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Heidi S. Harris

Eastern Oregon University, hasharris@gmail.com

Elwyn W. Martin

Eastern Oregon University, emartin@eou.edu

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Keywords

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Student Motivations for Choosing Online Classes

Heidi S. Harris Eastern
Oregon University La
Grande, Oregon, USA
hharris@eou.edu

Elwyn W. Martin Eastern
Oregon University La
Grande, Oregon, USA
emartin@eou.edu

Abstract

Increasing budget pressures on universities are causing many to turn to online education to solve their budget woes. However, as the marketplace for online learning expands, so does the opportunity for students to become ever more selective of the programs and universities they choose. The researchers sought to identify those factors that motivate students to choose or not choose to take online courses at Eastern Oregon University (EOU). Furthermore, students currently enrolled at EOU were asked to identify the interactions and services they would like to see increase at the university. Results of the survey are discussed in light of university mission and strategic plans to demonstrate how survey data works to drive policy decisions in uncertain financial times.

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Introduction

Universities and colleges nationwide are experiencing constrained fiscal environments, particularly in decreased funding from state revenue. While institutions are facing these budget shortfalls, they are also receiving increased pressure from accreditation bodies and the national media to tighten quality and increase graduation rates. Universities can no longer work to simply attract new students; they must also ensure that students are having a quality educational experience once they enroll.

One way colleges are seeking to address the first of these twin-pressures is through increasing enrollment in online courses and programs. According to Allen and Seaman (2010), in the U.S "66 percent of institutions reported increased demand for new courses and programs, and 73 percent reported increased demand for existing online courses and programs" (pg. 1). Fifty-four percent of those same institutions experienced a higher demand for face-to-face courses as well. The same study also showed that 74 percent of reporting public institutions rated online education as "critical to their long-term strategy" (pg. 2).

Eastern Oregon University (EOU) is one such institution. The primary strategic mission of the university is to provide access, affordability, and engagement through integrated, high-quality liberal arts and professional programs that lead to responsible and reflective action in a diverse and interconnected world. EOU serves a 45-county population in rural Eastern

Oregon. Approximately half of EOU students are enrolled as primarily online students.

Students enroll in online programs and courses for reasons that are primarily related to access, convenience and flexibility. Noel-Levitz National Online Learners Priorities Report (2010) indicates that the top three priorities for students choosing to enroll in online programs were convenience, flexible programming, and the ability to fit education into their work schedule. However, the key to not only growing online programs but also retaining students requires meeting student needs *during* online education. While students might choose online programs for convenience and flexibility, they persist in online programs for a myriad of reasons.

Heyman (2010) reports that three areas of importance in relation to student retention are "student support and student connection with the institution, quality of interaction between faculty and students, and student self-discipline." Street's (2010) analysis of eight studies of online learner persistence identified "significant external factors such as course structure and support, person factors such as self-efficacy and autonomy, and academic factors such as time and study management." These studies show that while, as with face-to-face learning, a number of variables remain outside of the control of the institution, elements such as course-structure and faculty support can make a positive difference in the retaining of online students.

The present authors administered a survey to on campus and online students at EOU. The purpose of the survey was to understand the motivations of students who choose either face-to-face or online courses, and subsequently to inquire as to what elements of online courses and/or university services students would like to see increase or remain the same. In addition, the researchers sought to understand student perceptions of online and face-to-face courses, and how these perceptions guide the decision to take either online or face-to-face courses. EOU Survey results are paired against those from the Noel-Levitz National Online Learners Priorities Report in order to provide a basis of comparison against both EOU enrollment and national averages. Finally, results of the survey are examined in terms of discussions at both the institutional and state-level and provide insight for further investigation of student decision-making and perceptions of online education.

Methods

Defining Delivery Mode

For the purposes of this study, delivery mode is defined as the primary means by which learning modules, assessments, and other class materials are provided to a class and from students to the instructor. Online learning is defined as a class that offers its entire curriculum in the online course delivery mode, thereby allowing students to participate regardless of geographic location, independent of time and place (Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, & Turoff 1995). Face-to-face (or on-campus) courses are those courses delivered primarily in the traditional brick-and-mortar classroom. The face-to-face course might be computer-mediated (enhanced by web tools or in a computer classroom), but the primary instruction takes place in an environment bounded by a single, synchronous time and place.

Participants

Sixteen percent of the 4000 students enrolled at EOU responded to our survey ($n = 644$). Survey participants were overwhelmingly female (71%), which is comparable to overall enrollment at EOU (68%). The ethnic makeup of our sample was 89% Caucasian, 5%

Hispanic, 2.5% Pacific Islander, 2% American Indian, 1% African American, and .5% other. The college level of our participants was 21% freshman, 12% sophomore, 25.5% junior, 28% senior, 7% graduate level, and 6.5% other. The age of survey participants was distributed across four broad categories (18-22, 36%; 23-30, 24%; 31-40, 20%; and 40+, 35%). Students completing the survey were self-identified as either fully or mostly on-campus (44%) or fully or mostly online (50.5%)¹. These numbers are similar to overall enrollments (on-campus 39% and online 48%).

