

Understanding the Student Experience in Online and Hybrid Courses to Improve Instruction

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ABSTRACT. As more students in higher education institutions take online and hybrid courses, their perspectives must be taken into consideration. A study surveyed forty-five undergraduate students regarding their experiences with online and hybrid courses. An online survey assessed their reasons for taking the courses and reactions to them. Using the general inductive approach, students' responses were examined. Students reported taking such courses to take advantage of their flexible schedules to suit work, family, and commuting commitments, fit course schedules, and reduce anxiety about in-person classes. Students reported being dissatisfied when they felt isolated from their peers and professors, did not understand course material, forgot to complete assignments on time, and had difficulty contacting instructors. Suggestions for faculty teaching online and hybrid courses include getting experience as students in an online course environment, enhancing their online "presence" in their own courses, and learning about best practices for online instruction.

Keywords: pedagogy, online, hybrid

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In recent years, taking courses online has become more of a mainstream activity for college students (Friedman, 2018; Priceonomics Data Studio, 2016) as technology has become ubiquitous in higher education (Hyndman, VanLeeuwan, & Weeks, 2016; Reese, 2016). While the numbers of students taking online courses have grown to over five million, with one in four students in the United States taking at least one online course, faculty report feeling less confident about the legitimacy of online education (Smith, 2016). This paper explores student experiences with online and hybrid courses and makes recommendations on how faculty can help improve the experience for students and for themselves.

At the university where the authors of this paper work and at many other higher education institutions around the US today, it is now common for courses that had been traditionally presented in entirely face-to-face formats to be offered by resident faculty in various formats, including online and hybrid, with the latter including online and face-to-face components. One reason for the change has been to increase opportunities for students to take classes that otherwise would not fit their schedules because of work or family obligations (Blackmon & Major, 2012; Snyder, 2013). Another reason is that some faculty report these newer formats facilitate greater participation in online settings by some students who would otherwise be passive during in-person class discussions (Dietrich, 2015; Fuster, 2016; Hyndman, et al., 2016). Both types of course can also provide greater flexibility for faculty who are able to manage their own work schedules (Hyndman, et al., 2016; Looser, 2017).

When teaching college courses in hybrid or wholly online environments, expectations of the roles of students and faculty need to be re-established (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison & Archer, 2001). Research shows that faculty and students rank what they consider to be the most important factors in online classes differently from one another. Students stated that their persistence in online classes was most related to 1) increased faculty instruction and 2) meaningful feedback, whereas faculty attributed student persistence to 1) student self-discipline and 2) quality of faculty-student interactions (Gaytan, 2015). While these views of what is most important for keeping students enrolled in an online class seem incompatible, it is possible to integrate them by suggesting that when students perceive greater faculty presence and assistance, they are more likely to persist and gain a sense of self-efficacy (Gaytan, 2015; Howland & Moore, 2002; Kuo, Walker, Belland, & Schroder, 2013). Thus, through greater efforts to provide feedback, encouragement, and facilitation of student efforts, faculty can enhance their “teaching presence” (Anderson, et al., 2001) or “online presence” (Lehman & Conceição, 2010) and help students remain in online or hybrid classes, perform at higher levels, and be more satisfied with their experiences (Kuo et al., 2013).

As the number of online and hybrid college courses has grown over the last few years, so too has the range of student and faculty experiences with them. One reason for this is that students may no longer have much of a choice as to whether they take courses in online or hybrid formats, which have become more common and sometimes reduce the likelihood of courses

