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Student perceptions of online courses

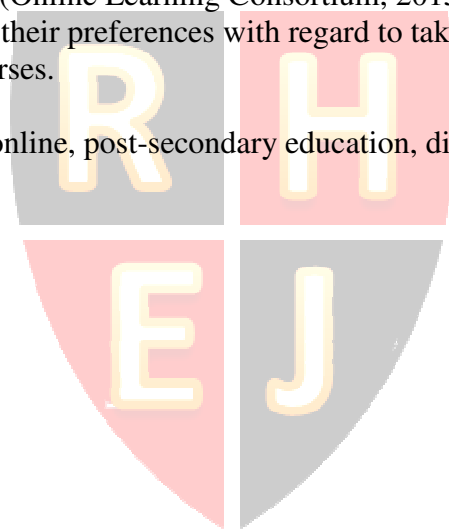
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ABSTRACT

Presently, at the post-secondary level, digital or online education is offered in addition to traditional face-to-face courses and the number of online course offerings is rapidly growing. The *Occupational Outlook Handbook* reveals that employment in "computer and information technology" occupations is projected to grow 12 percent between the years 2014 to 2024, faster than the average for all other occupations. This is directly related to an emphasis on cloud computing, the collection, storage and connectivity of data to the Internet and the continued demand for mobile computing (Online Learning Consortium, 2015). This survey will describe online student perceptions and their preferences with regard to taking online courses and their concerns with these online courses.

Keywords: online education, online, post-secondary education, distance learning



INTRODUCTION

Instruction, when completed in a face-to-face setting, can provide ongoing immediate feedback to faculty members and students about the lesson, delivery and experience. Observing a student's body language and non-verbal cues allows the faculty member to immediately adjust or develop the response for the students and allows for additional questioning to gain a more detailed idea of the information needed. Online education does not provide these same clues and instead the faculty member and students must rely more on written responses or feedback to assignments, discussion boards, or direct questioning. What might be perceived and easily achieved in the classroom requires a little more probing and questioning in an online course.

Investigating and analyzing how online courses should be designed and arranged should be an integral part of online teaching methodology as well as learning the students' preferences about their online experience. Developing a mechanism that allows students to make inquiries or ask for clarifications about their assignments should definitely be included in an online course. The authors at this southern Hispanic-serving institution surveyed online students to discover their preferences for online courses. The following article describes the process and results.

METHODOLOGY

Online College Students 2015: Comprehensive Data on Demands and Preferences Report is a comprehensive report of 1,500 participants that “summarizes trends in the online student experience, from recruitment to graduation, and provides insights on how to attract and serve these students (Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2015, p. 5). For this study, the authors adapted the original survey (2015 National Survey) into a short study with a cross-section of 10 demographic questions and 9 student learning preference questions. The shorter survey was administered using two faculty members' online courses at a southern Hispanic-serving institution with the intention of improving the online course designs and the students' overall online learning experience.

The three courses that were used for this survey did not have any equivalent face-to-face courses available for students during the fall 2015 semester; so students who needed this class for their program of study had to enroll in this online course or wait another semester. Volunteers from these three online undergraduate courses were asked to complete the survey which was administered during the fall 2015 semester. The authors will use the responses from this survey to improve or enhance their online courses in order to provide a better learning experience for their online students. The opportunity for students to volunteer to participate in this anonymous survey was provided using *Survey Monkey* with a survey link included in the course announcement section of the courses. Neither incentives nor bonuses were offered for responding to the survey.

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Forty-six student volunteers completed this survey out of a possible 70 enrolled in these asynchronous completely online undergraduate education and paralegal courses. Ten demographic questions were asked of the participants and will be discussed in this section. There were 46 responses or participants that completed this survey. Of the 46 participants, 59% were female and 41% male. For the ethnicity question, 82% were Hispanic or Latino, 11% White or Caucasian and 5% Black or African-American with 4% preferring not to answer this question. Because this southern university is a Hispanic serving institution, it was no surprise that the

majority of the participants were Hispanic. The 2015 National Survey, on the other hand, reported the majority of their results to this ethnicity question to be 71% White or Caucasian, with the Hispanic group being only 6% of that population. Table 1: Ethnicity displays this information and is located in the appendix of this paper.

Of the 82% Hispanic participants in this study, 63% spoke English as their first language with 33% speaking English as a Second Language (ESL) and 4% selecting their preference not to answer the question. The authors believe it is important to note that the setting for this study is along the border between the United States and Mexico and, as this university is a distributed campus, over 120 miles of border are served. In the *UTRGV, A Support Program in Reaching Excellence (ASPIRE) Annual Reports* for 2015 - 2016, it was reported that 83% of the ASPIRE students (226) were first generation college students. The ASPIRE program is designed to assist participants with enhancing their academic skills, increase their retention and graduation rates, and promote graduate and professional school programs (ASPIRE, 2016). Because many students are classified as first generation college students at this Hispanic serving institution, the authors noted that 63% of the students in this study spoke English as their first language. This percentage may be showing a trend or shift from English as a Second Language for Hispanic students.

