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# HOW THEY SEE IT: EMPLOYER PERCEPTIONS OF ONLINE VERSUS TRADITIONAL LEARNING AT THE GRADUATE LEVEL

Article by Cessna Winslow and Logan Allen

## Abstract

This study is part of a larger dissertation study that explored perceptions of Public Relations (PR) among graduate higher education publics regarding distance learning as contrasted with face-to-face learning contexts. Today, online degrees are seen as inferior to traditional, face-to-face classroom degrees, and because one primary goal of obtaining a higher education degree is to receive gainful employment, this portion of the dissertation study assessed employer perceptions of online versus traditional education at the graduate level. Human resource administrators from educational establishments who had experience hiring people with graduate education degrees were interviewed. The findings of this study indicate that employers have a positive impression of online learning, dependent on the discipline. However, employers do not hold a positive view of degrees obtained from for-profit institutions. Lastly, the findings indicate that colleges and universities should strive to ensure rigor and quality in their online offerings while exploring ways to engage students in their virtual classrooms.

*Keywords:* distance learning, employer perceptions, higher education, online learning, public relations

## Introduction

Online courses at colleges and universities in the United States have expanded to be more prevalent than ever, and students now have the ability to take hybrid courses, solely online courses, and even complete degree programs online (Abamu, 2018). A large population of students participate in learning experiences online as opposed to face-to-face classroom experience (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2012). "Today, nearly one in three US college students takes at least one online course during their academic career and 15% are enrolled in degree programs that are completely online" (Kizilcec, Davis, & Wang, 2019, p. 4). Schwabel (2013) pointed out that economics is forcing today's

students to make choices, saying “they are increasingly turning to online learning” as a cost effective alternative form of education (p. 1). In addition, students are turning to online courses over traditional courses due to factors such as employment, family obligations, and distance (Andrews, 2018). These online programs meet a growing demand for higher education, lowering costs, and reaching students who could not attend a traditional degree program, however, online degrees are frequently seen as inferior (Kizilcec et al., 2019). Distance learning is at a Public Relations (PR) crossroads (Winslow, 2014). While distance learning is gaining in popularity, some professionals, including employers, believe research still needs to be done to establish credible ways of providing and evaluating distance learning. Employers are key stakeholders, as many applicants will hold some form of online education, and their opinions and viewpoints need to be considered (Linardopoulos, 2012). In 2010, a poll of 449 randomly selected human resource (HR) professionals, by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) found that 60 percent preferred job applicants with a degree from a traditional institution over those who earned an online degree, presuming the candidates had similar professional experience. While 87% of those polled agreed that distance learning was viewed more favorably than it was five years previously, distance learning is not yet seen as truly equivalent to face-to-face training. The study also showed that because traditional schools were adding online programs, and online institutions were adding physical locations, sharp distinctions between online and offline degrees were becoming more challenging (SHRM, 2010).

## Employer Perceptions of Online Learning

Securing gainful employment is often a key reason people invest in higher education, thus how employers view online learning and degrees earned online is important. While acceptance of online degrees may be increasing in the workforce, skepticism remains. In the 1990s and early 2000s, widespread diploma mills, or unaccredited online degree programs, fostered a stigma in the minds of employers as these programs had a perceived lack of rigor and the heightened ability for academic dishonesty (Etherington, 2018). In 2007, career information company, Vault Inc., surveyed 101 employers and learned that a small majority (51%) said they favored applicants who earned a traditional degree over those with online degrees (Carnevale, 2007). Researchers noted that the most skeptical managers are the ones who may possibly know the least about it and as more traditional schools increase their online offerings, applicants may find that hiring managers may not be able to distinguish between online and traditional learning (Carnevale, 2007). Furthermore, universities may strategically choose to exclude the learning medium on student transcripts so employers would not be able to tell the difference between online and traditional graduates (Andrews, 2018). Columbaro and Monaghan (2009) compiled a literature review, spanning almost seven years, and indicates that there is still a stigma associated to online learning and degrees during the hiring process.