being offered in more traditional formats. Therefore, it is important to examine experiences of students who take these courses, examining reasons for their enrollment and considering whether they feel these courses have or have not been successful. As such courses are more available in non-technical courses such as family science and related areas (including those offered by this study's authors), it is important to compare students' perceptions with those identified in the literature, where the types of students and their programs are not always specified (e.g., Wladis, Wladis & Hachey, 2014). By analyzing students' reactions to such courses and identifying what they found to be benefits and drawbacks, this paper can contribute to improvement of online and hybrid course offerings and relate directly to family science programs.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 45 undergraduate students who were either enrolled in courses taught by the researchers (Human Development and Family Studies [HDFS] or Biobehavioral Health) or were their HDFS advisees. Five of these courses were either fully online (2) or hybrid courses (3). The two researchers also taught three face-to-face classes. Students received emails and were encouraged in class to complete their surveys, although there was no penalty for not participating and no way to track their participation. Thirty-one (69%) of the participants in the study were HDFS majors and 14 (31%) were in other majors: nursing (3), rehabilitation services (3), elementary education (1), business or agricultural business (2), health policy administration (2), psychology (1), occupational therapy (1), and liberal arts and sciences (1). Twenty-five (56%) participants were between the ages of 18 and 20, 15 were (33%) between ages 21 and 25, and 5 (11%) were between 30 and 40 years old. Gender was not indicated in the survey but it is assumed that most respondents were female since there are fewer males in the courses and in the HDFS program in general. Survey respondents reported how far they lived from campus, with 6 (13%) living on campus, 22 (49%) living 0-20 miles away, and 17 (38%) living more than 20 miles from campus. Students had attended between 1 and 9+ semesters of college (including the current semester) with 4 (8%) in their first semester, 26 (58%) between their second and fifth semesters, and 15 (33%) between their sixth and ninth semesters (or more). Fourteen (31%) students responded that they did not work for pay during the semester, while 24 (53%) reported working weekly between 5 and 20 hours for pay and 7 (15%) indicating they worked 30+ hours for pay.

Procedure

After receiving institutional review board (IRB) approval for the study, the researchers sent emails inviting students who were their advisees and students in their courses (a total of approximately 200 students, with some overlap across courses and advising lists) to participate in the study, providing a link to a SurveyMonkey.com web address with the survey. See Appendix A for survey questions. The study authors created questions based on their interests in student perceptions of their online and hybrid course experiences and questions about why students were enrolled in such courses. The survey was expected to take approximately 10 minutes to complete. The informed consent form was on the landing page for the website and no personally identifying information was collected in the survey. Potential participants were told the information was being collected anonymously. Invitations for participation were sent in early February 2017; most responses were received at the end of February, with four responses collected in March 2017. The courses were concluded at the end of the Spring 2017 semester. Students were assured there was no way to track their participation in the study.

Data Analysis

Using a general inductive analysis (Thomas, 2006), raw data were analyzed to identify a set of themes during the coding process. Data were coded to identify themes related to the students' reasons for taking online and hybrid courses and their reactions to them. Although the survey responses were relatively short, we used McCracken's (1988) five-step method for analysis of long interviews. The first step was to read through the responses and take notes on them, followed by coding responses based on similar content. Next, we examined patterns of responses to identify themes that connected the various responses and then we synthesized the findings, resulting in a final set of themes. The themes were primarily identified by the first author using the five-step method and a discussion was held by the two researchers to determine if additional themes were apparent. No additional themes were determined at that time. This method is consistent with the general inductive approach identified by Thomas (2006), by which debriefings should be held to ensure consistency in coding. The findings were also consistent with prior research examining student perceptions of online and hybrid learning experiences; there were no significant deviations from the previous research (c.f., Thomas, 2006).

Results

Students were asked questions about how many online and hybrid courses they took through the campus, at a campus or an institution other than their current one, or through the online program at the university, which is a separate entity from the campus. Figure 1 shows the distribution of responses to this question. Only five (11%) of the total sample reported not having taken any online or hybrid courses at all, either during the semester in which they were surveyed or in previous semesters.

