

CONSUMERS OF ONLINE INSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT

There is a great demand for the online delivery system of instruction. It accommodates students who cannot meet on campus due to distance, or their available times to take onsite courses do not coincide with their schedules. It accommodates students with family obligations, and allows for more flexible scheduling for those who maintain employment, while continuing their education. However, not only does online instruction meet the needs of non-traditional students, but on campus traditional students who enroll in onsite courses also take many of their courses online. The major purposes of this research were to identify just who are the consumers of online instruction, as well as to determine whether the learning outcomes of online students are equivalent to the learning outcomes of students who take courses onsite. The results of this research will assist in the assessment of students' needs in the online environment, and will allow online teachers to determine the best pedagogy for online student success.

Keywords: online student demographics, online learning outcomes, non-traditional students

INTRODUCTION

School is in session 24/7 in the online environment; thereby, allowing students the opportunity to multi-task in many life events within a day. In essence students have more freedom to balance their lives by simultaneously going to school, holding a job, and/or taking care of parents or pets. They can log-on into the online environment from a laptop computer or PDA when traveling on an airplane, or when living in temporary accommodations, such as a hotel.

An increasing number of students are participating in online courses, pursuing specialized or advanced degrees online; and their demand for online courses is steadily increasing. Malta, DuBlois, and the EDUCAUSE Current Issues Committee [7], in their article entitled *Trends in Current Issues, Y2K-2005*, state:

E-learning, also known as distributed learning or online distance education, has become such a significant element in postsecondary education that it is predicted that online enrollment in the United States alone will exceed one million students in 2005 [7].

In addition, the online teaching platform is one of the fastest-growing trends in higher education. The number of colleges and universities providing online programs is steadily increasing. The *Market Data Retrieval* service reported that nearly two out of three institutions offer distance learning programs, and the number of institutions offering accredited degrees in at least one subject is now 63 percent [8].

Just whom does online education serve? Generation age demographics can be used to identify categories of individuals who might enroll in online courses. The categories include the

Millennials or Net Gens, who are today's traditional college students between the ages of 18-22. Oblinger, EDUCAUSE & Oblinger, bring out that 20 percent of the traditional college students began using computers between the ages 5 to 8, and that computer usage among today's children between the ages of 5-18 is very high, because 96 percent of these children have already gone online [9]. Therefore there should be a high comfort level in using the online teaching and learning environment for this population.

Other demographic categories of possible online consumers would include students classified as non-traditional students. These students would be the Generation Xers, individuals born between 1965-1982; Baby Boomers, individuals born between 1946-1964; and the Matures, individuals born between 1900-1946, and who may or may not be as computer savvy as the Millennials or Net Gens. However, much of the literature reports the online student population as consisting of mostly non-traditional, older, part-time students because they need the convenience and flexibility of the online environment. A more recent definition of non-traditional students given by Oblinger [10] included students who now take approximately six years to complete an undergraduate degree.

However, Clayton [1] stated, "What is not so readily agreed upon is whether specific segments of the student population, more than others are drawn in by...the virtual classroom". The National Education Association's (NEA) findings in *A Survey of Traditional and Distance Learning Higher Education Members*, reveal that NEA faculty teach as many younger students as older students and as many full-time students as part-time students [14]. Therefore, with this revelation, the next question to address is whether there is a difference between the learning outcomes of students taking courses onsite versus students taking courses online.

Most research indicates that there is no significant difference in learning outcomes with online learning as compared to traditional learning. Many find online learning more favorable because of the flexibility of the online learning environment. Hannuh [6] states that although recent research during the past 10 years indicate that students learn faster with technology than without, the insignificant difference is basically due to the design of the materials, and/or the pedagogy. He also states that these differences can be attributed to more students' positive attitudes, and that there is one-third less learning time associated with eLearning [6]. In agreement with Hannuh, in reference to the design of online instruction and pedagogy that meets the needs of online students, Peacock, Tweedale, Fell, and Vollmerhouse [11] state, "It is founded on the principle that the simple transfer of content to an online environment will not deliver equivalent learning outcomes for students" [11]. The following discourse provides the results of the study, *Consumers of Online Instruction*.

METHODOLOGY

Two-hundred and eighty-four emails were sent out to online teachers from 13 universities in a Southeastern state university system. The survey was a web-based survey that was generated by *Create A Survey* website at <http://www.createsurvey.com> [2]. It contained 37 items that included demographic and *Likert Scale* questions using a five point scale. The response options on the *Likert Scale* included (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) neutral, (4) disagree, and (5) strongly disagree. Fifty-six online teachers completed the survey, which yielded a response rate of 20

percent. To date researchers have not concluded what constitutes a good web-based/email response rate; however, conventional mail surveys have generated a response rate of 20-50 percent [5]. The research also reveals that mail surveys generate a significantly higher response rate than web-based surveys [12].

The average length of time these teachers had taught online was 4.16 years. The faculty ranks of these teachers were as follows: Adjunct – 3 (5 percent), Instructor – 12 (21 percent), Assistant Professor – 16 (30 percent), Associate Professor – 12 (21 percent), and Professor -13 (23 percent).

