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Student Motives for Taking Online Courses in Educational Administration

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This study was conducted with students enrolled in a master's degree program in educational administration at a private research university that offered all required courses in both online and in-class formats. The purposes were to determine (a) the extent to which online courses were selected, (b) the level of importance students placed on four common motives for taking online courses, and (c) levels of association between the importance of values and two demographic variables (employment level and years of teaching experience). The extent to which students took online courses varied considerably. Convenience and flexibility were the most important motives and instructional preference was the least important motive. Although associations between each motive and the two demographic variables were small, the correlation coefficients for convenience and teaching experience and for flexibility and teaching experience were slightly higher than the others.

The original intent of distance learning was to make higher education more accessible for students who lived a considerable distance from a college campus. Over the past several decades, the number of colleges and universities offering online courses and the aggregate number of courses offered have increased substantially. Concurrently, student motives for engaging in distance learning have broadened. Even some full-time, campus-based students now enroll in one or more online classes.

Despite a rapid growth in distance education, skepticism regarding the effectiveness of this instructional format persists. More than a few hiring officials across

various types of organizations have expressed negative dispositions toward and distrust of online degrees and courses (Carnevale, 2007; Columbaro & Monaghan, 2009). Their misgivings have centered on two issues: comparability and student motives. The first matter relates to the question: Are online courses as effective as traditional in-class courses? The second matter relates to the question: Why do students enroll in on-line courses? Much of the previous research on online courses has addressed the first query, primarily by comparing distance learning and traditional learning in three areas: student satisfaction, instructional quality/rigor, and learning outcomes. To date, however, much less research has focused on the second question, student motives.

As part of the general trend toward offering distance education, many educational administration departments now offer part or all of a master's degree online (Kowalski, 2006). In most states, the degree is required to obtain a principal's license. This study was conducted with students enrolled in such a program at a private research university. At the time of the study, the university (a) provided all required courses in both online and in-class formats, (b) charged the same tuition rate for both formats, and (c) allowed students to determine how many online courses they took. The investigation had three primary purposes.

1. Determining the extent to which students did or would take online courses
2. Identifying levels of importance students placed on four motives (*convenience, cost savings, flexibility, and instructional preference*) for choosing online courses
3. Determining levels of association between the importance of the four motives and each of two demographic variables, *teaching experience* and *level of teaching assignment*

Generally, findings indicate that there was considerable variation in both enrollment patterns and the importance levels of the motives. Although all associations were small, a statistically significant association was found to exist between *teaching experience* and two motives, *flexibility* and *convenience*.

Literature Review

The National Center for Education Statistics (*Condition of Education*, 2011) reported the number of students enrolled in at least one distance learning course increased from 1.1 million in 2002 to 12.2 million in 2006. This number is forecasted to exceed 20 million by 2018. Consequently, distance learning is expected to account for an even higher percentage of college courses in the future. Distance learning research is usually complex because of provider differences related to institutional mission (e.g., not-for-profit versus for-profit universities); program scope (e.g., number of faculty, degrees offered); and accreditation (not all institutions offering online courses are accredited by regional, state, or professional agencies). Thus, generalizations about online experiences are precarious; for example, negative views expressed by employers may pertain specifically to degrees and courses offered by unaccredited, for-profit institutions (Carnevale, 2007).

Instructional Quality

Understandably, the rapid increase in distance learning has caused a number of researchers to examine the comparability of online and in-class courses in terms of instruction and student learning. According to Baker (2003), instructional differences have been reported in three areas: *instructor-student interaction* (e.g., the extent to which learning is observed or measured in real time); *learner interaction* (e.g., the extent to which ideas and information are exchanged between and among students); and *attendance* (e.g., the extent to which

students are motivated and accept responsibility for learning). These dissimilarities, however, do not confirm instructional inferiority, largely because quality studies almost always have been based on student perceptions of institutional variables, such as course structure and requirements (e.g., Maquire, 2005; Yang & Darrington, 2010) and student variables such as satisfaction (e.g., Yang & Cornelious, 2005).

With respect to student learning, two types of studies have been conducted. The first entails comparisons of learning outcomes as measured by metrics such as test scores and grades. The findings reported in this line of research, including meta-analyses (e.g., Dell, Low & Wilker, 2010; Shachar & Neumann, 2003), remain inconclusive.

The second category of studies has examined student learning in relation to a specific variable, the most notable being student learning style. Although some researchers have reported a statistically significant association (e.g., Aragon, Johnson & Shaik, 2002; Boyd, 2004; Meyer, 2003), others (e.g., Fahy & Ally, 2005; Kanuka & Nocente, 2003; Terrell, 2002) have reported conflicting findings. Shachar (2008) attributes the mixed results primarily to variations in treatments, settings, measurement instruments, and research methods. Battalio (2009) adds that some researchers mistakenly treated instructional preferences and learning style as synonyms. The former pertains to student predilections in areas such as course requirements, procedures, and grading practices. The latter is an individual's preferred way of learning (Grasha, 1996) validated by relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment (DeTure, 2004). After an extensive review of literature on learning style and instructional preferences, Santo (2006) concluded that the extent to which identified preferences have influenced distance learning outcomes remained unanswered.