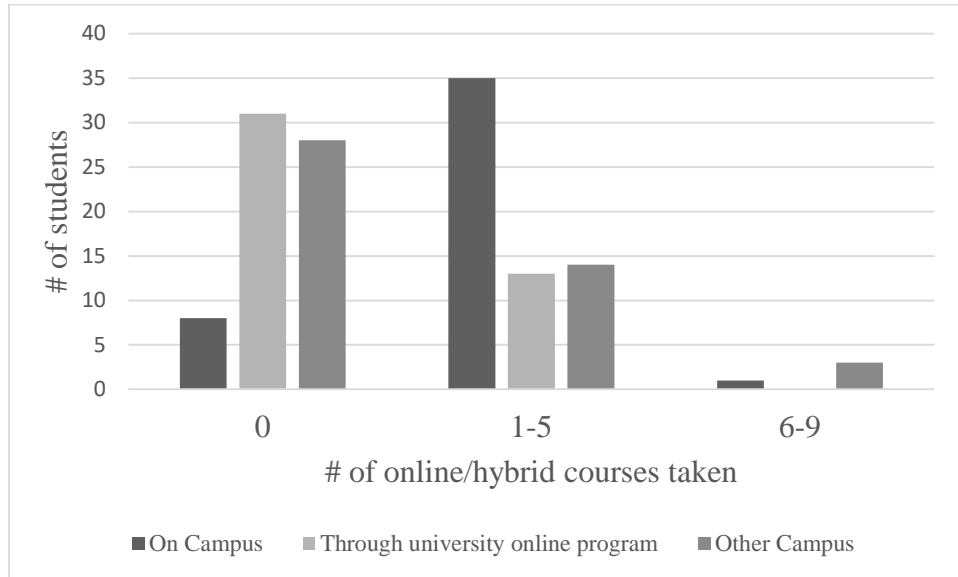


Figure 1. Number of Online and Hybrid Courses Taken by Students (*hybrid only available on campus and at other campuses)

Why Take Online/Hybrid Courses?

Twenty-five (57%) students stated they had taken online or hybrid courses because of the flexibility the courses offered, because they fit their schedules, because they commuted, or because of a similar issue, while nine (20%) reported they had no choice of the format in which the course was being offered. Two (4%) students mentioned their anxiety was reduced by having some or part of the course online or when working on it at home. Examples of the reasons provided include:

“They fit my schedule and allow me to work on my own time and independently which helps my anxiety.” (Subject #14)

“The classes on campus did not fit into my schedule.” (Subject #19)

“Online it lets me work and learn the material in the comfortable (sic) of my own home. Hybrid courses are nice because it breaks up classroom time.” (Subject #24)

Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction with Online or Hybrid Courses

In response to the question regarding whether they were satisfied with their online courses, 32 (71%) students indicated overall that they were somewhat or very satisfied with the online classes, 10 (22%) reported being neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, and just one (2%) reported being somewhat unsatisfied. For hybrid courses, 22 (49%) students reported being either very or somewhat satisfied, while 17 (38%) indicated they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, and 3 (7%) were either somewhat or very dissatisfied. Figure 2 shows the reported satisfaction with online and hybrid courses.

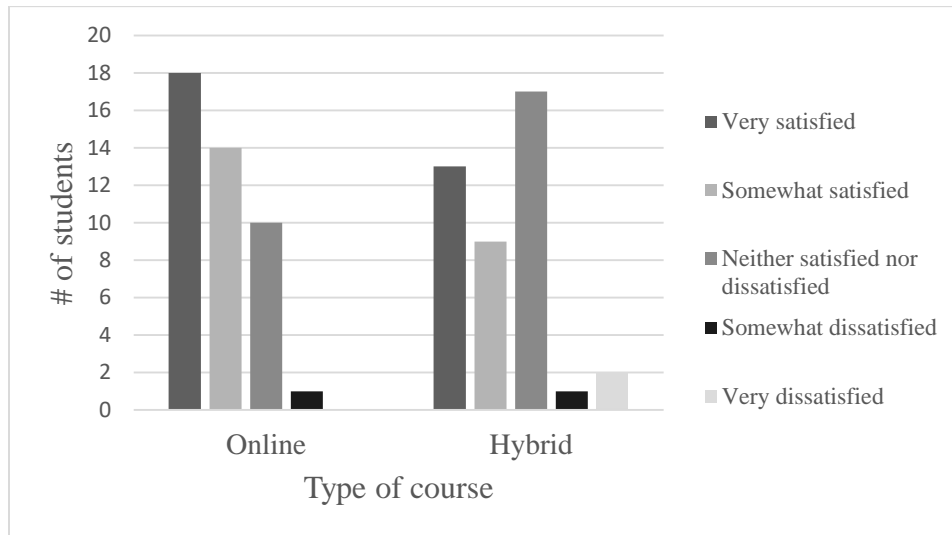


Figure 2. Reported Satisfaction with Online and Hybrid courses

Students reported reasons why they were satisfied with their online or hybrid courses in open-ended responses. Thirteen students (29%) stated they liked that they could work at their own pace or could manage their time and have flexible schedules in their online courses, while 21 (47%) mentioned these same issues as the “best” part of taking an online course. Only 5 (11%) students indicated flexibility as a reason they were satisfied with hybrid courses, although 14 (31%) students did mention these issues as the “best” part of taking a hybrid course. Examples of such responses include:

“The best part of taking an online class is being able to login whenever you have the time.” (Subject #3)

