University Distance Learning Program Promotion

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With the rapid development of online programs, there have been few studies in the marketing literature focusing on the promotion of distance learning (DL) programs. This study chooses a university's master level DL program exploring how the current students initially found the program. The results of the study can be used to aid in determining the most effective way to reach and attract potential students to the program. A survey method with 138 respondents is used.

INTRODUCTION

Distance learning (DL) creates many opportunities for learning in primary, secondary, and post-secondary institutions across the globe. Moreover, DL can enhance the experience of the traditional student as well as the 60-year student for continuous life-long learning opportunities; such would include simple self-aggrandizement as well as career-essential life-long learning opportunities as well. Some very respected institutions such as the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania have recognized the need to develop life-long relationships with its graduates by offering free seminars every few years as well as other continuing education and learning opportunities (Dan, 2010).

The distance learner consumer may include the traditional 4-year college student, the corporate learner, professional enhancement learner, degree-completion adult learner, precollege (k-12) learner, remedial and test-preparation learner, and the recreational learner (Oblinger et al., 2001). The rapid growth of the eLearner consumer and environment is associated with several core advantages the DL environment has over the traditional classroom style delivery venue. Firstly, DL overcomes the barriers of geographic

location, distance, and time. The distance learner can login anywhere there is internet access and at any time of the day or evening. In some instances, the distance learner can proceed at their own pace and login when it is convenient considering the contingencies of work, family, and other duties and responsibilities.

Secondly, the distance learner who prefers discussion and group interaction over lecture-style learning can participate well beyond the time constraints of the typical classroom and with every member of their class and the instructor as well. Thirdly, distance learners in careers requiring constant learning and re-learning can "update" in required areas conveniently and affordably as necessary. For some DL consumers, they can explore any area of human inquiry that peaks their interest often nurturing totally new career and professional interests.

Considering DL and the interests of organization in the public, private or not-for-profit sectors, DL can be incorporated into their executive development programs as well as their overall programs for employee continuing education and other needs. DL, in employee development as well as higher education, can incorporate an endless array of supplemental materials such as videos, speeches, and demonstrations as well as an enriching list of related websites and other learning materials.

There are advantages as well for DL providers. Considering the traditional university or college provider, DL opens up major new markets including the 60-year student and other students from many demographics domestically and internationally. Certain university departments which must meet the needs of several stakeholder groups as required for accreditation can very quickly offer new courses and other materials to meet these educational and training challenges. Colleges and universities may also experience cost savings as the digital classroom does not need to be built or maintained (Poulin, 2013). As budget issues continue across the board, the online environment becomes increasingly attractive as an educational delivery medium.

To meet the challenges of the growing online learning market and to become and remain competitive, both the private-sector eLearning industry as well as the traditional college and university may have to incorporate various promotion and marketing techniques for their eLearning opportunities. Although 70% of chief academic leaders in the U.S. indicate that DL will be critical to their institution's long-term strategic success (Allen & Seaman, 2013), very few studies have focused on how these organizations can effectively promote their online opportunities to prospective future students and other markets. Developing and nurturing an effective brand such as Penn State's World Campus is essential. Providing effective radio, TV, and billboard ads can also help. Another important area is to study the actual consumer of your eLearning programs and how they researched and learned about your eLearning opportunities; such data can be useful to further enhance your advertising and promotion activities.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

In response to the interest of online program promotion, this study chooses a university's master level DL program. The M University's (MU) School Library & Information Technologies (SL&IT) graduate program has strived to educate and prepare school library media specialists. This program was originally developed to serve the need for school library media specialists in Pennsylvania and has since expanded to students in all areas of the United States. The program has been designed from five core essential objectives: design and evaluate instructional services, design instruction and curriculum, advocate for change and diversity, promote lifelong learning and collaboration, and continuing skills, knowledge, and professional practice.

The directors of the SL&IT master program have expressed the need to expand the program. They have set up an objective of the program in trying to gain more prospective students, and that is through advertisement. The purpose of this study is to determine how the current students initially found the program. The results of this study will be used to aid in determining the most effective way to reach and attract potential students to the SL&IT program.

METHODOLOGY

Following an interview with the SL&IT's executive directors, a questionnaire identifying promotion aspects of the SL&IT program was designed. 360 current students in the SL&IT program were selected as respondents. Data was collected through the distribution of the questionnaire to the current SL&IT students via the internet. The results were statistically analyzed using SPSS software.

RESULTS

The total number of respondents surveyed was 360 with 138 students responding. The response rate was 38.33%. The results are reported below:

A. Media Mode:

As shown in Figure 1, 44.2% of the students, 61 people, initially found out about the program through a colleague or friend. The second most widely used source was through an online search, where 27.5%, 38 people, of current student's initially found out about the program. A magazine advertisement was where approximately 21%, 29 people, of the student respondents found out about the program. 10.1%, 14 people, of the SL&IT students found the program through M University's website.