In spring of 2011, Pew Research Center conducted a pair of surveys assessing peoples' views of online learning in America. One was a telephone survey of 2,142 adults. The other, done online, and in association with The Chronicle of Higher

Education, surveyed presidents of 1,055 two-year and four-year private, public, and for-profit colleges and universities. One of the findings showed a clear difference in the views of the two groups with regard to the value of online learning. While half (51%) of the college presidents surveyed say online courses offer an equal value compared with courses taken in a classroom, only 29% of the public agreed (Taylor, Parker, Lenhart, & Patten, 2011). A 2015 Gallup poll found that 46% of Americans believe that online colleges and universities provide a high-quality education, which is up 30% from the same poll conducted in 2011 (Abamu, 2018). Protopsaltis and Baum (2019) explained that employers and the public both view online degrees less favorably and attribute them with a lower value than face-to-face classroom degrees. However, as more of the public comes to consist of young people who have grown up with the Internet and mobile technology, the desire for effective distance education will continue to grow. For example, Sweeney (2006) conducted more than 35 focus groups of Millennial college students in 15 states, and characterized this generation as being “impatient, experiential learners, digital natives, multi-taskers, and gamers who love the flat, networked world and expect nomadic connectivity, 24x7” (p. 1). Schwabel (2013) argued that:

Millennials understand that the future of education is online and since they were brought up with the internet, they are prepared for that change. Education should not be a one size fits all model because everyone learns differently, regardless of age, occupation and location. More online courses should be offered to cater to those who learn better in a virtual classroom. (p. 1)

Millennials view higher education as important, and they “believe that education should be accessible to everyone and that online education can be as valuable as a traditional form of education” (Johnson, Gutter, Xu, Cho & DeVaney, 2016, p. 197). Millennials now comprise over half of all employees in the world (Calk & Patrick, 2017), and online colleges and universities appeal to working adults (Gardner, 2019) so millennial students are partaking in these distance learning opportunities. This Millennial assumption that the convenience of distance learning is most important may stand in some tension with older employers’ assumptions regarding the quality of distance learning.

Today, more and more universities, including prestigious institutes such as Harvard and MIT, are embracing online learning (Etherington, 2018). However, as Protopsaltis and Baum (2019) point out, employers remain skeptical about “the quality and value of online education” (p. 2). For example, one recent study indicates that employers are mostly concerned with online courses in regard to academic integrity, career preparation, and program accreditation (Richards, Stevens, Silver, & Metts, 2018).

## Research Questions

It is evident that employer perceptions of online learning have been a topic of discussion over the past few decades. However, in the last 15 years, very little research has been conducted to verify if perceptions of online degrees have changed (Andrews, 2018). The conceptual framework of this study explored common characteristics of public

relations and the relationship to higher education distance and traditional learning. It is important that institutions of higher education understand the perceptions of their curriculum and course offerings as part of their strategy to foster good relations with internal and external publics (Rowicki, 1999; Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman & Toth, 2012). Thus, this research explores employers' perceptions of coursework completed in both online and face-to-face graduate level courses to better understand employers' perceptions. This research sought to address the following questions:

1. How do employers perceive the qualifications of candidates who possess online versus traditional credentials?
2. What employment issues exist that can affect the reputation of a learning institution with regard to distance learning?

## Methodology

This study used the qualitative research method of interviews which provided interviewees with the opportunity to discuss and reveal their perspectives without any preconceived ideas, concepts, or opinions to be imposed upon them (Azungah, 2018). Furthermore, the interviews were conducted using a semi-structured approach which allowed for the researcher "to approach different interviewees in varied ways while still covering the same questions" (Azungah, 2018, p. 387). The dissertation research questions assessed student, faculty and employer Human Resource administrator perceptions of five central characteristics of PR: trust, communication, quality, respect, and rigor. This portion of the larger study focuses only on the employer responses and perceptions.

Participants for the employer-perspectives portion include human resource administrators from three large metropolitan area-employers of higher-education graduates. These include two school districts and one university that collectively employ 5,211 people. The researcher conducted interviews with one representative from each employer. The interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder. Each interview was personally transcribed within 72 hours after it was conducted. Identifying information was removed from the transcribed interviews and, for coding purposes, interviewees were assigned a pseudonym.