“It was nice to do it in my own time and not have to do it all in one setting.” (Subject #30)

“It has helped me manage my time better and study more efficiently.” (Subject #36)

“I was satisfied with my course because it allowed me to complete it at my own pace during the duration of the semester.” (Subject #42)

For hybrid courses, having either online or face-to-face interactions with the professor or other students was mentioned as reasons for satisfaction (5; 11%) and the “best” part of hybrid courses (12; 27%). Examples of these responses are:

“Since you have limited classes, you have more flexibility with your schedule, yet still benefit from the interaction of your classmates.” (Subject #6)

“Good mix of classroom interaction and flexibility.” (Subject #10)

“The best part about hybrid classes are (sic) the face to face communication and the online aspect. Homework can be done online and questions and concerns can be asked in person.” (Subject #18)

Students responded to a fixed-response question about how much they learned in a high-quality online or hybrid, with 24 (53%) indicating that they learned much more or somewhat more than compared to traditional classes, 14 (31%) stating it was about the same, and only 4 (9%) stating that they learned either somewhat or much less. In response to a question asking whether online courses allowed them to complete more work of higher quality, 27 (60%) students stated yes, while 8 (18%) responded no and 10 (22%) responded that they were not sure. Figure 3 shows distribution of the responses.

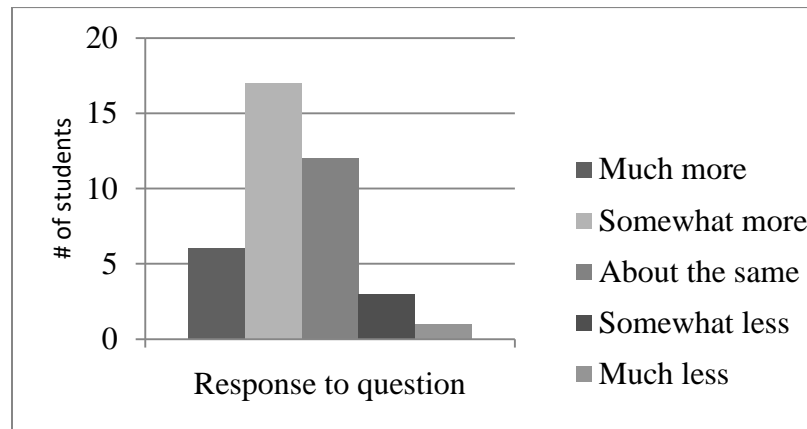


Figure 3. Response to Question About How Much is Learned in Online or Hybrid Class versus Traditional Class

Reasons students gave for dissatisfaction with online courses included having difficulty reaching a professor when needed or course material that was not well designed (6; 13%). Seventeen (38%) students indicated that the “worst” part of the online course was not seeing the instructor or classmates or having connections with them, while 8 (18%) students stated that forgetting to get the work done or getting the work done was the “worst” part. Responses included:

“Not being able to directly talk to the instructor about an assignment and being really confused about what they want, since it isn't a face-to-face interaction.” (Subject #21)

“Sometimes it is difficult to know when things are due and keep up with the work.” (Subject #30)

“Maybe the only thing is the lack of communication with peers of the same course.”
(Subject #34)

“Missing or forgetting due dates and sometimes being bombarded with extensive material.” (Subject #36)

“You can't connect emotionally and as socially with your professor or fellow students.”
(Subject #37)

Future Courses/Recommend to Friend

When asked if they were likely to take another online or hybrid course, 35 (80%) students said they were very likely to somewhat likely to do so, 5 (11%) stated they were neither likely nor unlikely to do so, while only 2 (4%) stated they were somewhat or very unlikely to do so. Figure 4 displays distribution of these responses.

