evaluations, and enjoyment of flexible hours. Among the factors prompting more negative attitudes were poor performance of technology, negative student feedback, large classes, negative experiences of other faculty, and lack of departmental interest.

Table 8

*Change in Attitude Towards Distance Education over Past Three Years*

Type of Faculty	Improved	Worsened	Unchanged
All faculty (n=113)	33%	15%	55%
College of Education Faculty (n=40)	42%	10%	48%
College of Business Faculty (n=17)	30%	23%	47%
College of Arts & Sciences Faculty (n=54)	27%	17%	53%
Faculty who have never taught via distance (n=70)	27%	15%	58%
Faculty who have taught using WebCT but not GSAMS (n=18)	62%	8%	29%
Faculty who taught using WebCT and GSAMS (n=18)	50%	16%	33%
Faculty who have taught using GSAMS and not WebCT (n=17)	24%	22%	53%

**Conclusions**

1. The factors which inhibit faculty participation in distance education appear to generally be universal, with many similarities between those who have taught via distance media and those who have not. The greatest concerns are related to student interaction and course quality. The other major concerns have to do with the amount of time that it takes for faculty to prepare and deliver a distance course.
2. There were some significant differences in motivational factors. Those who had taught via distance

previously appear to be more intrinsically motivated than those who had not, citing a desire to "keep up," and intellectual challenge among their motivational factors. Those who had not taught via distance were more likely to report monetary support and credit towards promotion/tenure as factors that would motivate them to teach. Among the top motivating factor for both groups was the ability to reach new student audiences who could not attend otherwise, and flexible working conditions.

3. Those with experience teaching through distance education were generally more positive towards distance learning at the university than were those who had not, suggesting that increased experience and knowledge leads to greater satisfaction.
4. Those who had utilized WebCT in combination with GSAMS or alone were significantly more positive towards distance education than those who had only utilized GSAMS.
5. Overall, faculty attitudes have become slightly more positive towards distance education at the university over the past three years.
6. Those whose attitudes have improved the most are those who have utilized WebCT.
7. Among the three colleges, the College of Education faculty reported the greatest improvement in attitude toward distance education. The College of Business reported the most declining attitudes, yet still had more positive attitudes than negative. Faculty attitudes in the College of Arts and Sciences were the most unchanged, perhaps because distance education is least utilized there.
8. The greatest factors contributing to a positive change in attitude appear to be the availability of WebCT and increased familiarity with distance learning. Other factors included improved training and facilities, feedback from students, and enjoyment of flexibility.
9. The greatest factors contributing to a negative change in attitude appear to be poor performance of technology, large classes, too much pressure to teach via distance, and negative experiences of other faculty.

Other conclusions were developed as a result of the study.

10. Distance education is of great interest to faculty at the university. This can be established from the high survey return rate and the number of written comments provided by the respondents.
11. Those who have previously taught via distance will continue or increase their participation if their intrinsic needs are met.
12. Those who have not previously taught via distance will not significantly increase their participation unless some of the inhibiting factors are diminished or removed.
13. A large majority (87 percent) of faculty view the attitude of the university administration toward distance education as positive. A significant number (41 percent) view the attitude of other faculty as negative, particularly those in the College of Arts and Sciences (41 percent), and the College of Business (58 percent).

## **Recommendations**

1. Address and diminish inhibiting factors that deter faculty from teaching via distance, and stress and expand the intrinsic benefits.
2. Increase marketing efforts to make faculty aware of the benefits of distance teaching and to increase overall familiarity with distance education.
3. Further evaluation should be conducted concerning the impact that distance education has on student interaction, as distance education was perceived by many respondents to inhibit interaction.
4. Address and modify the reward structure for distance instructors to include more formal and informal mechanisms for recognition.