The interviews with employers were targeted at understanding their views on the quality and rigor of online learning. For example, employers were asked if there is a generalizable difference between employees with online degrees than those with traditional degrees, and if an applicant with an online degree is viewed differently than one with a traditional degree. The goal was to see if one form of education was favored in the workforce. Employers were asked to share if they viewed prospective employees with online degrees differently than traditional, and if that view was affected by the applicant's school. Additionally, they were asked whether they viewed differences in employees who studied online in contrast with those who earned traditional degrees. Finally, employers were asked to discuss their perceptions of the strengths and

weakness of the two learning formats. Table 1 shows each question employers were asked and its related study characteristic(s).

Table 1

*Employer Interview Questions by Category*

No.	Employer	Q	T	D	C	Rs	Rr
1	If you see an applicant with an online degree is he/she viewed differently than someone with a traditional degree? <i>Does it matter where they matriculated? Is it different for some positions than others?</i>					x	x
2	Do you believe there is a generalizable difference between employees with online degrees and those with traditional degrees? <i>If so, please elaborate.</i>					x	
3	Are there unique strengths of online learning programs? <i>Do you think there are unique weaknesses?</i>	x					
4	Are there unique strengths of campus-based programs? <i>Do you think there are unique weaknesses?</i>	x					

*Note:* Q: quality; T: trust; D: discussion; C: communication; Rs: respect; Rr: Rigor

After all of the interviews were transcribed, the researcher began the coding and analysis process. The responses collected from the interviews were hand coded by the researcher using inductive analysis in which frequent and dominant themes were derived from the raw data (Azunga, 2018; Thomas, 2006). The inductive analysis coding style “is common in several types of qualitative data analyses” (Thomas, 2006, p. 239). Additionally, the inductive approach provided a convenient and efficient way to report the prominent categories of the main findings (Thomas, 2006). Quotes from the transcribed interviews were coded based on the five primary coding themes and then coded based on the respective sub-codes as seen in Table 2.

Table 2

*Coding Themes*

Trust	Communication	Quality	Reputation	Instructional Format	
Integrity	Relational	Teaching Process Rigor	Credibility	Similarities	Learning Preference
Relational	Feedback	Resources	For-Profit versus Non-Profit	Participation	Effort
	Methods	Professional Development	Niche	Traditional Pros/Cons	Online Pros/Cons
	Accessibility	Accountability		Cost Differences	Teaching Evaluations

*Note: Researcher-created coding*

## Findings

These findings are part of a larger unpublished doctoral dissertation study that explored perceptions of Public Relations (PR) among graduate higher education publics regarding distance learning as contrasted with face-to-face learning contexts. Employers are concerned about the quality of the education and training their potential employees are receiving. In our interviews they explored (a) concerns with the rigor and quality of educational experiences, especially online learning; (b) the limitations for social interaction in online formats to allow relationship building; and (c) whether and when online learning by itself is or is not adequate to teach a particular skill-set.

### Rigor and quality

In addressing the question of their own perception of candidate qualifications, employers weighed in on the quality of teaching sometimes using the word “rigor” to characterize quality.

One employer recalled their own experiences as a graduate student reporting that: “The online classes I took were very, very rigorous and whether you do a campus class or an online class [the rigor] can vary.”

An employer with experience teaching both online and traditional courses offered a unique view of rigor in online learning: “I do think that in online learning I expect you’re held to a higher level of accountability with regard to deadlines, quality of work because there’s no personal interaction that really becomes a part of it to sway a professor one way or the other. You earn what you earn.”

Another employer who has taken both online and traditional courses echoed that belief saying, “In the graduate study most all of the [online] ones that I have seen have been rigorous courses in which there has been a great deal of discussion as well as the regular sort of qualitative/quantitative work associated with it. So I don’t believe there to be a great difference at the graduate level.”

Looking at the online experience more holistically, and beyond the rigor, one of the interviewees appreciated the engagement aspect of face-to-face learning. The interviewee explained:

For me having the professor in front of me, that relationship as a learner, as a teacher, being able to interact with colleagues in my field and then walk away and then in practice meeting those people and sharing ideas back and forth was a priceless part of my campus [educational] experience, very much a strength.

Another, however, recounted a less positive experience with some face-to-face learning by saying:

One of the weaknesses of the campus-based system as I have seen it, a number of the classes in which I took on campus...I could’ve gotten from a library card.... I really got no benefit from the instructor being there at all.