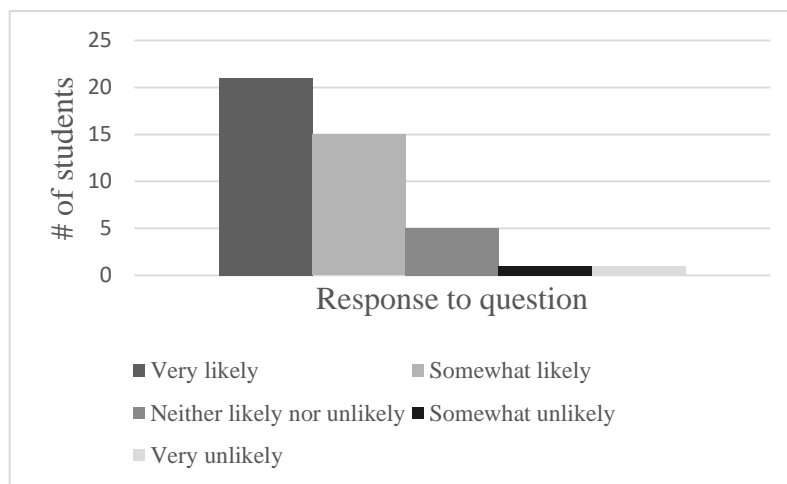


Figure 4. Response to Question on How Likely the Individual Would Be to Take Another Online or Hybrid Course.

When asked if they would recommend online or hybrid courses to a friend, 35 (78%) also indicated that they either strongly or somewhat agreed that they would, 7 (15%) said they would neither agree nor disagree, and only 1 (2%) strongly disagreed. When asked for comments about recommending online or hybrid courses to a friend, 8 (18%) responded that it would depend upon the person, suggesting that not everyone would like them or do well in them. Three (7%) indicated that it would depend on the course or professor. For example, different students responded:

“Think these types of classes are good for the working adult or anyone with a family.”
(Subject #5)

“It depends on the course. Some have been great others not so much. It is course and professor dependent.” (Subject #13)

“It depends on the other student. If they prefer to do work at home, then I would recommend an online course, but if they like the face to face communication, I would recommend the on-campus courses.” (Subject #18)

“I would recommend an online or hybrid course to another student, but the student would have to have very good time management skills in order to succeed with the classes.” (Subject #25)

“It's right for some people and not very good for others.” (Subject #37)

Discussion

In this study, which surveyed students in family science and related courses and HDFs majors on their experiences with online and hybrid courses, students reported being generally satisfied with their online courses and hybrid courses. However, students' views varied depending on their own circumstances and on the courses and instructor. Students often signed up for these classes and liked them for the flexibility that allowed them to fit the courses into their work, commuting, and family schedules, as well as the ability to learn at their own pace. At the same time, students did not like feeling isolated from peers or professors. Some students also reported having difficulty keeping track of materials and getting help from professors. Without in-person class time, some students reported they were more likely to forget about assignment deadlines and coursework and were not sure how to complete some assignments. Others had full-time jobs outside their classwork and found that while the online courses gave them more flexibility, they still had overwhelming workloads and an unrealistic understanding of the time commitment involved.

Students' motivations for taking online and hybrid classes varied, as did their experiences with these courses, with the two often linked. For those who wanted to take the courses, they felt freer in terms of schedules and were more motivated to succeed. For those who did not want to take such classes, they sometimes felt more disconnected or less involved in the courses. In some cases, students were forced to take one of these courses since no other options were available or fit their schedules, and so they were sometimes less satisfied with their experience.

The courses varied in terms of how much interaction the students had with peers and faculty members and how engaging the courses were. Some may have been adapted versions of in-person courses, whereas others were truly online-designed courses created and taught by those trained in online pedagogy. For hybrid classes, the full potential of the enhancement of in-person classes may not have been exploited by the instructor. Perhaps the course was seen as more of a way to reduce in-class hours without facilitating learning sufficiently.

Results of this study dovetail well with previous research investigating reasons that students take online courses and their reactions to them. As Blackmon and Major (2012) found, students in the present study often reported that flexibility and the ability to work within the constraints of one's work and family life were primary motivators for taking such courses, when they could choose for themselves the format of their course section. When they had no choice of format, students still often reported enjoying the lack of physical and time constraints that online courses offer. Hyndman et al. (2016) cited flexibility and "24/7" (p. 51) access to course materials as positive aspects of online courses for faculty and students. Sixty-eight percent of the current sample of students reported working in addition to taking classes, a number just slightly below the 70-80% of college students in the US reported by Carnevale, Smith, Melton, and Price (2015) to be taking classes and working simultaneously. Given this situation, it is unsurprising that students indicated that flexibility and the ability to work around their work and family lives were primary reasons for taking such online and hybrid classes, and for their satisfaction with these courses.