In light of mixed research findings, the effectiveness of online courses continues to be a concern, especially in the applied sciences. In the case of school administration, for example, employers and professors have raised concerns about the extent to which distance learning adequately incorporates the development of skills and dispositions (Kowalski, 2006). In online courses, learning experiences occur in relative isolation (Beam, 2010) making it difficult to ascertain if students can apply and believe in what they have learned. This is especially troubling in educational administration because elements of the psychomotor, affective, and social domains are program accreditation and state licensing criteria. Emphasizing that the academic preparation and development of district and school administrators is fundamentally and irrevocably an interpersonal, relation process, Fusarelli (2004) warned that pre-service and continuing education should not take place via a disembodied and depersonalized delivery system.

Motives

In an effort to explain the rapid growth of distance learning, researchers have examined three categories of motives: *social-political*, *institutional*, and *students*. From a social-political standpoint, the growth of online courses has been attributed to externally set agendas, such as state legislation providing approval and incentives for distance learning (Calvert, 2005). Often, governmental motives have been nested in two assumptions: online courses are generally less expensive than in-class courses; distance learning lowers the cost of higher education, partially by increasing market competition.

Institutionally, many universities have had pragmatic motives for offering online courses and degrees. Most notably, they experienced greater competition for students while incurring a relative decline in organizational resources (Amirault, 2012; Margolis, 2000; Navarro, 2000). Initially,

academic departments collaborated with divisions of continuing education to deliver online courses; however, these classes are now so pervasive that academic departments provide them independently, often in an effort to generate fiscal resources (Ashcroft, 2013).

Research on student motives has been limited but less mixed than research on instruction. Several studies (e.g., Braun, 2008; Klesius, Homan, & Thompson, 1997) have found convenience, flexibility, and cost savings to be the three most common attractions. In their review of research, Thomerson and Smith (1996) found that convenience even trumped dissatisfaction. Specifically, some students continued to take online courses even though they disliked the online course(s) they already had completed.

Student self-efficacy is another factor associated with online enrollments. Self-efficacy is the expectation that one can accomplish specific behaviors necessary to produce a desired outcome and it often increases as professionals gain experience (Bandura, 1997). Studying enrollments in online course, Artino (2010) found that the higher a student's confidence regarding his or her ability to learn online (self-efficacy) the more likely he or she was to take online courses.

Study of Graduate Student Motives

Methods

The defined population in this study was 202 full-time and part-time students enrolled in a master's degree program in educational administration at a private research university. The 30-semester hour program consisted of 9 required, 3-semester hour courses and an internship. The institution was selected for three reasons: (a) students had the option of completing each course in a traditional in-class or online format, (b) tuition for both instructional modes was the same, and (c) students self-determined the number of online courses they would take.

Data were collected via electronic survey and analyzed by the authors during the fall semester, 2013. Content validity was established by a three-member panel of experts, all of whom were professors not authors of this study. Respondents were assured confidentiality and the study received institutional review board approval from the university in which the study was conducted. The study was guided by three questions:

1. To what extent did the students select online courses?
2. What level of importance did students ascribe to four possible motives (*convenience, cost savings, flexibility, and instructional preference*) for selecting online courses?
3. To what extent was perceived importance of each of the four motives associated with each of two demographic variables: *level of teaching experience* (years) and *level of assignment* (elementary or secondary)?

The first two research questions were answered by calculating descriptive statistics. The third research question was answered by calculating Pearson correlation coefficients (r) and applying them as a descriptive statistic. Chen and Popovich (2002) describe multiple uses of Pearson's r , including special cases utilizing forms of the correlation coefficient as a descriptive statistic. The following rubric, described by Cohen and Cohen (1983), was used to determine strength of association:

- Small association: (+ or -) correlations from .01 to .29
- Moderate association: (+ or -) correlations from .30 to .49
- Large association: (+ or -) correlations of .50 and higher

The study had three notable limitations. First, the defined population only included master's degree students in educational administration enrolled at a Midwest, private university. Second, findings relied on the accuracy of self-reported motives. As such, validity depends on students having sufficient self-awareness and a disposition to respond honestly. Third, no inferences could be made about non-responders.

Findings

Surveys were completed and returned by 91 students, a return rate of 45%. Since the students were at various stages of the master's degree program, they were asked to indicate how many courses they had completed and planned to complete via distance learning. The results are shown in Table 1. As these data reveal, only a small percentage of the respondents had not taken or did not intend to take at least one online course, and those who took or expected to take three or more online classes exceeds 50%.

