

Distance Students And Services Focus Group Summary Summer 2007

The Distance Learning Students and Services Summer Focus Group gathered on July 3, 2007. A dozen distance students gathered to discuss their experience with their distance learning courses and services for distance students. Students were both graduate and undergraduate students. The students took an array of courses including Art History, Computer Applications, Education, Business Ed., Special Education and Media and Instructional Technology.

The first issue that the focus group tackled was advisement for distance students. None of the students in the focus group were advised in person; they were advised online, through email and by telephone. The students expressed an abundance of gratitude for the advisement received from business and education faculty over the phone and via email. All of the students who were not self-advised rated the advisement as good or excellent. A suggestion was made that students be advised as to how much time is required to spend online in their courses. Students who were self-advised recommended the continued availability of program sheets.

Out of the dozen students in the focus group, only one student suggested that the class registration needed improvement. All but one of the remaining students experienced the registration process as excellent. Students expressed that it would be helpful if the partial distance courses would have the meeting times and places listed on Banweb prior to registration. One student mentioned that: "Registration on the system needs to allow a category for things that do not fit the norm--then, at least, there would be an option to contact someone--I was continually blocked out for a class and I ended up on the phone and doing the paperwork anyway."

Half of the students in the focus group utilized the electronic library resources. All of those students were very satisfied with the availability of library services at West Georgia for distance students. One student was thrilled that she able to access Galileo while she was at Yale. Another student did mention however that when she attempted to reach the Kids Galileo that she was unable to access with her West Georgia password. Over all the students were most impressed with Galileo and electronic library resources.

Students received technical orientations from the course instructor most often. Some of the students received their technical orientations to WebCT Vista through a live orientation. A couple of students were oriented through online information while only one student received her technical orientation to WebCT Vista through other class members. All of the students indicated that the technical orientations provided them with enough information to effectively utilize WebCT Vista by the second week of the course. One student mentioned that her professor provided a helpful online tutorial in addition to the instructor-led orientation.

When having problems accessing their course online courses or utilizing WebCT Vista, the majority of the students contacted the Distance Learning helpline by email or phone. All of the students indicated that the Distance Learning helpline was very successful in solving their WebCT problems. A few students also contacted another classmate or their instructor for technical support with their courses. Those students reported they were mostly successful in solving their WebCT Vista problems. Overall, the distance students felt that they received prompt and courteous student support from West Georgia.

The focus group discussed their overall learning and interaction in distance courses in comparison with traditional face to face courses. Most students felt that they learned about the same in each type of course. A third of the group expressed that they felt like they learned more in their distance courses at West Georgia than in their traditional courses. Only one of the students felt like she learned in less in her distance course. Her reasoning was "ONLY because the true exchange of information is not available as it would be in a face to face mtg. Some things come up in verbal conversation and you can keep adding to the conversation." Where as a student who believed she learned more in a distance course said, "I learned more because I was able to apply what was learned." When asked about this topic a student replied: "I love

online courses. I would not take classes any other way.”

Due to the use of online course tools such as chat, the discussions board and email, more students than not felt that the level of interaction between themselves and the instructor and also themselves and other students was greater in a distance course than in a traditional on campus course. In regards to interaction with other students, one student said, “I chat so much with my other team members that I don't feel like I am missing any interaction.” Only one student reported that there was less interaction in a distance course and complained, “Honestly, I feel like I am bothering the instructors if there are individual emails. . . most of the correspondence is usually group related.” A third of the focus group said that the interaction in distance courses and traditional courses about the same. One student said that she interacts more with the students than the professor in distance courses. Additionally, another student commented on the camaraderie in distance courses: “the discussions are all very helpful. It's comforting to hear that other people are having the same problems I have.” Students reported that the instructors in distance courses made themselves available via email and telephone calls if needed.

The focus group was asked if they thought that there are enough distance courses offered at the University of West Georgia. None of the students in the group said that there were enough distance courses at West Georgia. A majority of the group indicated that there were not enough distance courses offered at West Georgia. One student emphatically said “I live 2 hours away and wish more courses were available online!” One student said that she wished she could complete her specialist degree online at West Georgia. A third of the group was uncertain if there were enough distance courses offered at West Georgia. One student frustratingly reported, “My work and graduation has been delayed yet another year because of not being able to take classes that are required because they are not being offered” and he felt that if there were more of the courses offered online this would not have been the case. The majority of the group reported that if the courses they were taking via distance media were not offered online they would not have driven to campus to take the courses in the traditional manner. One student was completing her Masters from Florida. Another student was taking courses at UWG in Houston, Texas. A couple of students stated that they would hesitantly drive to campus only if absolutely necessary. Only one of the focus group students taking distance courses lives on campus.

Most all of the distance students in the group accessed WebCT Vista from their computers at home most often. One student accessed WebCT Vista from both work and home equally. Another student accessed most often from her campus housing.

Students reported being frustrated with the current inability of to toggle back and forth between WebCT Vista and the campus portal. Additionally a student complained that “not all instructors use webct, some are on pipeline, so here we go again, with all these computer systems--we need to whittle that down to one--too much.” Another student stated that her only problem with distance courses is “with instructors who aren't familiar with WebCT.” Other issues in regards to specific course surfaced such as “different instructors have different ways of getting in and getting out--different classes will have different procedures--one class I can print the PPTs, the other I cannot because of the way the instructor posted.” Students reported having general issues with the lack of speed and poorly perceived usability with the Vista course management system. Also, a student requested “toward the end of sessions, please do not alter the system or do upgrades or maintenance.”

Two of the distance students in the dozen members of the focus group were unsuccessful in getting their copy of the Microsoft Office software as part of the Microsoft Campus Agreement. They had the unfortunate experience of driving a distance to campus and being told their reserved software was not available. Subsequently, they were told that the software could not be sent to them which was an incredible disservice since they both lived so far away from campus.

In closing, the student focus group reported a need for more totally online courses. Specifically when asked how distance programs and services could be improved, a student replied: "More completely online courses. Not the ones where you have to meet for the first session, etc." "Larger variety of online courses." "One student was "so upset after the first meeting when we had to meet 9 times for an online class." It was also requested that more courses be offered online and also be offered online more than once a year.

Prepared on July 6, 2007 by Christy Talley