Table 2: Age Comparison located in the appendix displays the participants' age groups for this study as compared to the National Survey. When compared to the 2015 National Survey results representing age groups, the 2015 National Survey reported 34% were 18 to 24 years of age whereas this study indicated that the 18 to 24 year old participants in our group were 26%, lower by 8%. However, looking at the 25 to 34 years of age group, the 2015 National Survey reported 28% whereas this study's participants indicated 35% were in the 25 to 34 age group, or a 7% increase from the national survey figures. The next largest group in the 2015 National Survey was 20% for the 35 to 44 age group whereas this study indicated 24% of the respondents within that age group. All in all, if we compare age groups between the 2015 National Survey and the survey for this study, except for the first two age groups' reversal, the rest of the distribution fell along the same distributed rates.

When asked about the participant's current relationship status, 41% indicated married, 44% single and 11% divorced. The next question asked whether the participants had children under 18 years of age. 66% indicated they had no children under the age of 18 while 39% indicated they did have children under 18. Table 3: Relationship & Children located in the appendix shows the 2015 National Survey figures as compared to this survey's results.

This study was administered at a southern Texas university that is located in a city which reported in 2014 to have a median household income of \$33,390 with 35% of the population in poverty (U.S. Census, 2014). Table 4: Total Household Income which is located in the appendix provides the breakdown for this study as compared to the National Survey. In comparing the household income totals of \$54,999 and below (56%) reported in the 2015 National Survey to the totals from this study for these same dollar grouping (73%), we find that there was 17% lower household income total than the 2015 National Survey.

This demographic information provides a clear picture of the students that are enrolled in the online courses taught at this university. Responses to student learning preferences will be reported in the following section.

RESULTS

In this section, the results of student learning preference questions will be described. The first question in this series asked whether the participants had ever enrolled in any other fully online courses or programs. Table 5: Prior Online Experience located in the appendix indicates that 62% of the participants had taken prior online courses or had online program experience with only 27% never having taken an online course before the one in which they were currently participating. Because this survey only included students that were currently taking online courses in a completely online program, this might account for the large difference (14%) between the 2015 National Survey and this survey.

Secondly, when asked how likely participants would be to enroll in a classroom program if the program they wanted was not available in an online format, only 32% percent of the participants indicated they would enroll in a traditional face-to-face course if the online course were not offered. Table 6: Enroll in Face-to-Face if Online Not Available provides the breakdown of the different responses. Online courses are an expanding trend which can be demonstrated by the figures reported in the *2015 Online Tracking Report: Tracking Online Students in the United States* (Online Learning Consortium, p. 10, 2015). In 2015, there was a year-to-year 3.9% increase in the number of distance education students, up from the 3.7% rate recorded the previous year. In 2015, more than one in four students (28%) were taking at least one distance education course, a total of 5,828,826 students, a year-to-year increase of 217,275 (Online Learning Consortium, 2015). Advances in technology, such as mobile apps and adaptive learning systems, will continue to make it easier for people to continue their education online.

Table 7: Hours Spent on Online Courses, found in the appendix, displays the responses with regard to how many hours students spend on each online course to complete the required studying and assignments. Nearly half or 49% of the participants in this study reported spending between 6 and 10 hours each week studying and completing required assignments. 26% percent of the participants reported spending more than the 10 hours on their course. The largest proportion of the responses for both the 2015 National Survey and this survey was in the 6-10 hour range.

When the participants were asked their preferred model for online study, Table 8: Preferred Model for Online study located in the appendix presents the responses provided. Forty-four percent of the students in this study reported they preferred the independent study model whereas in the 2015 National Survey only 24% reported that preference. Thirty-six percent of the participants in this study indicated a preference for an instructor-led model and 20% preferred a tutorial model as compared to 39% of the 2015 National Survey for the instructor-model and 37% for the tutorial model respectively.

Students were presented with a list of specific learning activities and asked which learning activity was the most effective means of online engagement and peer connection. In the appendix, Table 9: Most Effective Means of Online Engagement displays the results for these activities. In this study, participants responded by selecting more than one means of online engagement so the total percentages displayed do not add up to 100%. This indicates the question was faulty; the instructions for answering this question should be made clearer and/or the survey instrument should be drafted to allow only one response on this question. Seventy-five percent of the participants in this study indicated they felt posting to online message boards was the most effective means of connecting with others online while 40% (the largest figure) in the 2015 National Survey reported the same; 26% indicated blogging was the second most preferred method where only 7% indicated such in the 2015 National Survey. It was of interest

that in the 2015 National Survey, 25% indicated they preferred group projects whereas only 13% selected that in this survey.