Survey

The survey consisted of (16) questions, each with a multiple choice response format. Survey questions can be viewed in Appendix A. The Survey was disseminated using Survey Monkey online survey software. Skip-Logic was applied to questions for which the response was dependent upon course delivery modality – i.e., on-line or on-campus.

Results

When age and course delivery mode were cross-referenced for survey participants an interesting pattern emerged. The number of students who identified as either fully or mostly online tended to sharply increase with age, with the majority of students in the 18-22 range self-identifying as fully or mostly on-campus students (see Figure 1).

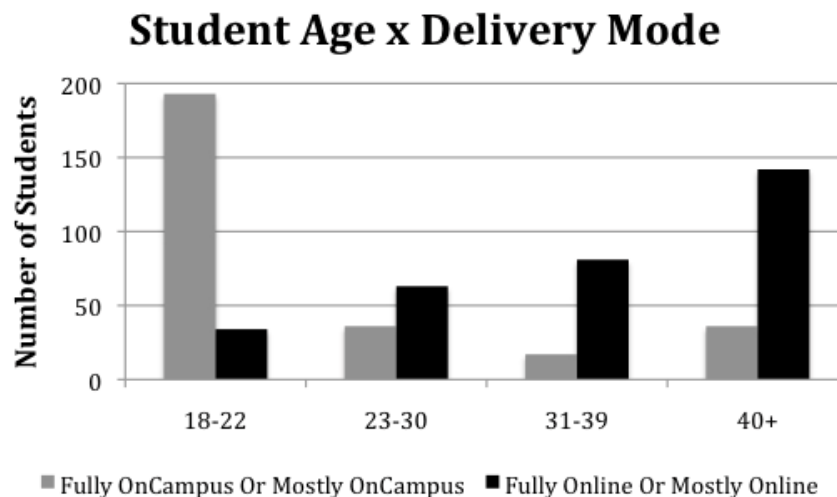


Figure 1. Course delivery mode at EOU by student age.

Motivations for Selecting Course Delivery Mode

After students identified their primary delivery mode, subsequent questions asked them to identify motivations for either taking or not taking online courses at EOU. Students who identified as fully on-campus identified two primary reasons for not taking online courses: lack of need for online courses or the desire for face-to-face interaction. The next most prevalent reasons centered around misunderstanding or lack of information about online courses. Thirty-five percent of students chose face-to-face courses because they felt that

online courses would prevent them from connecting with or working with others, indicating a perception of online courses as isolating. However, sixty-five percent of students who identified as fully on-campus (face-to-face) indicated that they would consider taking an online course in the future.

Students identifying as taking at least one online course strongly gravitated toward place-bound or time-bound issues, such as work or family commitments or distance from campus, as primary motivators for selecting online courses. As opposed to those students selecting face-to-face classes, who frequently identified learning preferences as motivating factors in their responses, only a small percentage of students selecting at least one online class included responses centered on learning preference as a motivator. Seventeen percent of students taking at least one online class indicated that they preferred learning online as opposed to 65% of fully on-campus students who indicated that they learn better through face-to-face instruction (see Table 1).

Table 1. Motivations for Students to Select Online vs. Face-to-Face Courses

Face-to-Face	%	Online	%
All of my classes fit into my on campus schedule, so I don't need to take online classes.	66	I can complete my coursework in an online course when it is convenient for me.	62
I learn better through face-to-face instruction.	65	I live too far away from EOU's La Grande campus or regional centers to easily commute.	51
I enjoy being on campus and would feel disconnected from others if I take classes online.	35	Online classes allow me to earn my degree and honor family obligations.	45
I enjoy working with other students in class, and I can't do that online.	27	Online classes allow me to meet my class requirements and keep my job.	45
Online classes are more difficult than on campus classes.	21	The classes I needed or wanted had time conflicts, so I took one of them online.	27
I don't understand how online classes work.	18	Online classes allow me to take summer classes when I go home/travel in the summer.	17
I haven't considered taking online courses before.	17	I prefer learning online.	17

Experiences with Online Courses at EOU

In addition to identifying student motivations for selecting online or face-to-face courses, the survey asked those students who had taken at least one online course at EOU to identify what they have frequently experienced in their online courses. The questions that most often received a designation of "Very Frequently" or "Frequently" were those items familiar in traditional brick-and-mortar classrooms: written assignments, multiple-choice exams, and discussion with peers. The elements that most often received a designation of "Very Infrequently" or "Infrequently" were elements that involved multi-media, proctored examinations or online discussions with the instructor (see Table 2).

Table 2. Student Experiences with Instructional Methods in Online Courses

Very Frequently or Frequently	%	Very Infrequently or Infrequently	%
Written assignments in my classes.	84	The option to engage in synchronous (real-time) online discussions with my instructor and/or other students.	71
Written grading standards so I know what I am expected to do in discussion boards and other written assignments.	82	The use of video lectures from my instructor.	64
Multiple-choice exams.	73	Proctored assessments.	48
Prompt responses to my email and/or phone calls (within 24-28 hours).	73	The use of multimedia to help me understand concepts in the class (i.e., videos from sources other than your instructor, interactive software, etc.).	45
Interaction with my peers on discussion boards.	71	Interaction with my instructor in discussion boards.	37

A final question asked what elements students desired more of regarding interaction with services, instructors, and other students in their online courses.² In all categories, students indicated that they would like “the same” or “more” interaction, materials or services, and in two categories, the differences were slight between students indicating that they would like *more* interaction and those who were satisfied: interaction with the instructor (44% more and 49% same) and online tutoring (38% more and 41% same). These results indicate that students desire interaction and support in their online courses.