In terms of students' reactions to their experiences with online and hybrid courses, the themes that arose in this study also resemble those in Blackmon and Major (2012). Blackmon and Major conducted a qualitative analysis of previous research on student reactions to "online learning experiences" (p. 78). They identified five recurring themes from the earlier studies: "ability to balance school and life, time management skills, acceptance of personal responsibility, instructor (in)accessibility, and connection with peers" (p. 80). Students indicated that being able to balance school with their family and work was a main reason for satisfaction with the online courses, in particular. Time management was a challenge for some, as they had to be more accountable for keeping up with course material and found that forgetting deadlines could be problematic. At the same time, time management skills were reportedly developed in response to some challenges they experienced, which was viewed as a positive outcome. Personal responsibility was considered a cause and an effect in terms of student satisfaction by Blackmon and Major, with students identifying the need to take personal responsibility for their success and stating that this led to a greater sense of satisfaction in the end. Similar reactions were evident in the current study, as students stated that they would recommend online courses to students who were able to manage their time well and that they were sometimes able to learn more and better when they worked on their own. As in the Blackmon and Major study, students in the current study were dissatisfied when their instructors were inaccessible and were satisfied when they were accessible. Hybrid courses allowed the students to gain some of the flexibility of online courses but with the benefit of having access to the instructor in person some of the time.

When students felt they were having problems with the course and were unable to reach their professors or believed course instructions were confusing, they were more likely to report dissatisfaction. Others indicated that having contact with professors in the online environment enhanced their experiences. Lack of connection with peers was mentioned as a reason for dissatisfaction by some students in the current study. Being able to connect with professors and classmates was found to be a positive aspect of online courses in Blackmon and Major's study.

Recommendations for Faculty Teaching Online and Hybrid Courses

Many of the recommendations provided herein are practical, with the goal of helping students become more autonomous and self-motivated. This practical advice has the added benefit of providing students with a stronger sense of the “presence” of the faculty and the online environment as a transformative learning experience.

Faculty should provide straightforward expectations using clear assignment descriptions and deadlines will assist the students in keeping track of the work they have to do while maintaining high standards for the work that is submitted. Using whole group and individual feedback regarding assignments while providing grading rubrics, both before and after assignments are turned in can enhance student engagement and performance (Jacobs, 2014). Having students evaluate their own time commitments and expectations regarding in-class and out-of-class work at the beginning of each course can help them understand that courses in these formats are not intended to be weaker versions of in-person courses as well as aid them in determining whether they are prepared for such courses as well as managing their time once they are in the class. For hybrid courses, using some in-class time to discuss the assignments, course material, and workload demands can reduce students misunderstanding about what is required and give them the opportunity to clarify the required work.

Many faculty members who teach online and hybrid courses have not been students in such environments, so we recommend they take an online class to experience interactions with the instructor and fellow students and to gain insight into the student experience. If available, faculty can check the “student view” in their course management system frequently to understand what students see and to modify online course materials to facilitate student learning and interaction. Faculty should also continue to learn about best practices for online teaching (Ragan, 2009), find out what successful colleagues are doing, and take advantage of workshops and online training and materials.

Faculty teaching online and hybrid courses should be aware of motivations and challenges that students have when taking these courses in order to take advantage of their benefits while warding off possible downsides of these delivery methods. Faculty should also understand that online students may feel more isolated, so it is important to work to build a community of learners and a more “intellective” environment (Blackmon & Major, 2012). Merely moving an in-person course to an online format will be less effective than focusing on ways to enhance learning for students and fostering an online community. Thus, the notion of “presence” as described previously (cf., Anderson et al., 2001; Lehman & Conceição, 2010) may be expanded to indicate not just faculty presence but the presence of a community including other students. This expansion may improve the experience of all students who may feel more motivated and supported and less isolated, ultimately leading them to a greater sense of “learning autonomy” (Blackmon & Major, 2012).

Limitations

This study had a limited number of participants who were primarily HDFS students from a rural campus of one university in the northeastern US. HDFS students are not in a highly technical major and typically include more females and nontraditional students. Therefore, such students are not necessarily representative of all college students who may take online or hybrid courses. The survey also did not ask for specific details of particular courses, so the authors cannot specify exact issues of individual courses because comments were generalized. Some students may have been very satisfied with certain courses, which were well planned and less so with more haphazardly designed courses, while other students felt less suited to and less satisfied when taking any online or hybrid course. Since the students surveyed were from a general pool of those in the researchers' courses and on their advising lists, not all had of them taken at least one online or hybrid class, and therefore not all of them were able to reflect upon such experiences. No question regarding why these students had not taken online or hybrid classes was asked, so it is not clear how self-selected these students were in terms of their experiences with these classes.