The last question queried the participants regarding their continuing concerns about online learning as displayed in Table 10: Concerns with Online Learning located in the appendix of this paper. Although a good number of students are committed to online education, the participants have concerns and see room for improvement in these courses. There were three main concerns that students in both the 2015 National Survey and our study had in common: The cost of online learning was the predominate factor of concern to 36% of our students and was also one of the top three concerns in the 2015 National Survey; staying motivated, paying attention, and staying focused is a second concern of 32% of our students as well as 27% in the 2015 National Survey; and the perception of quality of online study had a 26% response rate in our study and 27% response rate in the 2015 National Survey. These concerns suggest that more research and study should be completed that might provide for changes to occur within online design and methodology. Although there are some programs like *Quality Matters* and *Total Quality Management* available for online course design, additional data is needed to ensure that what is put in place is actually more effective than what is currently in place.

CONCLUSION

Although our sample size is too small to generalize to the larger online higher education population, a few strategies can be identified that might be helpful to other online instructors who have a large proportion of Hispanic students. Some recommendations from these authors are

- A robust and rigorous discussion board that not only requires social interaction but also consistent feedback from the instructor as well as peers should be included in the course design;
- There should be structure included in the course design with assignments providing clear instructions and also providing examples and grading rubrics for assignments;
- Included in the weekly modules should be lesson objectives;
- Some students may display field-dependent or field-independent characteristics and should therefore be given a choice between individual or group projects;
- When possible, keep the structure uniform between all courses offered by the same instructor.

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APPENDIX

Ethnicity	2015 National Survey N = 1500	UTRGV N = 46
Hispanic or Latino	6%	82%
White / Caucasian	71%	11%
Black or African American	11%	5%
Prefer not to answer	3%	4%
American Indian or Alaskan Native	0%	0%
Asian or Pacific Islander	5%	0%
Other (please specify)	5%	0%

Age	2015 National Survey N = 1500	UTRGV N = 46
18 to 24	34%	26%
25 to 34	28%	35%
35 to 44	20%	24%
45 to 54	13%	11%
55 or older	5%	4%

Table 3: Relationship & Children		
Status/Children	2015 National Survey N = 1500	UTRGV N = 46
Single	54%	44%
Married	45%	41%
No Children 18 years & younger	50%	66%
Children 18 years & younger	49%	34%

Table 4: Total Household Income		
Income	2015 National Survey N = 1500	UTRGV N = 46
Less than \$25,000	20%	33%
\$25,000 to \$39,999	22%	22%
\$40,000 to \$54,999	14%	18%
\$55,000 to \$69,999	12%	5%
\$70,000 to \$84,999	9%	2%
\$85,000 to \$99,999	6%	5%
\$100,000 to \$114,999	4%	4%
\$115,000 to \$129,999	2%	9%
Prefer not to say	7%	2%
Totals	96%	

Table 5: Prior Online Experience		
Responses	2015 National Survey N = 1500	UTRGV N = 46
Yes I took online courses prior to taking this one	48%	62%
No	43%	27%
Yes, I completed an online program	11%	11%

Table 6: Enroll in Face-to-Face if Online Not Available

Responses	2015 National Survey N = 1500	UTRGV N = 46
Probably Not	21%	27%
Definitely Not	12%	22%
Definitely Would	15%	22%
Probably Would	25%	16%
Not Sure	28%	13%

Table 7: Hours Spent on Online Courses

Responses	2015 National Survey N = 1500	UTRGV N = 46
5 hours or fewer per week	19%	25%
6-10 hours per week	43%	49%
11-15 hours per week	21%	11%
16-20 hours per week	10%	4%
More than 21 hours per week	6%	11%

Table 8: Preferred Model for Online Study

Responses	2015 National Survey N = 1500	UTRGV N = 46
Independent Study: Students study independently at their own pace, with books and other resources provided by the university and then complete assignments/exams.	24%	44%
Instructor-Led: Students complete a series of instructor-led learning activities and discussion forums with a class of other students and then complete assignments/exams.	39%	36%
Tutorial: Students complete a series of learning activities at their own pace, with an instructor available to answer questions and then complete assignments/exams.	37%	20%

Responses	2015 National Survey N = 1500	UTRGV N = 46
Posting to online message boards	40%	75%
Blogging	7%	26%
Being assigned a "partner" in your class	16%	20%
Other	1%	20%
Simulations	11%	17%
Doing group projects	25%	13%

Concerns	2015 National Survey N = 1500	UTRGV N = 46
Cost	26%	36%
Motivation/attention/focus	27%	32%
Perceptions of quality of online study	27%	26%
Other	2%	26%
Inconsistent/poor contact and communication with instructors	21%	21%
Inconsistent/poor quality of instruction	17%	15%
More difficult than classroom	13%	15%
Need for costly technology	16%	13%
Lack of direct contact with other students	17%	8%
Takes longer to complete	12%	8%