### **Relationship building**

A candidate’s ability to engage socially in the learning experience was raised in regard to instructional quality. “I think the weakness of an online program would be if it did not include a way for learners to engage with each other because I truly believe that interactive part of learning is foundational.”

Since these employers hire educators, one question of interest was if online learning restricts a prospective employee’s engagement and interaction skills. As one employer summarized:

the downside to [online learning] is the socialization and relationship building that are naturally associated with a program in which you have to interact interpersonally with other people. And in the business of education where you’re interacting with 25 to 30 young adults that could be a question . . . of ‘Can you communicate your message in person or have you been trained to communicate . . . through a computer screen or through electronic communication?’

### **Candidate qualifications perceptions**

**Effort.** Related to these perspectives, two employers commented that the student’s experience and effort are what affect program quality and credibility:



I think that within a virtual program or within a physical program, people get out of their education what they put into it and what they want to get out of it. You can usually tell that in an interview process. I think you can tell what somebody walked away with by the experiences they talk about throughout their learning process and what they learned that would apply to the next experience. And I don't think that has to do with online or not online.

I don't think it's as much really about the program as it is the student. I think for some people [online is] perfect. They can get everything out of it they need.

**Vocation.** Related to student experiences and effort, vocation and personal situations influence choices when considering a college and learning format. One of the employers noted that:

Typically, people who are going to go into a field that has a very personal basis for it are people who want to go to class and sit and have interactions personally with people. ...People who chose [online education] are typically people who are going to be in a profession that will be technical in nature versus personal in nature.

Similar to the view expressed by the employer above, the studied discipline was another matter of question with one employer noting that an online degree is fine for some professions but not for others:

If [the online degree] is for teaching, I would not consider an applicant for a first-grade teacher... Being able to view and see how people interact, how people communicate, what sort of empathy and genuine regard they have for people is part of what the teaching process is...For jobs that are technical in nature, knowledge based in nature, I would be happy to hire someone with an online degree. For those jobs that are service and interactive such as teaching, I would not be.

While most employers seemed to concur that online learning is suitable for certain fields of study, a hybrid program was suggested by some as the preferred ideal learning environment.

"For something like nursing I suspect a balance between both (traditional and online) like a hybrid would be appropriate."

**Undergraduate/Graduate.** Since some of the interviewed employers hire K-12 teachers with baccalaureate degrees, an interesting distinction was made regarding online undergraduate and graduate matriculation. "I think that for an undergraduate setting . . . that there would be question marks there because of the general interaction in the socialization aspect of being a teacher that would raise some red flags."

**Course structure.** Other comments showed that employers were less concerned with the field format issue and rather indicated a belief that course structure is key to creating an ideal learning environment. For example, one employer stated:

I think it would depend on the makeup of the specific program. Online by itself is okay either way, whatever as long as there is a practicum component, especially for teachers in the classroom, and time to go observe. And I think essential to any learning process is being able to dialogue and interact.

**Interaction.** All of the above views noted, during the course of the interviews employers seemed to believe that face-to-face provides a better quality undergraduate education for service professions but also noted that, overall, instructional format is a personal preference, not a hiring preference. For example, an employer commented:

There's a significant benefit to [synchronous learning] as well as to some extent the online classes you can have some of that but it is less fluid. You have less opportunity on campus to sit and compose your thoughts and come up with research and you get more of a true reflection of peoples' inner-beliefs as they try to make arguments toward something because they can't sit and contemplate prior to typing and editing their remarks. So that is a skill too.

An employer with a dual-role of hiring administrators and college professors shared a similar belief from the other side of the classroom podium:

I think in graduate programs we have a tendency because to overvalue the attendance, the participation, and the interaction that people have in class and undervalue whether the person is meeting the benchmark standards with quality of work. ... When I see that you're engaged, you're attentive, your eyes are lighting up, that somehow that influences what we think about students. And it may be an indicator that this is the perfect [venue] for this person to learn.