Suggestions for future studies include having more direct questions for students enrolled in online and hybrid classes that target the exact issues they are experiencing, both positively and negatively. Examination of student performance in these classes would also help in understanding links between student perceptions and student outcomes. Comparing student and faculty perceptions of the same courses would help with alignment of goals and recommendations for improving their experiences.

Conclusion

Although some critics would argue that online courses by definition will never be as good as face-to-face classes (Edmundson, 2012), others believe that through sustained efforts of faculty, it is possible for students to have high-quality educational experiences (Blackmon & Major, 2012; Hyndman et al., 2016; Jaschik, 2009; MacKnight, 2000; Wladis et al., 2014). By enhancing one's "presence" and taking other steps to assist students, exemplary online educators can help students develop better self-regulation and self-efficacy (Edwards, Perry, & Janzen, 2011), which can improve student performance in all manner of educational experiences. Becoming aware of how removing the physical components of educational experiences can lead students to new levels of learning may assist faculty in transforming their educational experiences.

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Appendix A

Survey Instrument for Study on Student Experiences of Online and Hybrid Courses

How students react to online and hybrid courses is an important aspect of how they will succeed or not in college. We will survey students to assess their perceptions of what aspects of online and hybrid courses are most successful for them and which are least successful for them. The goal is to help understand how to improve such courses to fit student needs. Please complete all of the following questions if they are applicable.

1. How old are you?

- 18-20 years
- 21-23 years
- 23-25 years
- 25-30 years
- 31-40 years
- 41-50 years
- 50+ years

2. What is your major? (or intended major if you are currently not in a major)

3. Approximately how far do you live from CAMPUS

- I live on campus.
- 0-5 miles
- 6-10 miles
- 11-20 miles
- 21-40 miles
- 40+ miles

4. How many semesters (including the one we are currently in) have you completed in college (at REMOVED or elsewhere)?

- One
- Two-Three
- Four-Five
- Six-Eight
- Nine or more

5. How many hours do you work per week for pay during the school year?

- I do not work for pay during the school year.
- 0-5 hours/week
- 6-10 hours/week
- 11-20 hours/week
- 20-30 hours/week
- 30-40 hours/week
- 40+ hours/week

6. How many online or hybrid courses have you taken through CAMPUS?

- 0
- 1-5
- 6-9
- 10+

7. How many online courses have you taken through a campus other than CAMPUS (not including ONLINE UNIVERSITY PROGRAM)?

- 0
- 1-5
- 6-9

10+

8. How many online courses have you taken through the ONLINE UNIVERSITY PROGRAM?

0

1-5

6-9

10+

9. Online courses include those courses where all course content is available online only. How many online courses have you taken, including this semester?

I have taken no online courses.

One

2-5

6-10

10+

10. Hybrid courses are those courses where some of the course content is available online while at least some of the class is held in person. How many hybrid courses have you taken, including this semester?

I have taken no hybrid courses.

One

2-5

6-10

10+

11. Why have you taken online or hybrid courses?

12. How satisfied have you been with your online course(s)?

- Very satisfied
- Somewhat satisfied
- Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- Somewhat dissatisfied
- Very dissatisfied

13. Why were you satisfied or dissatisfied by your online course(s)?

14. What do you think is the best part of taking online classes? (what makes for a great online class?)

15. What do you think is the worst part of taking online classes?

16. Overall, how satisfied have you been with your hybrid courses?

- Very satisfied
- Somewhat satisfied
- Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- Somewhat dissatisfied
- Very dissatisfied

17. Why were you satisfied or dissatisfied with your hybrid course(s)?

18. What do you think is the best part of taking hybrid classes? (what makes for a great hybrid class?)

19. What do you think is the worst part of taking hybrid classes?

20. Do you believe that online class work allows you to complete more quality work?

yes

no

not

sure

21. In an online or hybrid class that you have found to be high quality, how much do you learn compared in class work and assignments?

Much more

Somewhat more

About the same

Somewhat less

Much less

22. How likely are you to take another online or hybrid course?

Very likely

Somewhat likely

Neither likely nor unlikely

Somewhat unlikely

Very unlikely

23. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: "I would recommend online or hybrid courses to another student"

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Please explain: