

QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH RETURNS

Why did it Leave?

Michael Simonson

Co-editor

... the experiment: as the only means for settling disputes regarding educational practice, as the only way of verifying education improvements, and as the only way of establishing a cumulative tradition in which improvements can be introduced without the danger of a faddish discard of old wisdom in favor of inferior novelties.

—Cambell and Stanley (1963, p. 2)

Apparently, Campbell and Stanley's position has regained favor at the U.S. Department of Education. A recent report in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Glenn, 2005) discusses the Department's efforts to foster what is described as "scientifically based research" in education. According to the *Chronicle*, the "new policy will permit—but not require—all of the department's units to give preference to grant applicants who promise to use randomized controlled trials or similar quasi-experimental methods" (p. A16).

The column's author, David Glenn, goes on to report that the department hopes to build a body of experimental data so that, as Michael Petrilli, an associate assistant deputy secretary in the department, says: "three years from now, we can look across our portfolio and know which programs are actually worth replicating and disseminating" (p. A16).

This little-publicized yet extremely important policy change is sure to fuel the debate about the quality of educational research,

including the growing body of research about distance education. The department's stress on the importance of quantitative research designs, especially randomized trials, is a victory of sorts for educational traditionalists and, for many, is long overdue. The claim that educational research is of poor quality is not new, and some assert that the vast quantity of research studies published, especially doctoral dissertations, have had little if any impact on the practice of education.

Obviously, all in education and training should dust off their copies of Campbell and Stanley's classic monograph. Actually, it should never have left the corner of our desks. Just as important is for all who consider themselves to be scholars and researchers to re-examine the design requirements of rigorous and effective research. Any who have attempted educational research realize that it is difficult, intensive, and time-consuming, but ultimately rewarding.

The *Quarterly Review of Distance Education* is committed to publishing research using many methodologies and approaches, including randomized experimental trials. It is most important that studies have significant research questions, theory-based approaches, rigorous methodologies, standardized measures, and generalizable results. We in distance education must pay special attention to Campbell and Stanley's admonition that educators must ensure that "improvements can be introduced

without the danger of a faddish discard of old wisdom in favor of inferior novelties."

REFERENCES

- Campbell, D., & Stanley, J. (1963). *Experimental and quasi-experimental designs for research*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Glenn, D. (2005, March 11). New federal policy favors randomized trials in education research. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, A16.