FIGURE 1
HOW DID YOU INITIALLY FIND OUT MU'S SCHOOL LIBRARY & INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES (SL & IT) ONLINE PROGRAM?
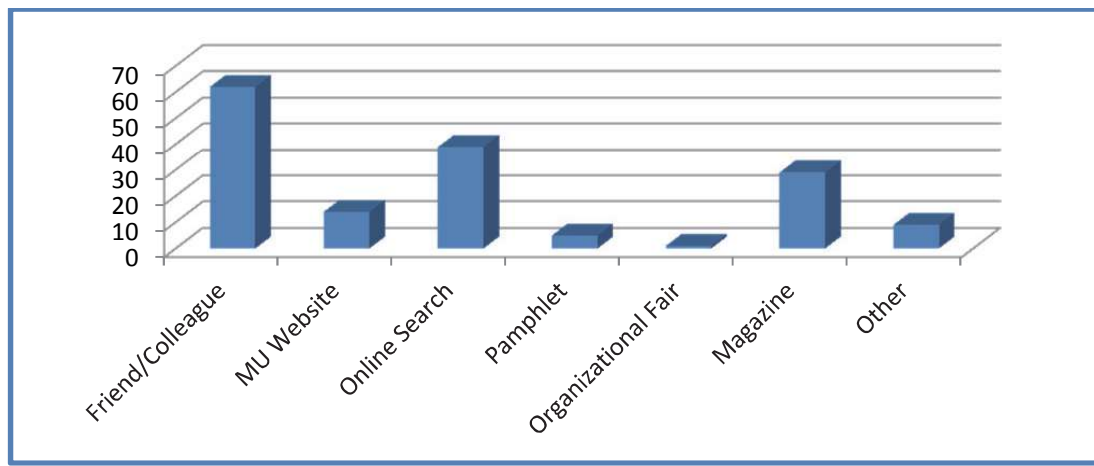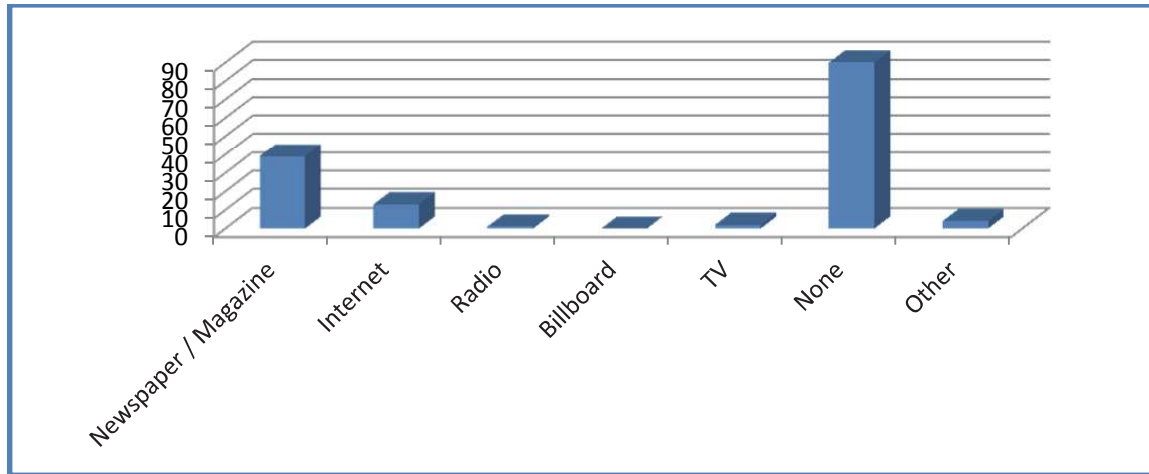

Location Analysis I:

Further analysis shows that 63% of those students from New York State initially found out about the program from a friend or colleague while 55% of the students from Pennsylvania initially heard about the program from a friend or colleague. This indicates that more than half of current students in New York or Pennsylvania heard about the program through word of mouth.

Figure 2 shows that the main media mode was through newspaper and magazine, in which 26% of current students have seen advertisements. The second media mode was through the internet in which 9% of current students have seen an advertisement of the program. 60% of the current students have never seen an advertisement of MU's SL&IT online program.

FIGURE 2
HAVE YOU EVER SEEN ANY ADVERTISEMENT FOR THE SL&IT PROGRAM ON ANY OF THE FOLLOWING MEDIA?


Location Analysis II:

A further analysis shows that 21% of current students from Pennsylvania have seen an advertisement on a newspaper or magazine. Among those students from New York, 31% have seen an advertisement on a newspaper or magazine. 60% of students from New Jersey have seen advertisement, and 100% of students from Massachusetts have seen an advertisement on a newspaper or magazine. These results indicate that many students from northeast (NY, PA, MA, NJ) have seen advertisement for MU's program on a newspaper or magazine.

