



Shaping the online experience: How administrators can influence student and instructor perceptions through policy and practice

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ABSTRACT

To maximize the quality of the online experience and actualize the potential of alternative learning environments at their institutions, administrators must explore the perceived experiences of the members of their online learning communities. The overall purpose of the study was to identify factors that would enhance student and instructor experiences in online environments. The focus of the survey was to obtain information from students about their perceptions of the online and blended courses that they participated in and insights from instructors about online and blended courses that they taught. The data collected in this survey reveal optimal areas where a university administration can partner closely with instructors to enhance the student experience in online learning environments and afford online instructors with adequate support and assistance.

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1. Introduction

Online courses have become increasingly prevalent in higher education; over 89% of public colleges and universities currently offer courses online, and nearly half of all students who have graduated in the last ten years have enrolled in at least one online course (Parker, Lenhart, & Moore, 2011). While growing numbers of nontraditional students in higher education contribute significantly to that increase (Allen & Seaman, 2010a), traditional students now share many of the characteristics previously attributed to nontraditional students such as having regular employment, spouses, dependents, or parental care responsibilities, and are also enrolling in online courses in greater numbers (Allen & Seaman, 2010b; Choy, 2002). In an effort to attract, retain, and graduate more students, higher education leaders at many colleges and universities now consider online learning as essential to their overall strategy (Allen & Seaman, 2010b; McCarthy & Samors, 2009) and are examining the importance and implications of student and instructor perceptions of their experiences in online environments.

1.1. Background

1.1.1. Online course design and student engagement

Even as online learning becomes an integral element of student persistence on public college and university campuses, online course design and facilitation are still emerging concepts. Online course development models and pedagogical frameworks for online learning have yet to become widely accepted (Hartman, Dziuban, & Moskal, 2007; Xu & Morris, 2007). Research shows that similar to traditional learning environments, student engagement in online courses is still a strong predictor of student success and achievement of learning outcomes (Mandernach, 2009). A study by Chen, Lambert, and Guidry (2010) pointed to a positive relationship between student engagement and learning when using online technologies. Kenny, Dumont, and Kenny (2005) revealed five components relevant to student engagement in higher education: academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student–faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and a supportive learning environment. A challenge for online instructors is to re-interpret student engagement for the online learning environment. For both the student and the instructor, the online environment differs from the traditional classroom in terms of time spent, curriculum, and pedagogy (Maki & Maki, 2007; USDOE, 2009). The student-centered online course becomes characterized by a shift in

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emphasis with active learning and engagement as the focus and the instructor as the facilitator (Harasim, 2011; Kyei-Blankson, 2009; Moore & Kearsley, 2005).

Other factors identified as essential for effective online instruction include clear course design, accessibility and presence of the instructor, timely feedback by the instructor, and a sense of community within the online course (Zen, 2008). Similarly, Teemant, Smith, Pinnegar, and Egan (2005) concluded that instruction for student-centered online courses should: be clear and understandable; respond to the way in which students learn and communicate; acknowledge student interests and motivations; honor the social nature of learning; engage students; and provide students with meaningful and timely feedback. McCombs and Vakili (2005) comparably asserted that the key components of student-centered online instruction involve: providing means for learners to build interpersonal connections and relationships; finding strategies that acknowledge differing learner needs, abilities, and interests; affording personal control and choice to learners; and assessing and addressing the technology self-efficacy of individual learners. Further review of the literature reveals that an often common and defining characteristic of effective online instruction is the provision of opportunities for students to interact with each other and the instructor throughout the course (Dixon, 2010; Gayton & McEwen, 2007; Oblinger & Hawkins, 2006; Zen, 2008; Zhao, Let, Yan, Lai, & Tan, 2005). Researchers and practitioners assert that interaction is a result of strong instructor presence which is established through such activities as asking questions, providing consistent and substantive feedback, addressing students by name, using inclusive personal pronouns (such as “our,” or “we”), moderating discussions, and restarting stalled discussions (Dixon, 2010; Hughes, 2007; Kehrwald, 2008).

The consensus among researchers on the significance of these traits has an implication for students, faculty, and administrators. Over a third of full-time faculty have taught online (Seaman, 2009), and in addition to their responsibilities as active online course facilitators, most online instructors must simultaneously perform the roles of instructional designer, subject matter expert, media developer, and occasionally programmer for the course (Xu & Morris, 2007). In order to provide an effective online experience for students, instructors and administrators must partner to provide appropriate online pedagogical practices, technologies, and support.

