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Business Student Perceptions of Online Learning: Using Focus Groups for Richer Understanding of Student Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to develop a deeper understanding of student perceptions, expectations, and opinions about online learning at the program level. Student evaluations of teaching are generally focused upon a single course and instructor and therefore do not address students' general perceptions of online learning and the effectiveness of various elements specific to the online course environment. Faculty worked with a professional focus-group moderator to develop and conduct the focus groups, which involved 11 undergraduate students experienced with online learning. Using a qualitative process, we discovered some common themes that cut across courses in an online program, as well as some new avenues for consideration. These include the conveniences of learning in online courses, the need for consistency in course design across an online program, better use of certain time management tools, the importance of faculty presence, and students' perceptions of certain activities as "busy work."

KEYWORDS

Online education; focus groups; student feedback; evaluations; qualitative research

Online education has grown substantially over the past decade in business schools and universities overall. In 2013, 7.1 million U.S. college students, about one-third of the U.S. college population, took at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2014). As a consequence, a greater proportion of credit hours earned by students is delivered in an online format. Since online teaching has become a significant mode of education affecting a considerable proportion of students, it is important to continue to learn about the strengths, weaknesses, and areas that can be improved in online education in colleges. In fact, the significance of online education in business schools has led to a formal call for deeper and more rigorous understanding of factors affecting online course delivery (Arbaugh, Dearmond, & Rau, 2013).

Online courses and degrees often undergo additional scrutiny from employers, faculty, students, and university administration (Baggaley, 2014; Bergstrand & Savage, 2013; Redpath, 2012). For instance, in one study, 80% of employers recognized that online education presented real opportunities for older students to get college credentials, and 45% of employers stated that online degrees required more discipline. However, 42% of employers believed that students learned less in online-only programs, while 46% reported that learning was about the same in online-only programs (Public Agenda, 2013).

Meanwhile, organizations are increasingly embracing more online learning platforms internally and for continuing education for their employees. In 2014, for the first time, e-learning in asynchronous and synchronous forms surpassed in-person classroom education in corporate settings (Anderson, 2014). Corporations spent more than \$40 billion on e-learning worldwide in 2013 and are projected to spend \$51 billion in 2016 (Docebo, 2014). These trends indicate that there may be increasing value for students to "learn how to learn" in the online format.

Often, online courses at universities are proactively designed in advance with external assistance from instructional designers residing on campus, faculty peer reviewers, and/or third parties—public or private (e.g., Swan, Matthews, Bogle, Boles, & Day, 2012). There may be a couple of reasons for this practice. First, since many faculty members matriculated through college in traditional face-to-face settings, they may need assistance using the technology necessary for online teaching and may not yet understand the intricacies of the delivery format. Second, given the increased scrutiny of online learning, these assistance programs also serve as a quality check for the courses. The expectation is that the use of techniques proven to be effective along with published "best practices" for online education will yield better learning outcomes for the online course.

Even with these design assistance programs, faculty members need to continuously develop and improve courses over time. “Student satisfaction should be considered in evaluating the effectiveness of e-learning” (Zhu, 2012, p. 127) as a part of this continuous quality improvement. Part of the impetus surrounding course improvement efforts in online courses is the common perception that these courses are of lower quality and less effective than traditional courses. While proactive online course design efforts are generally expected to yield higher student satisfaction, in one example, researchers found that student satisfaction in virtual learning environments was generally lower than in traditional classroom settings (Piccoli, Ahmad, & Ives, 2001). However, the technical frustrations for students cited in this study have since been mitigated with more current, improved technologies. In addition, one previous study found that MBA students’ perceptions of usefulness of online course software and delivery medium satisfaction both increased significantly between the students’ first and second online courses (Arbaugh, 2004).

Online courses are still assessed by students at the end of the term in a manner similar to traditional face-to-face courses, with an increasing use of digital questionnaires for both formats. Assessing courses, and programs overall, using questionnaires has a number of limitations that have been noted over the years (Kember & Leung, 2008; Marsh, 1984; Wright & Jenkins-Guarnieri, 2012), though they are one source of student feedback that faculty can use to improve courses. While using quantitative data gathered from questionnaires allows for quick numerical comparisons between courses, there are only a few opportunities on typical end-of-term questionnaires for students to elaborate on their views. Even in cases where students have the opportunities to provide written comments, many do not take the time to give significant feedback. Furthermore, knowledge of any written feedback left by students on open-ended questions is often confined to the individual faculty member and a department chair (or comparable position). In fact, given the integrated nature of most business school curricula, it is important to examine courses at the individual level and at the program level (B. Arbaugh, 2010).