Table 1: Number of Online Courses

Number of Online Courses (either completed or to be completed)	Frequency	Percentage
0	12	13.3
1 or 2	30	33.3
3 or 4	24	26.7
5 or 6	13	14.4
7 or 8	04	04.4
9	07	07.8
Total	90*	100.0

*One student did not answer the question.

Based on a review of extant literature, four possible motives (convenience, cost savings, flexibility, and instructional preference) for taking online courses were identified. Respondents were asked to assign an importance value for each motive by selecting one of the following four responses:

Major – Large importance

Moderate – Average importance

Minor – Small importance

None – No importance

Only students who took or planned to take at least one online class answered these questions. The outcomes are contained in Table 2 where the motives are listed in a descending order of importance in the first column.

Table 2: Importance of Possible Motives

Motive	Level of Importance in Relation to Online Course Selection			
	Major	Moderate	Minor	None
Convenience	59%	14%	11%	16%
Flexibility	46%	22%	14%	18%
Cost savings	13%	11%	23%	53%
Instructional preference	05%	18%	14%	63%

Pearson correlations were calculated to determine levels of association between each motive and each of the two demographic variables, teaching experience (years) and level of assignment (operationalized to include only those solely indicating either elementary schools or secondary schools). The average (mean) level of teaching experience was 5.47 years and the standard deviation was 4.07. With respect to level of assignment, 40% of the respondents were

employed in elementary schools and the remainder in secondary schools. The correlation coefficients are contained in Table 3.

Table 3: Associations between Motive Importance and Demographic Variables

Motives	Respondent Demographic Characteristics	
	Teaching experience	Level of assignment
Cost savings	.09	.21
Convenience	.19*	.11
Flexibility	.29*	.04
Instructional preference	.14	.08

Note: * = $p \leq .05$

Only two of the eight correlation coefficients were statistically significant even though neither level of association was classified as being moderate. Students with greater teaching experience (i.e., more than 5 years) placed more importance on convenience and flexibility than did other respondents.

Discussion

Given the growth in distance learning generally and in educational administration specifically, an increasing number of persons who apply for school administration positions will have completed all or a substantial portion of their graduate education online. Accordingly, superintendents and other hiring officials will benefit from empirical evidence that provides insights into student motives for taking online courses and their level of competence after completing them.

In this study, the finding regarding the quantity of online enrollments per student was lower than expected because aggregate online enrollments in the master's degree program had increased incrementally over the previous 5

years. Two factors may partially explain why the online selection data for students were not higher in this study. First, a considerable number of students who took all or most of their courses online may be among the non-responders. Second, students may actually take more online courses than they anticipate in the early stages of the program.

Findings regarding three of the four motives, *convenience*, *flexibility*, and *cost savings*, are congruent with a number of earlier studies based on different samples and contexts, such as those conducted by Braun (2008), Klesius, Homan, & Thompson (1997), and Thomerson & Smith (1996). The importance of *cost savings* may have been reduced in this study because in-class and online courses had identical tuition rates. The low importance ascribed to the fourth motive, *instructional preference*, is congruent with Battalio's (2009) assertion that instructional formats are not a primary reason why students take online courses.

When using the correlation coefficients as a descriptive statistic, all the associations between motive importance and the two demographic variables were small. Two coefficients, however, were found to be statistically significant. They were the importance of *flexibility* and *teaching experience* and the importance of *convenience* and *teaching experience*. Specifically, teachers who had more than 5 years of experience placed more importance on these two motives than did teachers with less experience. Although reasons for this finding are not clear, two factors may be relevant. One is self-efficacy. This attribute often is increased as professionals gain experience as practitioners; therefore, confidence that one can learn online may reduce apprehensions about selecting instructional formats considered to be flexible and convenient (Artino, 2010). The other factor is social and professional obligations. As teachers gain experience, they often undertake added family and school responsibilities and as a result, their ability to take in-class courses is reduced.

To date, meta-analyses of distance learning research reveals that in-class and online courses are comparable in terms of the cognitive domain. Yet, the effectiveness of academic studies and practice, especially in applied sciences such as school administration, is also predicated on skills, dispositions, and social relationships. In this vein, the limitations of learning in relative isolation remain a concern.

Additional research on motives for selecting online courses in educational administration should be conducted within states, university programs, and school districts. Such studies should examine instructional rigor and learning outcomes not only in the cognitive domain, but also in the psychomotor, affective, and social domains. Perhaps most important, additional research on possible relationships between student motives and student learning is needed. For example, do students who see convenience and flexibility as primary motives achieve at the same level as other students? Last, novice principals who completed most or all of their licensing requirements via distance learning should be examined in relation to their job performance across all four domains.

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