Advertisement modes were looked at to see which mode could reach the greatest number of prospective students. Figure 3 shows the advertisement mode that has the greatest impact on the current SL&IT students was through newspapers or magazines, with 34% of the respondents choosing that mode. Television was the second most effective advertising mode with 28% of respondents choosing it. Internet was also an effective mode for advertisement, with 23% of respondents choosing it. The other forms of advertisement channels, which include radio, billboards, and pamphlets, seem ineffective to the current LS&IT students.
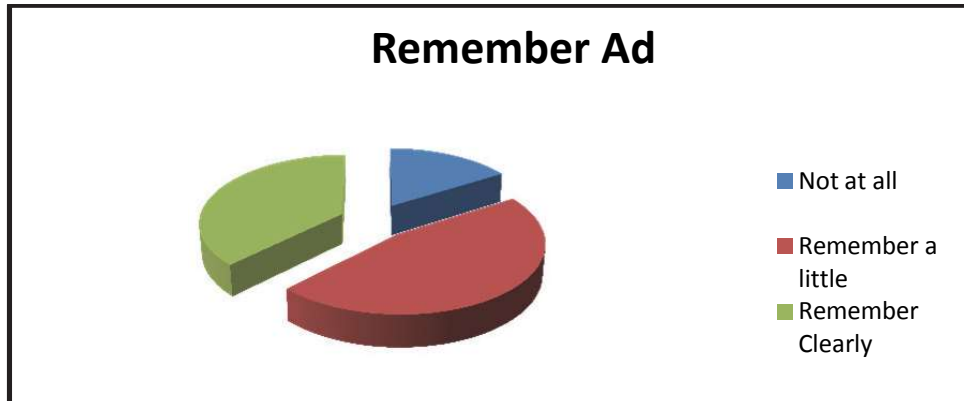
FIGURE 3
WHICH ADVERTISING MODE HAS THE MOST IMPACT ON YOU?
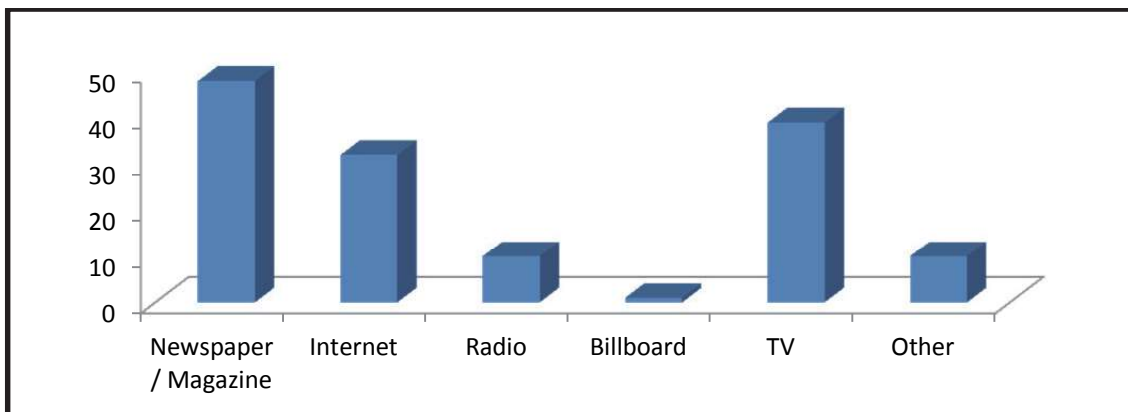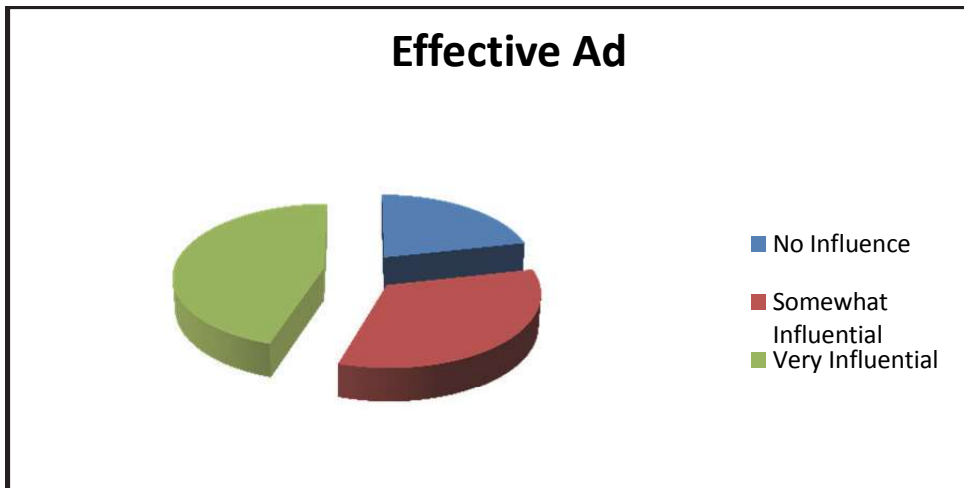
B. Effectiveness of the Advertising:

   In order to analyze those students who have seen an advertisement, only the students who have seen an advertisement were chosen (taken out 84 students who did not see any advertisement). As shown in Figure 4, of the respondents who have seen some types of advertisement, 46% of them stated that they remembered the advertisement a little. 38% of the respondents who have seen an advertisement stated that they remembered it clearly. While only 16% of the students did not remember the advertisement at all.

FIGURE 4
HOW WELL DO YOU REMEMBER THE ADVERTISEMENT SEEN?

Remember Ad

- Not at all
- Remember a little
- Remember Clearly

   As shown in Figure 5, among those students who have seen an advertisement, 45% found it to be very influential at getting them to look further into the program. 33% of respondents found the advertisement to be somewhat influential. 22% of respondents found that the advertisement had no influence on them looking into the MU master's program.

FIGURE 5
HOW EFFECTIVE WAS THE ADVERTISEMENT AT GETTING YOU TO LOOK FURTHER INTO THE PROGRAM?

Effective Ad

- No Influence
- Somewhat Influential
- Very Influential

   A crosstab analysis of the effectiveness of each specific advertisement mode on getting the current students to look further into the SL&IT program was conducted. Two advertisement modes that had an impact on the current student respondents was through newspaper or magazine, and the internet. The data

shows that 46% of those respondents who have seen a newspaper or magazine advertisement found it to be very influential, while 39% found the advertisement somewhat influential. 15% of respondents said the newspaper or magazine advertisement had no influence on them looking into the MU program.

For internet advertisement, 23% of respondents found the internet advertisement to be very influential on them deciding to look further into the program. 62% of respondents found it to be somewhat influential on their decision, and 15% found the internet advertisement to have no impact on their decision.

C. The SL&IT Website:

Current students were asked about the type of search engines they used to find out information about the SL&IT program at MU. As shown in Figure 6, 47% of respondents went through Google. Yahoo was used by 11% of the students, while MSN was only used by 6% of the students to find out more information about the program. 27% of the current master program students did not go through a search engine to find out information about the program.

FIGURE 6
WHICH SEARCH ENGINE DID YOU GO THROUGH TO FIND THE SL&IT PROGRAM?
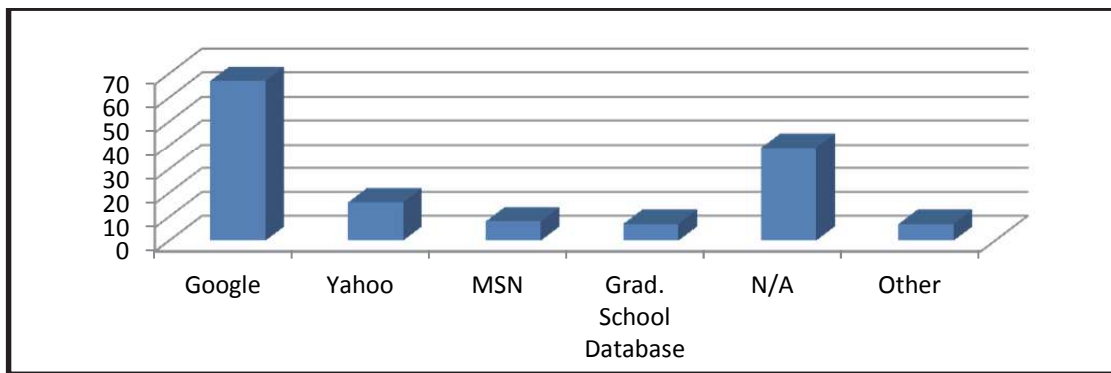
As shown in Figure 7, among those students who went through Google to find information about MU's SL&IT online program, only 8% of them found it somewhat difficult to find information using Google. 61% of the students found the website easy to find through Google, while 31% of the students found it very easy to find.

Information was gathered on the ease of getting to MU's SL&IT website through MU's homepage. Figure 8 shows that less than 1% found it to be very difficult and 11% thought the website was difficult to find. 16% of the students were neutral about the ease of finding the SL& IT website. 44% of students thought it was easy to find the website, while 26% of students found it to be very easy to find.

As shown in Figure 9, when asked about the ease of finding information about "how to apply for the program on the SL&IT website", less than 1 % found it to be very difficult to find information. 3% of the students found it difficult, while 15% were completely neutral about the ease of finding information. 43% of the students thought it was easy to find information on the website on how to apply, and 35% considered it to be very easy.