1.1.2. Student perceptions and satisfaction in online learning environments

A succession of comparison studies between online and traditional courses resulted in the finding that there were no significant differences in student outcomes for the two learning environments (Aragon & Johnson, 2008; Block, Udermann, Felix, Reineke, & Murray, 2008). Review of academic literature reveals that most of the early comparison research in this area of study did not include the perceptions of students about their experiences in the online courses (Dobbs, Waid, & del Carmen, 2009; Zhao et al., 2005). Zhao et al. (2005) conducted a meta-analytical study of research on online learning that illustrated how, when student perceptions about the course were measured, online learning showed a significantly better outcome than traditional learning. A study by Swan (2001) revealed that clarity of a course design, interaction with the instructor and active discourse among students “significantly influenced students’ satisfaction and perceived learning” (p. 306).

Student satisfaction is one of the most commonly used measures of effective teaching (Pucel & Stertz, 2005) and a primary indicator of quality in online learning (Moore & Kearsley, 2005). Student satisfaction is the student’s subjective perception of how well a specific learning environment supported the student’s academic success (Lo, 2010). Learners perceive satisfaction differently and base perceptions of their satisfaction on a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic measures (Artino, 2008). In an effort to ensure academic success and increase student satisfaction, student perceptions of online learning experiences

merit further examination; such data can provide insight about the preferred learning environment, best practices in instructor interaction, and opportunities for improvements in course design and curricula (Lo, 2010; Winberg & Hedman, 2008). Student perceptions of their online experiences influence their reality and affect the likelihood that they will seek and be successful in online courses in the future (Artino, 2008; Wang, 2003).

1.1.3. Instructor perception and satisfaction of online learning environments

The concept of instructor satisfaction in an online environment differs from that of student satisfaction. According to the Sloan Consortium (2006), instructor satisfaction is defined as the perception that teaching online is personally rewarding, institutionally supported, and professionally recognized.

Faculty satisfaction has been positively associated with student motivation and performance (Yen & Abdous, 2011), and is considered an indicator of quality online programs (ASHE-ERIC, 2002). While research conducted by Wasilik and Bolliger (2009) demonstrates that satisfaction can vary considerably from instructor to instructor, instructor satisfaction is named as one of the five pillars of online education (Sloan Consortium, 2002) and should be regarded by the administration when assessing online courses (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009).

A study by Seok, DaCosta, Kinsell, and Tung (2010) found that overall, students and instructors who participated in online courses had positive perceptions of the effectiveness of online courses. Seok et al. (2010) also identified that instructors had significantly higher perceptions of the effectiveness of online courses than did students, and that the amount of teaching experience and technology skills an instructor possessed positively correlated to the instructor’s perception of the effectiveness of his or her online courses. Further research revealed that the affordance of flexibility that teaching online provides and the added opportunities for research and interdisciplinary collaboration that it offers are additional reasons instructors who teach online favor the environment (Meyer, 2012).

Instructor satisfaction measures higher when instructors believe that they can positively influence student outcomes (Sloan Consortium, 2006). An often-cited reason instructors teach online is the educational access it affords to a wider student population (Kyei-Blankson, 2009). Instructors also reported a heightened awareness of the level of student engagement and academic progress when teaching online (Wingard, 2004). Similarly, Guidera’s (2004) investigation of instructor perceptions of the effectiveness of online instruction according to the Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education (Chickering & Gamson, 1987) indicated that online instruction rated more effective in the areas of promoting prompt feedback, time on task, respect for diverse learning styles, and communicating high expectations. Online instruction was perceived less effective, however, for promoting student–faculty interaction and cooperation among students. These results support the findings by Hogan and McKnight (2007), in which instructors disclosed high levels of depersonalization in the online environment associated with an absence of face-to-face contact with students.

Though most instructors value interaction with students in the online environment (Wasilik & Bolliger, 2009), online instructors also report that online course preparation and facilitation require more time and effort than face-to-face instruction (Green, Alejandro, & Brown, 2009; Seaman, 2009). This actual or perceived increase in workload, if left unacknowledged and unrewarded by the administration, could lead to increased instructor dissatisfaction (Hiltz, Kim, & Shea, 2007). Administrative issues related to online instruction, including recognition as promotion and tenure activity, compensation or release time, and intellectual property must be adequately addressed (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2009; Sloan Consortium, 2006). Likewise, ample consideration must be given to providing instructors with access to reliable and current technologies and infrastructure,

as well as assistance with instructional design and course development (Hartman et al., 2007; Marek, 2009).