Conclusions from the Survey Data

While the survey data collected provides a brief glimpse into why students are selecting online courses and their experiences in those courses, some informative conclusions can be drawn from the data. First, online learners at EOU are similar demographically to those learners at universities nationwide, which makes the results of this survey of potential interest to similar institutions. Second, convenience and flexibility were the primary motivations for students who chose online courses at EOU. These findings closely mirror the Noel-Levitz (2010) survey results, which indicated that the three primary motivations for students choosing online programs were convenience, flexibility, and the ability to fit courses into a current work schedule. Therefore, both in regards to demographic information and listed priorities for online students, EOU students are similar to those across the nation in terms of motivating factors for selecting online courses and programs. These conclusions are important as universities seek to attract students from areas outside their primary service areas.

Once students select online courses at EOU, they are often satisfied with the levels of interaction with peers and campus services. However, a significant number of students

indicated that they would like increased interaction with faculty and additional online tutoring services. Survey participants indicated that online course assignments and evaluations were primarily those that they would find in face-to-face courses: written assignments, multiple-choice exams, and discussions with peers. Fewer online faculty members used multi-media or synchronous communication tools in their courses as options for student instruction or interaction. These results indicate that more emphasis could be placed on assisting or encouraging faculty to more frequently use a variety of multi-media and instructional tools in online courses.

Potential for Institutional Decisions and Communications Based on Survey Data

A number of conversations have surrounded the collection of this survey data on the EOU campus and at the state level, particularly given EOU's mission of affordability, access and engagement. For instance, a common perception at the state and university level is that younger students (those identified as Digital Natives or the "Net" Generation) are those more likely to take online courses. However, survey data indicates that non-traditional students (30 and older) are more likely to be drawn toward online courses. Understanding the needs of non-traditional students, including their desires for interaction with faculty, will be a key element in both marketing directed at those populations and providing online assignments that are flexible and challenging for learners with a variety of time- and place-constraints.

The following are ways that this data is being used in strategic planning and in communicating with state legislators and administrators and administrators and faculty at the university.

Emphasis on faculty and personal connections in online courses

In both conversations at the university- and state-level, this survey data has informed decisions about faculty support and recruiting and retention of students. Primarily, administrators at EOU have used this information to emphasize that the personal aspect of education is as important online as it is in face-to-face classes. In particular, this data is relevant in decisions regarding staffing of online courses, development of student services targeted toward fully-online student populations, and the insistence that personal connections with students must be maintained in order to provide a quality education for all students at the university.

Faculty development and incentives to use interactive technologies

At the university, new initiatives for online faculty development are being informed by this survey data. Incentives for experimentation with Web 2.0 and emerging technologies are priorities with the administration, as are creating faculty professional development opportunities, such as funded summer institutes and online certification programs, that allow faculty the time, space, and support to experiment with and incorporate interactive technologies in their online and face-to-face classrooms. The primary emphasis is to move from a "bag-of-tricks" emphasis for faculty professional development, one that focuses on "training" faculty to use particular tools for the sake of incorporating technology, and toward the targeted use of technology shaped by discipline-specific and outcome-appropriate goals.

Updating online information and technology

In addition to informing decisions about online courses and faculty development, this survey indicates the need for increased education across campus about what online courses entail for students who might be considering online courses in addition to face-to-face courses. Helping students make decisions about whether to take online or face-to-face classes will

both ensure that students have a learning experience that best suits their needs and also potentially create space for additional on-campus students who truly require face-to-face instruction (either through adding additional face-to-face courses or utilizing hybrid or blended courses). Those students who selected face-to-face courses because they enjoyed contact with instructors or other students might be motivated to move to online courses as opportunities for those types of interactions increase in online courses. Encouraging instructors to utilize more interactive online technologies might provide the contact that these students crave in face-to-face courses.

Universities are advised to use student surveys to form a data-driven basis for strategic discussions as they begin to provide online courses or increase online course offerings in response to fiscal realities. This survey data suggests a means of ensuring that strategic initiatives, including beginning or expanding online programs and/or expanding the use of technology on campus, to ensure students have strong, interactive learning experiences in addition to the universities desires to boost recruiting and ensure retention.

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Footnotes

¹ The remaining 5.5% of survey participants identified themselves as enrolled at one of EOU's Regional learning centers. Regional learning centers are satellite campuses with limited course offerings.

² Students were specifically asked about seven areas: 1) interaction with instructors, 2) interaction with peers, 3) contact with advisors, 4) contact with financial aid and other campus services, 5) online tutoring options, 6) access to admissions materials and representatives, and 7) registration information and resources.