FIGURE 7
IF YOU FOUND THE SL&IT WEBSITE THROUGH GOOGLE, HOW EASY WAS IT TO FIND THE WEBSITE ON GOOGLE?

Easy to Use Google

- Somewhat Difficult
- Easy
- Very Easy

FIGURE 8
HOW EASY IS IT TO FIND THE SL&IT PROGRAM THROUGH THE MU HOMEPAGE WEBSITE?

Locating SL&IT Website

- Very Difficult
- Difficult
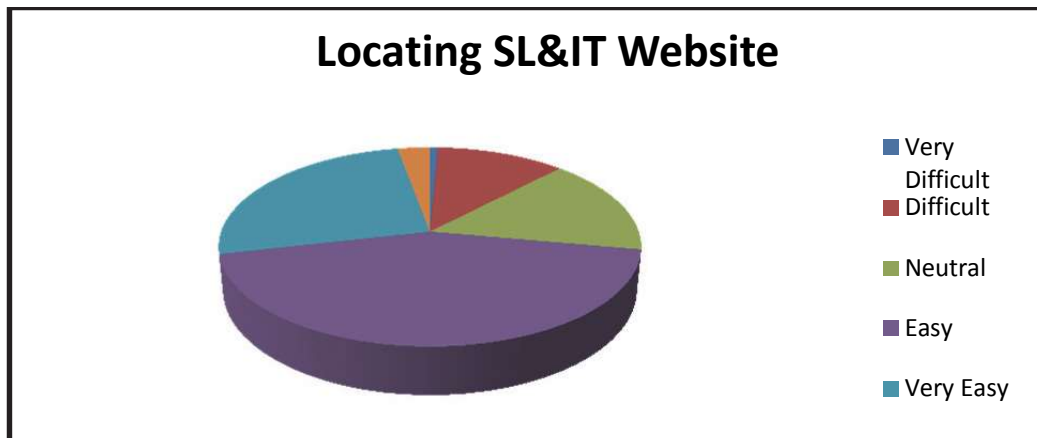- Neutral
- Easy
- Very Easy

FIGURE 9
**HOW EASY WERE YOU ABLE TO LOCATE INFORMATION ON THE SL&IT WEBPAGE
ON HOW TO APPLY FOR THE PROGRAM?**

Locating Information

- Very Difficult
- Difficult
- Neutral
- Easy
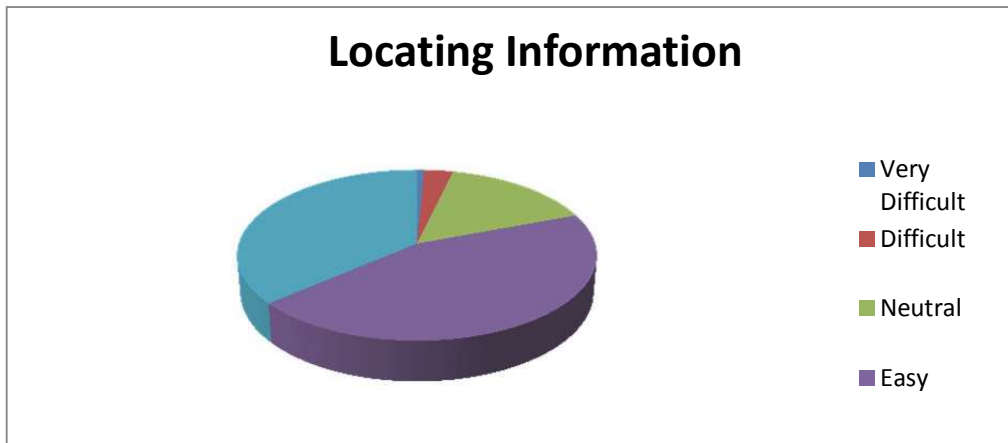
The video played on the SL&IT website is filled with information that could be useful to current and prospective students. Figure 10 shows 75% of current student respondents have never seen the video, while only 23% of them have played the video.

FIGURE 10
IF YOU HAVE EVER BEEN ON THE SL&IT HOMEPAGE, DID YOU PLAY THE VIDEO?

Did You Play the Video?
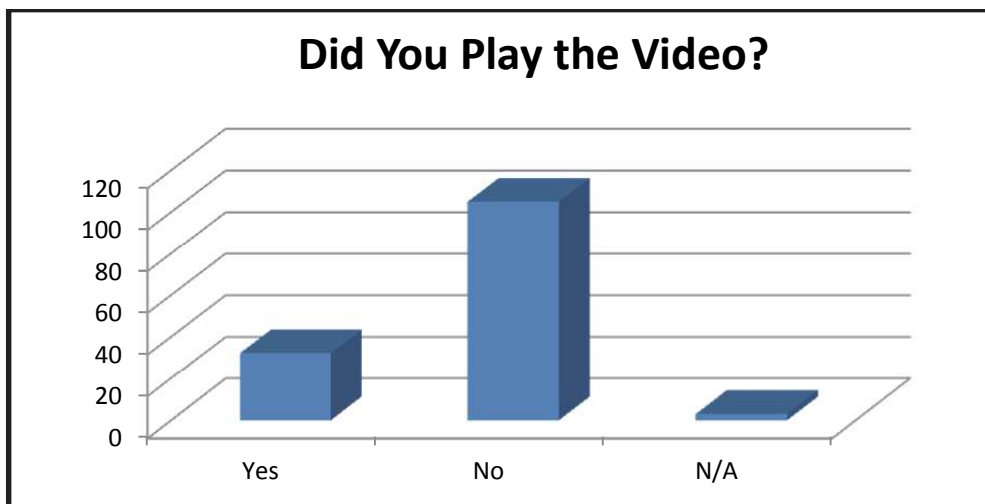
As shown in Figure 11, of the students who have seen the video on the SL&IT website, 86% of them said they enjoyed watching the video, while only 14% of them did not like the video.

FIGURE 11
DID YOU LIKE THE VIDEO ON THE SL&IT HOMEPAGE?
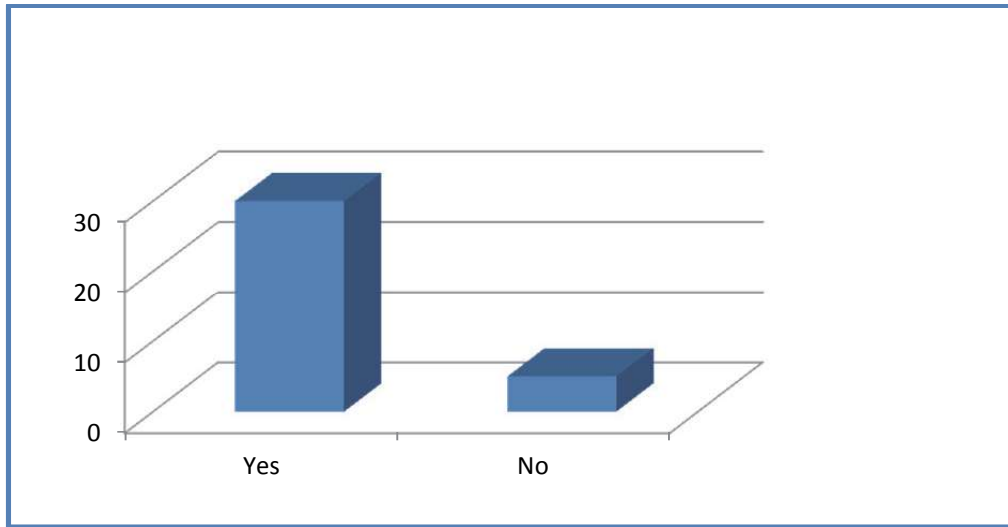
As shown in Figure 12, of those respondents who have seen the video on the SL&IT website, less than 1% found the video to be ineffective at explaining the SL&IT program. 35% of the students who have seen the video found it to be somewhat effective, while 39% of students found it was effective. 23% of the students who watched the video thought it was very effective at explaining the program.

FIGURE 12
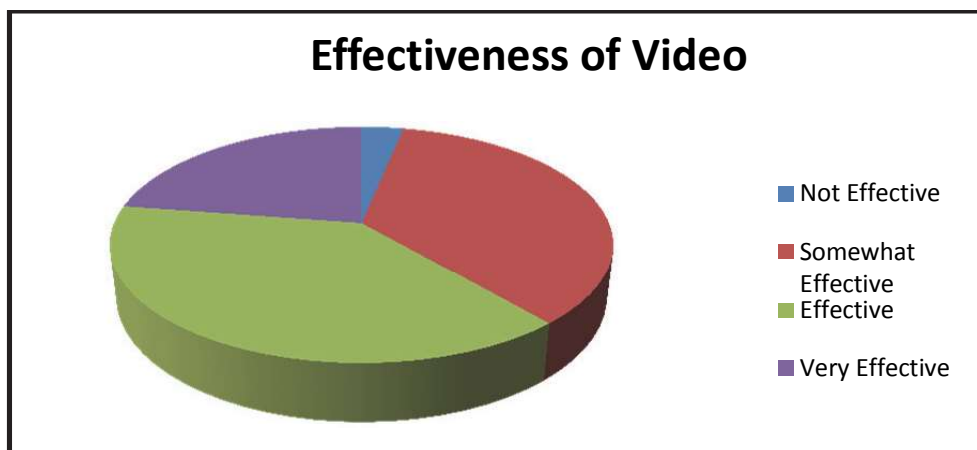**HOW EFFECTIVE WAS THE VIDEO AT EXPLAINING THE SL&IT PROGRAM?**


Figure 13 shows that when asked about the effectiveness of the SL&IT website at explaining the program, 16% of students thought it was somewhat effective. 48% felt that the website was effective, while 27% of students said it was very effective at explaining the program.

Effectiveness of SL&IT Website

Legend: Not Effective, Somewhat Effective, Effective, Very Effective
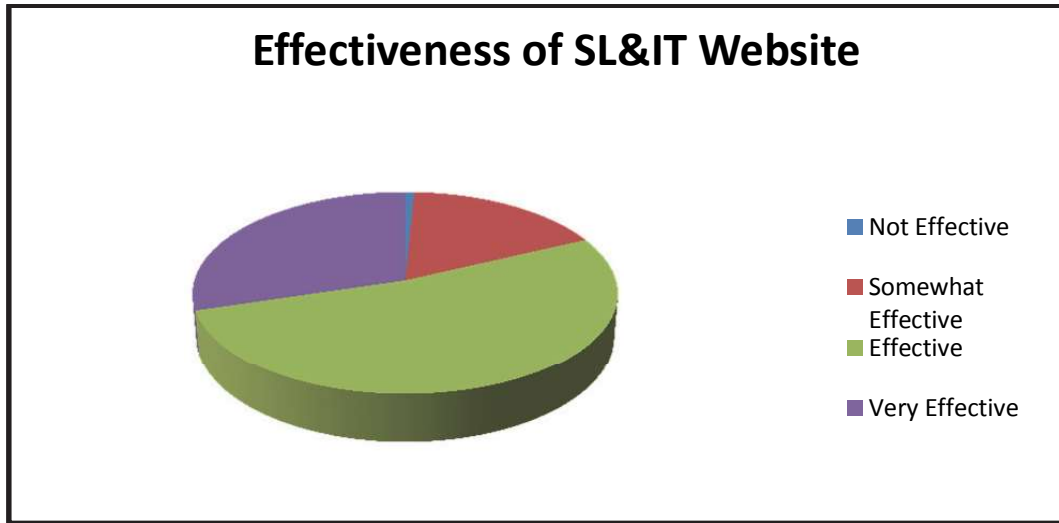
The "Ask Us" button on the SL&IT website is used for students to get in contact with the advisers of the program. Figure 14 shows 36% of the students have not used, or did not know about the "Ask Us" button. Less than 1% of the students thought the button was difficult to find, while 9% felt neutral about finding it. 33% of students felt it was easy to find the "Ask Us" button, while 22% thought it was very easy to find the button.

Figure 15 shows that, of the students who have used a contact through the SL&IT website, 10% thought the information given through the contact was only somewhat effective. 42% thought it was effective information, while 48% found the information received was very effective.

FIGURE 14
IF YOU USED A CONTACT THROUGH THE SL&IT WEBSITE TO FIND OUT MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROGRAM, HOW EASY WAS IT TO FIND THE CONTACT INFORMATION OR THE ASK US BUTTON?
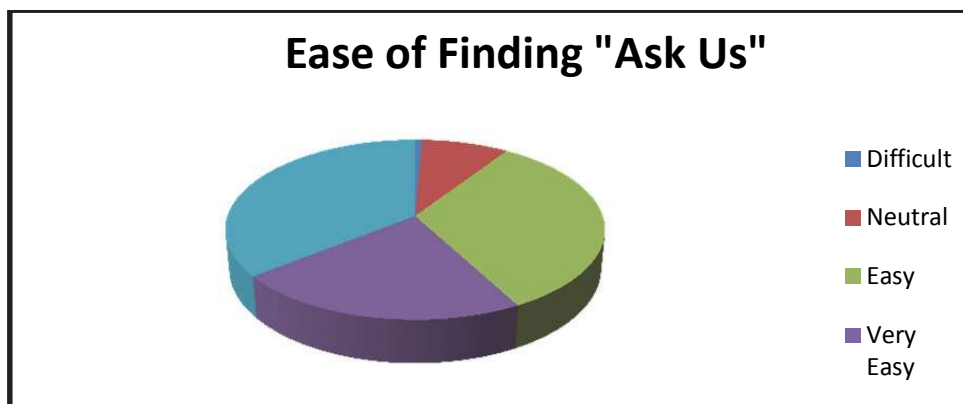

Ease of Finding "Ask Us"

Legend: Difficult, Neutral, Easy, Very Easy

FIGURE 15
IF YOU USED A CONTACT THROUGH THE LIBRARY SCIENCE WEBSITE TO FIND OUT MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROGRAM, HOW EFFECTIVE WAS THE RESPONSE?

A crosstab between the ease of finding contact information and the effectiveness of the information received from the contact was conducted. The data shows that 48% of the students who through the "Ask Us" button was very easy to find also felt the information received was very effective. 32% of students who thought the button was very easy to find did not use it at all. 42% of the students who only felt neutral about the ease of finding the "Ask Us" button thought the information received were somewhat effective. 17% of these students felt information received was very effective.

CONCLUSIONS

In 2011, 65% of institutions reported that DL was critical to their long-term strategic plans (Allen and Seaman, 2011). Online Education is no longer simply a trend (Kentnor, 2015), but how to promote college online program is still an insufficiently explored area. Through survey method of a sample of 138 existing students, this study reveals how the DL students initially found the program, and determined the most effective way to reach and attract potential students to DL program. Our research analyze the appropriate media mode for DL program promotion, the effectiveness of advertisement, and program website.

Media Mode

Respondents who live in the surrounding areas of MU, which include New York and Pennsylvania, initially found out about the SL& IT program through a close source of theirs. These results suggest that prospective students from NY and PA can be brought in by increasing word of mouth. In the northeast area (NY, PA, NJ, MA) most current students have seen an advertisement for the SL&IT master program through a newspaper or magazine. Furthermore, professional magazines such as National Education Association (NEA) have been a popular source for bringing in prospective students. Many of the respondents who chose "newspaper or magazine" for advertisement mode went on to say that the NEA magazine is the only place they have seen an advertisement. The NEA magazine has an average of 1 million readers a year. MU puts an advertisement in for the SL&IT program 4 times a year. The questionnaire shows that this advertisement has been effective at reaching prospective students. Interestingly, 60% of the respondents have never seen an advertisement through newspaper / magazine, internet, radio, TV or on a billboard.

Effectiveness of Advertisement

Out of the respondents who have seen an advertisement for the SL&IT program, 16% of them did not remember the advertisement at all. The majority of the students did remember the advertisement seen. 45% of the respondents reported that the advertisement seen was very influential at getting them to look further into the program. Only 22% found the advertisement to have no influence on the students. These numbers suggest that not many students see an advertisement, but for the majority of those who have seen an ad find it effective at getting them to look into the SL&IT program.

The two media modes that had the greatest impact on the students were newspaper or magazine articles and through the internet. Most of the students who saw an ad on a newspaper or magazine are from the Northeast area of the country. The students who have seen an ad on a newspaper or magazine said they did remember the ad. The data shows that a majority of the students who have seen an ad on a newspaper or magazine had some sort of influence on them looking into the SL&IT program. 92% students who saw an ad on an internet said that they remembered the advertisement. Most students who saw an ad online were from across the country. The majority of the students who have seen an ad on the internet reported that it had some sort of influence on them looking into the program.

SL& IT Program Website

The SL&IT website is useful to prospective students because it is filled with intricate details that may help to sell the program. The section on the questionnaire was designed to see how easy the SL&IT website is to find from a search engine, and how effective the website is on giving information about the program. Half of the respondents have found the SL&IT website through Google. Out of these students who went through Google, the majority found the website easy to find. The majority of respondents also felt that the SL&IT website was easy to find through M University homepage website.

Once on the SL&IT website, most respondents thought it was easy to locate information on the website. There is a video which helps to explain the program on the website. The data shows that 75% of respondents have never watched the video. However, the majority of the respondents who have seen the video thought it was effective at explaining the SL&IT master program. Contact information is also an important aspect of the SL&IT website. The data shows that most of the current student respondents have not used a contact on the website.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Advertising the SL&IT master program should have a three-fold focus. There should be one focus on the "word-of mouth" advertising. The data shows that the majority of current students from the surrounding New York and Pennsylvania areas found out about the program through a friend or colleague. The SL&IT program should emphasize the importance of promoting through current students. An incentive could be set up for these students to increase the awareness of the program.

Another focus should pertain to the NEA magazine and other newspapers that are circulated throughout the area and/or country. The newspaper / magazine media mode had the most impact on current students from the Northeast (NY, PA, NJ, MA). It was also found that this mode had the most influence on getting students to look further into the program. This media mode can be one of the cost effective ways to advertise and promote the program. If newspaper advertisement mode had been increased, it would have the potential to reach a larger portion of prospective students in the Northeast part of the country, as well as throughout the country.

The third focus of advertising should go towards increasing the amount of Internet advertisements. The data shows that current students from across the nation were most influenced by ads found on the Internet. As the global community grows more reliant on the Internet, this mode of advertisement can serve to be more and more effective at reaching students. By increasing the amount of Internet ads, more prospective students from across the country can be reached.

LIMITATIONS

There are a few limitations of this study. Due to the budget and time constraints this study was only preliminary. With more time and resources this study could be expanded to include more respondents so that results of the sample would have a higher correlated with the population. The sample was selected through a convenience sampling. The questionnaire could also be refined. For example, questions should focus more on certain aspects the SL&IT program could have done better to inform the public of the online program and possibly better ways to inform prospective students.

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