While online courses have become an important option for universities seeking to increase student enrollment, persistence, and global presence (Allen & Seaman, 2010b), higher rates of non-completion of online courses remain a concern (DiRamio & Wolverton, 2006; Hoyer, 2006; Stanford-Bowers, 2008). Reliable and consistent, support and connection with the institution while participating in an online course are strong predictors of student success (Park & Choi, 2009). Relatedly, instructors include technical support and material development assistance as significant variables when determining their interest in teaching online (Marek, 2009). As university administrators consider plans and policies regarding online learning at their institutions, knowing the best approaches for providing effective online learning spaces as perceived by both students and online instructors is invaluable. For students, perceptions of their experiences in online learning environments greatly contribute to their willingness to consider online courses as a viable option as they pursue their degrees (Wang, 2003). For instructors, perceptions of their experiences as online educators affect their continued interest in teaching online and inform their pedagogical approaches (Myers, Bennett, Brown, & Henderson, 2004). Though many campus administrators already recognize online learning as a means of scaling the cost of serving students while preparing them to compete in a global society (Parker et al., 2011), administrators must also explore the perceived experiences of the varied members of their online learning environments in attempts to maximize the quality of the experience and actualize the potential of online learning at the institution.

2. Method

The overall purpose of the study was to identify factors that would enhance student and instructor experiences in online and blended courses offered by the university. Administrators at the university articulated concerted interest in addressing student enrollment, persistence, and graduation through a variety of initiatives, including online and blended learning opportunities. University leadership assembled an online learning research committee composed of faculty, staff, and a student government representative. The committee was tasked with providing recommendations for enhancing student and faculty experiences in online and blended courses at the university and offering considerations for factors that would assist in determining a recommendation for online course sizes for the university. The focus of the research was to obtain information from students about their perceptions of online and blended courses that they participated in at the university and perceptions from instructors about online and blended courses that they taught at the university. The research team designed and developed separate yet parallel electronic surveys for students and instructors in order to collect the data and organize the survey responses. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages were performed to examine student and instructor preferences and rankings regarding elements of online course participation. Chi-square analyses were used to test for differences in perceptions among students and faculty.

2.1. Instrument

The student and instructor surveys were similar in format. The student survey consisted of six sections. Section 1 contained questions that described the demographic profiles of the students. Section 2 concerned the importance of factors that affect the student's decision to enroll in an online or blended course. Section 3 assessed the importance of the presence of various elements in an online learning environment. Section 4 consisted of a list of questions on the preferred types of interactions in online learning environments. Section 5 requested the student's opinion of the most effective course size for an online course. Section 6, the final section of the survey, was an open-ended question

that encouraged students to provide comment and feedback about the topic of online learning environments.

The instructor survey also consisted of six sections. Section 1 contained questions that described the demographic profiles of the instructors. Section 2 regarded factors that affected their decision to teach online. Section 3 assessed the importance of various resources when developing an online or blended course. Section 4 consisted of a list of questions on the preferred types of interactions in online learning environments. Section 5 concerned the instructor's opinion of the most effective course size for an online course. The final section of the instructor survey, Section 6, was an open-ended question that encouraged instructors to provide comments and feedback about the topic of online learning environments.

The surveys were recreated electronically using an online survey application through a private, password protected account. The surveys were field-tested using instructors, students, and university staff members to help gauge ease of use and clarity of questions. Based on the feedback from the test group, final revisions were made and the surveys were broadly distributed.

2.2. Participants

The participants for this study were students from a large public university who participated in online or blended learning at the university and instructors who taught online or blended courses at the same institution. An email regarding the student survey was sent to all students whose enrollment records showed that they had participated in what the university deemed as an online or blended course within the last two years. A total of 1139 students completed the survey, representing approximately 11% of the target population. The typical student was a non-transfer student (60%) who had been at the university for either two or three years (29% and 25%, respectively), was comfortable (43%) or very comfortable (52%) with using technology, and had taken between one and three online or blended courses (28% one course, 29% two courses, 21% three courses) while a student at the university.

An email was also sent to all instructors who had taught an online or blended course at the university within the last two years. Over 30% of the target population of 161, or a total of 49 instructors responded. Most instructor respondents were tenured or on tenure-track (38% full professor, 23% associate professor, 14% assistant professor, 25% lecturer), who were comfortable (35%) or very comfortable (61%) with using technology, taught one, two, or three *different* online courses (35%, 27%, 18% respectively), and had taught online 10 or more times (45%).

3. Results

This section is divided into four subsections: survey items that concerned student preferences only; survey items unique to the instructor survey; identical questions that were asked of instructor and students allowing for a direct comparison of perceptions; and qualitative feedback from students about their online course experiences. Items unique to the student survey are presented in Tables 1 and 2; items exclusive to the instructor survey are presented in Tables 3 and 4. The identical questions that were asked on both surveys are presented in Tables 5 and 6, and Fig. 1.