With regard to employee qualifications, the data revealed that while employers expressed personal format learning preferences, they did not indicate that having trained in one format would exclude a job candidate. Again, emphasizing the importance of the degree level being sought, this employer had a positive view of post graduate online learning:

[The online degree] has been seen from an administrative view as a way in the education world to move themselves on the salary schedule or ... change paths within the educational setting. So I don't believe from a post graduate standpoint that there is any difference or there is a negative connotation viewed for an online degree.

Overall, a preference of one format over another was not raised as an employment issue in regard to the perceptions of candidate qualifications. However, the interviews revealed concerns about the actual degree-conferring institution.

### **Distance learning employment issues**

Question number two of this study sought to see if there are employment issues that can affect the reputation of a learning institution with regard to distance learning. As

noted, for most positions, employers would not preclude or exclude a job candidate who matriculated from an online degree-conferring institution. However, what was raised as a possible cause to preclude an applicant was the reputation of an institution with employers using that descriptor in their interview responses.

**Reputation.** For this study, the reputation of online learning was looked at in two ways. First, as applied to the format of a learning experience, questioning if either *seated* or *distance* is inferior. Second, questioning the educational experiences of degrees earned at higher education institutions that are corporate or commercially based in contrast to those that are not profit-based.

**Instructional format reputation.** One employer noted that the educational reputation is not determined by the format but rather the quality of the curriculum and instruction. “I think from a post graduate standpoint I don’t believe that there is a great deal more or less that you would get from an online program-provided it’s a quality online program.”

Sharing that positive note, other comments indicated that some employers believe that people who have success with online learning tend to be self-directed which may in turn, make them more employable. “The people who make it through rigorous online programs are self-motivated, self-starting folks who don’t need constant supervision. So that would definitely be a unique benefit to those programs.” This belief aligned with Lorenzetti’s (2005) findings where a representative from a surveyed college commented on how online studying attracted self-motivated students and further noted that distance learners “benefited from imposing structure on their own lives rather than waiting for it to come from an outside source” (p. 3).

**For-profit versus nonprofit reputation.** While the employer respondents were comfortable with employees having online degrees, they did, however, note a few stipulations in their consideration of employee candidates. The institution, and its reputation was an expressed consideration:

I definitely believe there is a difference between the universities where one would matriculate from. With so many diploma-granting institutions now offering online classes, I think [there] is still some stigma attached to where you matriculated from as opposed to whether or not if it was online or in a classroom.

Being more specific, this employer questioned the qualifications of candidates with degrees from online for-profit institutions:

For better or for worse, if someone [local] gets a degree from one of those [identified diploma mill] institutions there would be some question, as opposed to if you were taking online classes through [reputable local not-for-profit] schools. So there is definitely a stigma tied to where the degree is from.

This employer’s concern highlights the fact that students should be aware of the stigma surrounding for-profit institutions.

## Conclusion

The insights from these large-area employers of education graduates seems to suggest that while many schools promote the affordability and accessibility of their programs to prospective students, institutions should not overlook their reputations as viewed by prospective employers. In regard to the research questions, the data suggest that employers have a qualified positive impression of online learning. Qualified in that it depends on the discipline and the degree as most felt that certain disciplines are not ideally learned online and that online learning is better suited for graduate degrees.

As for reputation of a learning institution, employers do not hold a positive view about degrees obtained from for-profit colleges. They also felt that while there are positives to taking online courses, an ideal learning environment would be one where the online curriculum offering is part of a traditional institution.

These findings suggest that universities will be more credible and attractive to employers if they strive to ensure rigor and quality in their curriculum and explore ways to provide an engaged learning environment in the remote classroom. Additionally, admissions, academic, and marketing departments need to collaborate and be unified in communicating the strengths of their degree programs, and especially the convenience and flexibility of their online offerings.

As stated earlier, this research is part of a dissertation study that explored trust, communication, quality, respect and rigor among graduate higher education publics (including employers) as it relates to distance learning contrasted with face-to-face learning contexts. A larger and more robust study focusing on employers who hire graduates of both online and traditional institutions would add valuable insights and provide a resource to higher education institutions that may be considering adopting an online curriculum or revising their current offerings. Additionally, with corporate professional development and training commonplace in today's workforce, a study that addresses the use of distance learning to meet those needs may provide valuable insights to both corporations and higher education institutions.

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