The teachers represented 18 disciplines, with the highest number of respondents coming from different areas of education (agricultural education - 4, business education – 6, curriculum and instruction – 2, and education – 10), followed by business and nursing with 6 respondents each. Several teachers had used more than one online teaching platform. The platforms used were as follows: *Blackboard* – 33, *WebCT* – 22, *E-College* - 5, and others 14. Other platforms identified by *EduTools* at [<http://ww.edutools.info/index.jsp>] may include *Learning Space*, *IntraLearn* and *Top Class* [4].

FINDINGS

Identification of Online Students

College students from all classifications are enrolling in online courses. Therefore faculty members were asked to identify the classification of students who had enrolled in their online courses. The percentages reflect that the majority of traditional students enrolled in online courses represent higher grade level classifications; whereby, 20 percent of these students represented seniors, 19 percent represented juniors, 16 percent represented sophomores, and 10 percent represented freshmen respectively, which gives a grand total of 65 percent for traditional students. Some faculty reported that there were no course offerings for freshmen in their institutions; the rationale centered on the belief that freshmen probably would not be disciplined enough to take online courses and/or they needed more time for the transition from high school to college before attempting to take courses online.

Within the non-traditional student group, 22 percent represented students at the graduate level and 13 percent represented lateral entry students, which gives a grand total of 35 percent for non-traditional students. The lateral entry classification consists of students who already hold a four-year college degree, and who have returned to take additional courses for teacher certification (See Table 1).

Table 1. Classifications of Students Enrolled in Online Courses

Classification of Students	Percentage of Students
Traditional Students	
Freshmen	10%
Sophomores	16%
Juniors	19%
Seniors	20%
Non-traditional Students	
Graduate Students	22%
Lateral Entry Students	13%

Students enrolled in online courses also live in diverse geographical locales. However, this study revealed that 48 percent of the online students lived on campus or in the campus vicinity; 40 percent lived a minimum of 1 hour away from campus, and 12 percent lived in other states. These statistics reveal a high number (48 percent) of students who have the opportunity to take courses on site, but choose to enroll in online courses. A National Education Association (NEA) study revealed even higher percentages. The findings are as follows:

A majority of the distance education faculty (56%) report that most of their distance learning students live within one hour from campus and another third (32%) report that most of their distance learning students live in the state but more than an hour's drive away [13].

Of course, students select to take online courses for different reasons. The online course may fit better in the student's schedule, or perhaps the student prefers taking online courses. In addition, a large number of traditional college students are employed. *The Daily Post Digest* [3], reported, "Of all full-time students, 74 percent work while attending school, up from 71 percent in 1995-96". When faculty members were asked to respond to the statement, "Why do students enroll in online courses?", the number one reason was that online courses were convenient for work schedules. It can be noted that this response can apply to both traditional students and non-traditional students (See Table 2).

Table 2. Why Do Students Enroll in online courses?

Reason	Number of Responses	Percentage
1. Convenient for work schedules	46	43%
2. Convenient for family obligations	23	22%
3. Could not meet on campus	22	21%
4. Like online courses better	8	8%
5. Believe they are easier than onsite courses	6	6%

The responses, “Convenient for family obligations” that yielded 22 percent of the responses; and “Could not meet on campus” that yielded 21 percent of the responses, also coincide with the non-traditional students, since this group is more apt to have families and live off campus.

Online Students’ Learning Outcomes

Student success is dependent upon many variables. The maturity level (adult learner [i.e., graduate student] versus a college freshman) of the student may play a significant role in student success. The research indicates that online students must possess high levels of motivation, discipline and organization skills for success. The respondents in this study reported that graduate students were more disciplined in completing work on time (46 percent), followed by 15 percent for college seniors, 15 percent for college juniors, 12 percent for lateral entry students, 9 percent for sophomores, and 3 percent for freshmen. The low percentage for freshman may perhaps justify the finding that some institutions do not allow freshmen to enroll in online courses because they need more time to make the transition from high school to college; and that they are not disciplined enough to be successful in online courses.

The respondents in this study strongly agreed with a mean score of 1.67, that higher levels of self motivation and organization skills were crucial for success. They also agreed with a mean score of 2.46 that online students need to manage their time, so they can visit and participate regularly in the online environment.

In describing online students in reference to specific skills, online teachers indicated that online students were skillful in using critical thinking skills (mean of 2.57 – agree), and that their team project outcomes were very good (mean of 2.62 – agree).

To gauge student outcomes, the respondents were asked whether their students who enrolled in their online courses received better grades than students enrolled in their onsite courses. Teachers responded to this question with a mean score of 3.34 (neutral). Lastly, another interesting finding also revealed that teachers responded with a mean score of 3.06 (neutral) as to whether the retention rate of online students was better than that of onsite students. As stated earlier, prior research has revealed that there is no significant difference in the classroom versus the online delivery method.

CONCLUSION

Because of the continuous growth in the use of the online delivery system of instruction, more students from the traditional and non-traditional populations will enroll. It appears, to date, that both delivery systems of instruction are doing the job of meeting the educational goals of educational consumers – both online and onsite. However, there is a need for online teachers to pay close attention to how the instruction is packaged and delivered in the online environment. It is vital that online teachers focus on meeting the pedagogical needs of all online consumers of instruction. Certainly there will continue to be many more variables to study as online instruction gains in popularity.

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