3.1. Student preferences

When asked about the importance of various factors in making a decision to take an online or blended course, student respondents indicated the relative importance of the factor using a Likert scale from 1 = *not important* to 4 = *very important*. Students reported that knowing about any required face-to-face meeting times for an online course prior to enrollment is the most significant factor in deciding to enroll in an online course (92% responded "important" or "very

Table 1

Student perceptions of factors that affect the decision to enroll in an online or blended course.

Factor	% I + % VI	n
Knowing the required meeting times for the course prior to enrollment	92%	1007
Complexity of the content that will be taught in the course	81%	895
Your level of interest in the topic	79%	865
Recommendation from other students who have taken the course	71%	776
If the course is within your major	65%	711
If the course is a general education course	59%	646
Having taken a previous course from that instructor	53%	584

Notes. N = 1100. The above items were responded to using the following as scale: 1 = not important, 2 = slightly important, 3 = important, 4 = very important.

important” for the factor). Student responses indicated that the complexity of the content that would be covered in the online course affected their decision to enroll in an online course (81% of the students responded “important” or “very important” to this factor). The student responses also revealed that their level of interest in the topic of the online course impacted their decision to enroll in the course (79% of the students responded “important” or “very important” to this factor). Receiving a recommendation from others who have taken the online course rated lower as a deciding factor (71% of the students responded “important” or “very important” to this factor). Less important than the previous factors that might be considered when deciding to enroll in an online course, was whether the online course was within their major, whether the course was a designated general education course, and having taken a previous course from the instructor teaching the online course (65%, 59%, and 53%, respectively responded “important” or “very important” to this factor).

Students were presented with various elements of an online course and were asked to rate the relative importance of the presence of each element within the online course using a Likert scale from 1 = not important to 4 = very important. Students ranked having a manageable amount of required assignments for the course as most important (97% responded “important” or “very important” for this element). An interesting presentation of the course content was followed closely by having a self-paced format within the online course (89% and 88%, respectively responded “important” or “very important” for these elements). Having a variety of delivery methods for the content and the availability of technical support (such as helpdesk or teaching assistant support) were still rated by students as important or very important, but were in the bottom positions at 84% and 81%, respectively.

3.2. Instructor perceptions

Instructors were presented with a variety of factors that had a possible influence on their decision to teach online. Instructors were asked to rate whether each factor would encourage or discourage their decision to teach online using a Likert scale from 1 = strongly discourages to 5 = strongly encourages. The highest ranking factors included the opportunity to experience a variety of teaching delivery modes or pedagogies (85% of

Table 2

Student perceptions of the importance of elements within an online learning environment.

Element	% I + % VI	n
A manageable amount of required assignments for the course	97%	1081
Having an interesting presentation of the content	89%	997
Having a self-paced format	88%	987
A variety of delivery methods for the content	84%	935
Availability of technical support (such as helpdesk or TA)	81%	911

Notes. N = 1118. The above items were responded to using the following as scale: 1 = not important, 2 = slightly important, 3 = important, 4 = very important.

Table 3

Instructor perceptions of factors that encourage or discourage the decision to teach online.

Factor	% E + % SE	n
Experiencing a variety of teaching delivery modes or pedagogies	85%	40
Personal interest in the course topic	81%	38
Opportunities to make ties to research or scholarship using the course	64%	30
If the course is a bottleneck in the path to student graduation	57%	27
Being personally asked by your dean or chair to teach an online course	57%	27
If the course is a core course within your college	55%	26
If the course is a general education course	53%	25
If the course is an elective within your college	47%	22
Your college's interest in optimizing FTE	47%	22
Reserving physical space for the face-to-face hours e.g., orientation, final	38%	18
Amount of student monitoring, facilitating, and tracking required	38%	18

Notes. N = 47. The above items were responded to using the following as scale: 1 = strongly discourages, 2 = discourages, 3 = encourages, 4 = strongly encourages.

the instructors responded “encourages” or “strongly encourages”), and having personal interest in the course topic (81% of the instructors responded “encourages” or “strongly encourages” for this factor). Instructors regarded opportunities to make ties to research or scholarship using the online or blended course as favorable (64% of the instructors responded “encourages” or “strongly encourages”). Fifty-seven percent of instructors reported being encouraged or strongly encouraged to teach an online course that is a “bottleneck” in the path to student graduation. Similarly, when personally asked by their dean or department chair to teach an online or blended course, 57% of the instructors said they were encouraged or strongly encouraged to teach the course. With regard to the topic of the online or blended course, instructors stated interest in teaching a core course within the college (55% of the instructors responded “encourages” or “strongly encourages” for this factor) over a general education course for the campus (53% responded “encourages” or “strongly encourages”) or an elective within the college (47% of the instructors responded “encourages” or “strongly encourages” for this factor). When the purpose of the course was to optimize full time equivalent students (FTEs), 47% of the instructors said they were encouraged or strongly encouraged to teach the online course. In equal percentages, instructors were decidedly discouraged by the amount of monitoring, facilitating, and tracking required while teaching an online or blended course and having to reserve physical space for the face-to-face hours (38% of instructors responded “encourages” or “strongly encourages” for each factor).

When instructors were asked about the importance of various resources as they developed an online or blended course, they indicated the relative importance of the resource using a Likert scale from 1 = not important to 4 = very important. Instructors top-ranked the availability of technical support, including help with providing students with accessible materials, with 86% of the respondents indicating that resource

Table 4

Instructor perceptions of the importance of resources when developing an online or blended course.

Resources	I % + VI %	n
Technical support including help with accessible materials	86%	38
Instructional design support	75%	33
Electronic or web-based material development support	73%	32
Reassigned time	73%	32
Electronic or web-based materials from the publisher	61%	27
Course development stipend	57%	25
Copyright and licensing support	59%	26
Teaching assistance	52%	23
Library support	48%	21

Notes. N = 44. The above items were responded to using the following as scale: 1 = not important, 2 = slightly important, 3 = important, 4 = very important.

Table 5
Direct comparison of student and instructor perceptions of the importance of online interactions.

Interactions	Students		Instructors		p-Value
	I % + VI %	n	I % + VI %	n	
Instructor–student interaction	79%	888	83%	39	.478
Classmate interaction	47%	530	62%	29	.106
Sense of community	46%	517	68%	32	.000

Notes. Student N = 1118. Instructor N = 47. The above items were responded to using the following as scale: 1 = not important, 2 = slightly important, 3 = important, 4 = very important. Bold indicates a significant difference, $p < .001$.

was “important” or “very important.” Instructors rated instructional design support, electronic or web-based material development support, and reassigned time resources almost equal in importance (75%, 73%, and 73% of the instructors responded “important” or “very important” for these factors, respectively). Identified as important resources to a lesser extent were electronic or web-based materials from the publisher (61% of the instructors responded “important” or “very important” for this factor), course development stipends (57% of the instructors responded “important” or “very important”), copyright and licensing support (59% of instructors responded “important” or “very important” for this factor), and teaching assistance for the online course (52% of the instructors responded “important” or “very important”). Less than half of the instructors (48%) determined library support to be an important or very important resource when developing an online or blended course.

3.3. Direct comparisons of student and instructor perceptions

Both students and instructors were asked to rate the importance of interaction in an online environment using a Likert scale from 1 = not important to 4 = very important. A Chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relation between student or instructor status and perceived importance of the types of interactions in an online or blended course. Both students and instructors considered instructor–student interaction important or very important (79% and 83%, respectively). Less than half of the students (47%) rated classmate interaction as important or very important, while over half of the instructors (62%) ranked classmate interaction as important or very important. Though the difference in student and instructor responses for this question was not statistically significant, the disparity is notable. However, when considering sense of community in an online or blended course, the relation between the student and instructor responses was significant, $\chi^2(3, N = 1165) = 29.51, p < .001$. Most instructors (68%) perceived sense of community in an online or blended course as important or very important, while most students (54%) held sense of community in an online or blended course as only slightly important or not important.

Table 6
Direct comparison of instructor and student perceptions of effective class size for online courses.

Effective course size	Instructors		Students	
	%	n	%	n
Up to 20 students	37%	18	13%	145
30 students	41%	20	27%	306
50 students	20%	10	29%	331
75 students	2%	1	12%	141
100+ students	0%	0	20%	228

Notes. Student N = 1151. Instructor N = 49. $\chi^2(4) = 36.036, p < .001$, was statistically significant. Student's percentage column does not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Students and instructors were asked to indicate the most effective class size for an online course. Instructors identified the most effective online class size as 30 students with 41% selecting that option on the survey, followed by a preference for a course size of 20 students or less with 22% of instructors selecting that option. Student responses, however, revealed 50 as their perceived most effective class size for online instruction, with 29% of students selecting that option, followed closely by a recommendation of 30 students as an effective class size, with 27% of students selecting that option. There was just one suggestion from the instructors for an online class size of 75 students. None of the instructors selected 100 or more students as effective class sizes, while 12% of students reported a class size of 75 as acceptable and 20% of the students considered online class sizes of 100 or more students as appropriate. A Chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relation between student or instructor status and perceived most effective course size. The relation between these variables was significant, $\chi^2(4, N = 1200) = 36.036, p < .001$. Instructors perceived the most effective size for online courses to be smaller than the most effective course sizes recommended by students.

3.4. Qualitative student feedback

The final question on both the instructor and student surveys was an open-ended question inviting participants to make additional comments. A total of 107 students provided feedback; instructors offered no additional feedback regarding online learning environments. The written, optional feedback data were analyzed using LeCompte's (2000) approach to thematic analysis, a highly iterative qualitative analysis process that allows multiple and interconnected themes to emerge from the data. There were five major themes that emerged from the feedback: favorable comments about online learning experiences; unfavorable comments about online learning experiences; suggestions for improvement of format and delivery of online courses; the importance of communication and interaction; and class size.

3.4.1. Favorable comments about online learning experiences

An emergent theme involved student comments that communicated favorable experiences in online or blended courses or with an instructor who taught online. Comments focused on appreciation for the flexibility that online learning environments offer, and favorable experiences in specific courses or with specific instructors. As proclaimed by one student, “I've had wonderful experiences in using online courses and I highly recommend them to any student.”

3.4.2. Unfavorable comments about online learning experiences

Another theme that emerged from the data was unfavorable comments about online learning experiences or displeasure with an instructor who taught online. Comments pertained to the perception that online learning entailed more work than face-to-face courses, or that it required too much autonomy or self-discipline. Several students in this category also noted the lack of instructor availability as a source of discontent. One student noted, “I did not like taking the class online because there was minimum contact with the professor and no matter how much I studied, I couldn't get an A in the class.”

3.4.3. Suggestions for improvement of format and delivery of online courses

Students offered several recommendations for improvement in online course format or content delivery. Suggestions included integration of multi-modal content, better assignment and exam content alignment, added flexibility with regard to exam attendance or exam delivery format, and exclusion of required campus meetings. One student offered the following feedback: “I have had online classes where the teacher expects the students to be on-campus and meet at certain times, whether it be for a ‘mandatory orientation’ or to take a midterm and final. One of the main reasons I take online courses is because I can't

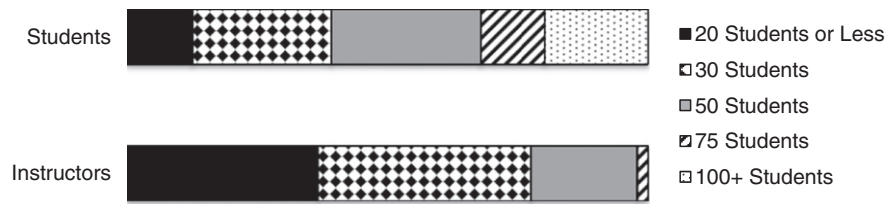


Fig. 1. Instructor and student perceptions of effective class size for online courses.

fit [the traditional course] into my schedule and it is available online. The teacher cannot deduct points from a student who cannot make these times.”

3.4.4. The importance of communication, interaction, and availability

A theme that surfaced during data analysis regarded the need for communication and interaction during the online or blended course. Students attested to the need for communication among course participants as well as interaction with other students and the instructor throughout the course. Students also expressed desire for direct access to the instructor through defined office hours for the course, virtual office hours, and faster response times to questions. One student insisted, “An online course doesn’t work unless there is good communication with the instructor. Instructors who teach online courses need to be available to be contacted much more than professors who do not teach online courses. If such professors are not willing or able to do this, then online courses cannot work well.”

3.4.5. Online class size

Students made several comments about online class sizes. Most comments within this theme surrounded assertions that additional online courses and course sections should be available to accommodate more students, the number of students that are allowed to enroll in an online course section should be increased, and online course offerings on the graduate level should be added. Several students also used the open-ended question as an opportunity to clarify their position on the most effective class size for an online course, stating online class size was not an issue of their concern. For example, one student wrote, “From a student’s perspective, the number of people enrolled doesn’t really have an effect on my learning. We’re not in the same classroom so I’m not going to be distracted by them, and by allowing more students in the class you allow more people to progress with their degree.”

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify factors that would enhance student and instructor experiences in online and blended courses offered by the university. The focus of the survey was to obtain information from students about their perceptions of the online environments that they participated in, and perspectives from instructors about online and blended courses that they taught. As universities refine their approaches to increasing student success and instructor involvement in online learning environments, insight into the perceptions of online students and instructors is instrumental in assisting university leadership in identifying and providing appropriate resources and support. The data collected in this survey reveal optimal areas where a university administration can partner closely with instructors to enhance the student experience in their online courses and afford online instructors with adequate assistance.

4.1. Provide required meeting times before course registration begins

Student participants noted that the primary deciding factor for enrolling in an online course is being aware of any required meeting

times such as orientations, exams, or synchronous online meetings prior to enrollment. Some students reported that they do not even consider taking an online or blended course that does not make that information available. These outcomes align with a study conducted by Conrad (2002), in which students asserted a desire to have early access to course information and content to make adjustments to their busy schedules, increase preparedness, and reduce anxiety. University administrators can make required meeting information available to students by gathering the details from the online instructors and adding the required meeting times to both the printed and electronic schedules of course offerings. Students would then have access to the scheduled meetings prior to registration periods so that they can make informed decisions. This recommendation may require close coordination with multiple campus units to ensure that the university’s data infrastructure can accommodate inclusion of the information.

4.2. Offer technical support to students and instructors

While student participants self-reported as being technology savvy, they also asserted a need to have access to technology support while enrolled in an online or blended course. Technology tools used in the course may not be controlled by the instructor, but could affect student evaluations of instructors if problems arise. As suggested by Moore and Kearsley (2005), dedicated help for university-supported and college-adopted technologies should be made available to students through an online or physical help desk. Similarly, instructor participants listed technical support – including help with producing accessible documents and course materials – as the most valuable resource they can receive while developing or facilitating an online or blended course. These findings mirror those of Orr, Williams, and Pennington (2009), which assert that instructors are discipline experts, not necessarily technology experts and therefore should be assisted with such tasks. Instructors want to know that they can get help with learning to use the new technologies, especially when those technologies are tied to university or state mandates such as accessibility inclusion. University administrators should provide instructors with support for developing accessible documents and for using software and hardware in online environments, particularly courses that affect a larger amount of students. Support for those technologies should also be extended to the students using the hardware or applications so as to not burden instructors with having to be the provider of technical support in addition to their many responsibilities while facilitating the course.

4.3. Ensure that instructional design and material development resources are made available

The online instructors included in this study reported being highly motivated by opportunities to experience a variety of teaching delivery modes or pedagogies while facilitating the online or blended course. But they also strongly expressed the need for direct support in the form of instructional design assistance and electronic material development. These findings are in alignment with assertions made by Hartman et al. (2007) and Oblinger and Hawkins (2006) on the benefits of intentional and teamed faculty development. Instructors recognize that they cannot be experts in every facet of online course

development and facilitation and they have identified the areas where they most need support. The instructors also reported being dissuaded by the amount of student monitoring, facilitating, and tracking required when teaching online to the extent that they value receiving reassigned time in order to develop and facilitate their online course more than receiving a new course development stipend. Administrators should provide instructors who are interested in teaching online with instructional design and course material development resources. They should also consider offering reassigned time or a course release to instructors who are new to teaching online. Such measures could assist more instructors in developing, facilitating, and maintaining quality online courses.

4.4. Allow instructors to teach interesting courses that encourage undergraduate research

When deciding whether to teach online, instructors reported being strongly compelled by personal interest in a topic and being motivated by opportunities to make ties to research or scholarship. Lawler and King (2003) reported similar findings. In accordance, student survey participants stated that their personal interest in the topic of a course offered online is among their deciding factors for enrolling in the course. These findings are in keeping with prior research on motivation (Lin, Lin, & Laffey, 2008) and student efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Liaw, 2008). Rather than focusing only on bottleneck courses as the most likely candidates when expanding online course offerings as is often the case (Parker, 2003), administrators should allow instructors to teach courses that interest them, appeal to students, and present opportunities for undergraduate research as recommended by teacher-scholar models (American Council of Learned Societies, 2007) and by Kuh, Chen, and Nelson Laird (2007) in their study that presented positive relationships between faculty interest in educationally purposeful research activities with students, and student involvement and engagement in those activities.

4.5. Develop policies that acknowledge the amount of preparation, facilitation, and contact hours required of online instructors

Student participants of this study disclosed that they were deterred by what they perceive as an over abundance of homework and assignments in online or blended courses. This concurs with the findings made by Mullen and Tallent-Runnels (2006). Relatedly, instructor participants divulged that the added amounts of student monitoring, facilitating, and tracking required in online studies are disincentives to teaching online. This finding is in agreement with other studies that discerned that instructors are dissuaded by what they consider excessive amounts of facilitation and grading in their online or blended courses (Meyer, 2012; Visser, 2000). Online instructors must find ways to allow students to demonstrate achievement of learning outcomes that are rigorous but not disproportionate in the amount of work that would be assigned in a similar traditional class (Kim & Bonk, 2006). Both students and instructors of this study revealed an interest in participating in online courses where creative presentation, interaction, and variety in delivery format are integrated into the course. These results are in keeping with prior research on student engagement (Hull & Nelson, 2005; Ishitani & McKittrick, 2010), and the benefits of universal design for learning (UDL) (CAST, 2009). UDL is a pedagogical framework in which instructors provide students with multiple methods and modalities for learning new content and demonstrating learning outcomes. Inclusion of such measures in an online environment requires sufficient administration-backed support for instructor resources during all stages of the planning, design, and development of the course.

Student survey participants also conveyed that they grounded their decision to enroll in online or blended courses based on the level of complexity of the subject matter of the course; students

reported that they were less likely to enroll in online or blended courses that covered the more advanced topics. Primary reasons for this could be linked to the online students' stated challenges to traveling to campus to attend the instructor's office or recitation hours and their perceptions of lack of instructor availability to answer questions or explain difficult concepts. This would support the findings by Riley, Jensen, and Santiago (2005) on student perception that instructors are less accessible in online learning environments. It also reflects the theory of transactional distance (Moore & Kearsley, 2005), in which the amount of communication and immediacy between a student and the instructor is directly related to a student's sense of pedagogical connectedness in the course. Students would benefit from the provision of online office hours for online and blended courses, in the form of video or text chatting, or a dedicated hour for immediate email response. Yet, often these non-traditional modes of interaction are not recognized as equitable to face-to-face office hours, and are frequently relegated to occur in addition to the instructor's contractually required contact hours and office meetings. Administrators must recognize the value of fluid and intentional instructor–student interaction within online learning environments and consider regular instructor availability and communications beyond the required contact hours as equitable to on campus office hours.

When the student and instructor participants were asked about the importance of having a sense of community in an online environment, responses differed. The disparate opinions could in part be due to students being unaware of both the benefits of fostering community and belonging in an academic setting (Yuqing et al., 2012), and the deleterious effects of learner isolation (Dickey, 2004). Instructors should incorporate opportunities for community building into the course, not as separate, optional or extra credit modules, but as meaningful, required, seamlessly integrated activities within the course. This type of effort, however, when interwoven with other pedagogical and technical requirements for developing and facilitating a quality online course can become consuming. Again, assistance with planning, developing, and possibly facilitating such activities require appropriate institutional support. Moreover, administrators must formally acknowledge such activities as valid contributions towards promotion and tenure.

4.6. Identify (and adhere to) the most effective class size for an online course

The study revealed a statistically significant difference among students and online instructors on their perceptions of the most effective class size for an online course. Most instructors selected 30 students or fewer as their preferred class size, while over half of the students identified 50 students or more as the most effective size. One reason for the number of student selections in the 75 to 150+ categories could be that students are unaware of – or unconcerned about – the amount of effort it takes to facilitate and manage an online course. The discrepant perspectives among students and instructors become important when administrators attempt to widen the path to graduation by adding online sections of high-enrollment and bottleneck courses to the catalog or by increasing the class size of online sections, making them disproportionate to the cap for their face-to-face counterparts. Instructor and student participants of this study value interaction within an online course, yet larger online course sizes diminish interaction, as revealed in a study by Simonson (2004). Administrators must recognize that online instruction does not require less work by instructors or students; contrarily, it demands a more active and collaborative pedagogical approach for both instructors (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009; Ko & Rossen, 2004) and students (Lear, Anson, & Steckelberg, 2010; Maki & Maki, 2003) than in traditional courses. Administrators should not overburden instructors through excessive increases in online course offerings and section sizes in an attempt to compensate for budget constraints. A decision about the appropriate size for an online course should include input from the department and course instructor and

involve an expectation for meaningful interaction and active facilitation throughout the course.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of the current study was to identify factors that would enhance student and instructor experiences in online and blended courses offered by the university. The data enabled analysis of student and instructor perceptions about their online learning experiences. During the process of institutional planning, it can be easy to overlook the central role that student and instructor perceptions can play. The current study provided relevant data that should be weighed and considered as university administrators make policy and budget-related decisions regarding online learning on behalf of the university. The findings of this survey demonstrate that student and instructor perceptions of their experiences in an online environment can be affected and improved when adequate provisions are made available. Administrators must enable online learning to be a viable alternative to traditional courses by providing instructors with appropriate support and resources that will allow them to design, develop, and facilitate exemplary student-centered online learning environments.

Researchers have shown that having access to online environment can add value to the students' learning experience if done correctly. It is therefore incumbent upon administrators to weigh persistence, completion, and a perceived positive experience within an online setting above mere enrollment. This study furthers the discussion about the role of student and instructor input in organizational decision-making and the role of participant perceptions in planning, scheduling, designing, developing, facilitating, and assessing online and blended courses. Further studies and analysis of the responsibilities of and level of commitment required for university leadership with regard to student success and instructor involvement in online learning environments should be conducted.

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