As an alternative to survey questions, Moessenlechner, Obexer, Sixl-Daniell, and Seeler (2015) gathered qualitative data from reflection papers of students enrolled in an undergraduate business blended learning course. The purpose of their study was to determine the students’ perceived success factors in an online learning environment. The two main factors that emerged were good time management skills, which students felt they did not have, and interaction among students, which they felt does not

necessarily result in success but “adds to” success and enjoyment of the course. The authors recommended a follow-up study with the same students to determine how perceptions change as students progress through the program. In an attempt to examine student perceptions at the course and program levels, we used focus groups with experienced online students.

Previous research on student perceptions of online courses have focused on the impact of personality traits (Keller & Karau, 2013), course technologies (Arbaugh, 2000; Love & Fry, 2006), student and faculty interactions (Young & Norgard, 2006), and academic discipline (Arbaugh, 2013), to name a few. Additionally, much of the research done about online business courses has examined graduate students as the sample population (e.g., Arbaugh, 2013, 2000, 2004; Brower, 2003; Marks, Sibley, & Arbaugh, 2005; Northrup, 2002), though there have been calls to examine whether there are differences between undergraduate and graduate students in online courses (J. B. Arbaugh, 2010).

Various studies report the use of focus groups to gather information within educational settings, but we found no such applications for the evaluation of online programs. Focus groups allow us to triangulate research conducted using other methods by acknowledging limitations of traditional questionnaires of course effectiveness and the questionnaire method in general. End-of-course evaluations assume we already know what is important to the students, as the questions are set. Students might comment on an aspect of the course not included in the evaluation survey, but there is no opportunity to ask them to elaborate or to follow up with them. A focus group setting has the potential to uncover information not included in an online questionnaire. The focus-group method is a macro evaluation across courses, which allows us to observe how students perceive the interconnectedness of courses within the program and to better understand the effectiveness of the online program overall.

In essence, our primary research questions are:

- (1) What are student perceptions of online courses and the online program overall?
- (2) What are the effective and ineffective aspects of online courses?
- (3) What improvements would the students suggest for online courses?

This research is different from previous research in the following ways. First, we are leveraging focus groups to better understand student perceptions about online courses with a richness that is not typically

achieved using end-of-semester instruments. Second, by using focus groups, we are able to examine program-level details in conjunction with individual course examples—another limitation of single course instruments. Third, the open-ended nature of this technique does not limit the responses of students in the same way that surveys can. Fourth, as previously mentioned, much of the research about online courses has focused on graduate students. We focus on undergraduate students.

In this article, we describe the methodology and findings from three student focus groups, which included students who had taken numerous online courses in an undergraduate business program. Some of our findings reinforce results of previous studies, for example, reasons for taking online courses, student attitudes about graded discussion assignments, and the value of faculty presence, while others were more enlightening. Some unique requests from the students were for more consistency in organization, rules and guidelines, and better use of the course calendar across courses in an online program; demonstration of the relevancy of course assignments to course learning objectives; more effective utilization or elimination of discussion activities; and, incorporation of instructor's expertise and work experiences. We conclude the article with some general recommendations and discussion of related future research questions.

Methodology

The institution utilized in this study has been active in the online learning realm since about 2006 in an organized manner, and the degree programs became formalized in the 2007–2008 academic year. The business school is Association to Advance College Schools of Business (AACSB) accredited and has a robust online program. Online education has grown substantially in both the business school and the university overall in the last decade. At the time of the study, all fourteen 3-hour core courses required for the bachelor's in business administration (BBA) degree were available online, although the only fully online degree program available was the BBA in management. This structure allowed students in all majors to complete a considerable portion of their degree requirements online, even if their higher level major requirements and electives were not available in an online format.

In general, the majority of students in online classes are supplementing their schedules of traditional courses, although the number of entirely online students is growing. Online courses are typically staffed using the same proportions of full-time and part-time

faculty that are used in the traditional face-to-face settings. The college of business had about 180 full-time faculty at the time of the study, with 102 certified to teach online at the time of the study. In general, during any spring or fall semester, online courses are staffed with 45–55 full-time and around 10 part-time faculty. Median online teaching experience by faculty at the time of the study was 4 years with an average of 3.68 years. With rare exception, online classes in the business school are entirely asynchronous. When occasional synchronous sessions within online courses are scheduled, they are announced at the start of the semester. Since attendance at the synchronous sessions is not typically required, the sessions are recorded.

The university uses a well-known course quality management process to evaluate newly developed online courses and to periodically review existing courses. To satisfy this process, certain basic elements must be incorporated, such as contact information for the instructor, links to sites where students can obtain various types of assistance, clearly stated learning objectives for the course, grading policies, instructions on how to access course materials and assignments, appropriate delivery methods for course content, clear due dates for assignments, defined methods of peer-to-peer and student-to-instructor communication, and so on. Additionally, within the College of Business, each online course is assigned a master online course coordinator, a faculty member who manages the master version of the course. This process ensures consistency across sections of a course when multiple instructors are involved. Most online courses operate in a modular format that has a weekly setup.

At the end of the semester, online courses and face-to-face courses are assessed using online surveys. There are slight variations in a couple of items for online classes specifically relevant to the online class format. For instance, “the instructor started class on time and managed class time effectively” is paralleled with “the instructor implemented and maintained an effective weekly schedule” (see Appendix A for the full version of the evaluation instrument). Given the limited amount of information from the end-of-course evaluations specifically related to students' experiences in and expectations of online courses and the online program overall, a professional focus-group moderator was employed to conduct three focus groups for the College of Business. Focus groups are commonly used for a variety of situations, including collecting general information about topics of interest, generating research hypotheses for further research, “diagnosing potential problems with a program, service or product,” and “generating impressions of products, programs,

services, institutions, or other objects of interest” (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990, p. 15).

Focus groups generally provide several advantages over individual interviews, as well as some drawbacks. The advantages of focus groups are interaction between participants, more natural vocabulary, and a willingness for participants to challenge one another and extend ideas (Morgan, 1988). This “synergistic effect” produced by reactions and extension of ideas by participants can generate “data and ideas that might not have been uncovered in individual interviews” (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990, p. 16). Focus groups also shift the interaction from participant–reviewer to participant–participant primarily (Morgan, 1988). Among the drawbacks of focus groups, as compared to individual interviews, are that the researchers and moderator forego a good bit of control on the discussions and there is the possibility for individual behavior to be subjected to group influence (Morgan, 1988). As a result, responses from individuals are not independent of one another within the group. Finally, as with any limited set of data, focus groups will have limitations in generalizability (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990).

The focus groups were formed by soliciting student participation via e-mail, which targeted current students who had taken at least two online courses in the College of Business at the institution. Otherwise, no prescreening of the participants took place. It was not known, prior to the focus-group sessions, whether previous online experiences for the participants were positive or negative. Of this set of 44 students, 11 students (5 females, 6 males) chose to participate across the three focus groups (3, 3, and 5). Table 1 includes more information on the participants. Participation was incentivized by offering to accommodate a registration override (to get into a full-capacity section perhaps) in the coming semester, if needed. Additionally, participants were notified that one of them would be randomly selected to receive a textbook of their choice

free of charge. Finally, participants were fed sandwiches, snacks, and drinks.

For comparison purposes, the general population of students in the business school taking online classes during the same semester was examined. For students taking at least one online course during that semester, 49% were female and the median grade point average (GPA) was 3.16 and mean GPA was 3.15. The median age was 24 years and the mean age was 27 years. These numbers are similar to our focus-group sample to some degree, giving us confidence that our focus groups represented the overall population taking online courses during that semester. Our focus groups were different by design with respect to the number of courses taken in that the focus-group students were solicited based on the number of online courses they had taken. The general business-school population taking online classes that semester had, on average, taken 2 online courses with a median of 1, compared to a mean/median of about 14 for our focus groups. Again, because our intention was to look at both course and program level, we solicited participation from more experienced online students.

The moderator met on numerous occasions with faculty members familiar with online teaching to construct an interview guide (Appendix B) to examine issues that were considered important for the online program. It is important for the researchers to involve the moderator at some stage during the development of the interview guide to be sure that the moderator “understands the intent of the questions” (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990, p. 61). The two guiding principles for constructing the interview guide are ordering questions from more general to more specific, and ordering questions by relative importance to the study at hand (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Our interview guide was developed to begin with very open-ended discussion and gradually become more specific over time if the respondents did not address a particular area of interest during their natural discussion.

Each focus group was comprised of students who had taken multiple online courses at the institution. All groups met in person (which limited the pool to those within driving distance), lasted for about 2 hours, and occurred on 2 days during the same week. The sessions were recorded, as well as monitored live by several online faculty members via closed-circuit video. The recordings were used to generate transcripts so that accurate information could be reviewed at a later date. As focus-group sessions occur with multiple participants present, it is not believed that recording significantly affects responses of the members (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). In our focus groups, students

Table 1. Focus-group participant information.

	Age at time of focus group	Overall GPA	Number of online courses
	56	3.49	18
	37	3.96	18
	23	3.25	31
	21	3.57	14
	23	3.36	10
	22	3.16	10
	24	3.88	17
	39	2.63	15
	29	3.46	8
	22	3.64	3
	27	3.06	13
Median	24	3.46	14
Mean	29.36	3.41	14.27

were made aware that they were being monitored and recorded. In fact, near the end of each focus group, the moderator excused himself during a break and let the participants know he was checking for follow-up topics from the observers in the next room.

The moderator used a number of techniques to assess what aspects of online learning were important to the students. In the beginning, following the introduction to what a focus group is and prior to any discussion, the moderator started with an individual free-association exercise, for which students were provided index cards and asked to write down things that come to their minds when he said “online courses.” They repeated the exercise for the term “face-to-face courses.” Students were given 3–4 minutes to complete this activity.

From the index cards, the moderator had the students construct a flip chart highlighting the positives and negatives of their online experiences. The setup for this exercise was an evaluation of the merits of their particular experiences with online courses at the institution and was not intended to be an abstract list of the pros and cons of online learning in general. In other words, they might have thought that online discussions were not useful for learning, but had a positive experience that changed their mind, or vice versa. Students were also asked to weigh various aspects of online learning on a chart with two axes, importance of the particular aspect and how well the online program (combined experience overall) satisfies this aspect. Finally, students were asked to write down, individually, a description of their ideal online course and share it with the group. In between exercises, there was sufficient time for open elaboration on the topics being discussed.

Analysis

The main goal for the focus-group study was to better understand students’ expectations and perspectives of online courses at this institution. The interview guide was designed to lead students to identify factors that enhance student learning as well as aspects of the current program that are not important to them. From there, students were asked to discuss what they consider to be “done well” within their online courses and what areas need improvement. The research focus was intended to uncover perspectives that are not reported during end-of-course evaluations, as well as opinions across multiple courses from individuals with significant online course experience, while the practical aspects were intended to guide consideration for actual changes to the online program at the institution. As part of the

research, we first used a preliminary data analysis process (Grbich, 2007) in which we identified the major issues that emerged. This process gave us a broad view of the major ideas discussed in the focus groups. From there, we utilized more formal open coding techniques (Saldana, 2013; Strauss, 1987), or unrestricted coding, to better understand the topics the students mentioned and, perhaps, the underlying ideas that are unstated. While we use some quotations from individual focus-group participants to illustrate points for this article, the level of analysis is at the group level since the interaction of the members of the group influence what others might say.

For the open coding process, we used three coders. Two of the coders observed the focus groups live on closed circuit video, and the third was not present and had not seen the videos or read the transcripts in advance. In line with Strauss’s guidance on who should serve as coders (1987), each of these individuals was a university faculty member and had experience teaching online courses. The coding process for this particular study was relatively straightforward in the initial passes, given the more “tangible” attributes associated with the student experiences, resulting in 34 initial codes. However, by examining these initial codes, some higher level groupings emerged. Our grouping exercise yielded several major categories of codes, grouped into five areas: Course—Pedagogical Aspects, Course—Technological Aspects, Faculty Interaction, University Aspects, and Lifestyle. The categorization of the codes is depicted in [Table 2](#).

Additional information from moderator activities

As previously mentioned, the moderator used a number of techniques during the focus groups to obtain as complete a picture as possible of how online efforts were going in the college of business from the students’ perspectives. After completing the individual free association exercise at the start of the focus groups, the moderator then conducted two group exercises, (1) positives and negatives and (2) quadrants. For the first of the group exercises, each focus group was asked to create a list of the benefits as well as the negative aspects of online learning. This process resulted in a list of positives and negatives jointly created on a flip chart ([Table 3](#)). These aspects factored in many of the topics from the individual free association exercise.

For the quadrants exercise, the focus groups each created a 2 × 2 chart with a vertical axis of importance and a horizontal axis of performance, in terms of how well these are executed at the institution. They were to use their particular experiences at the institution, and

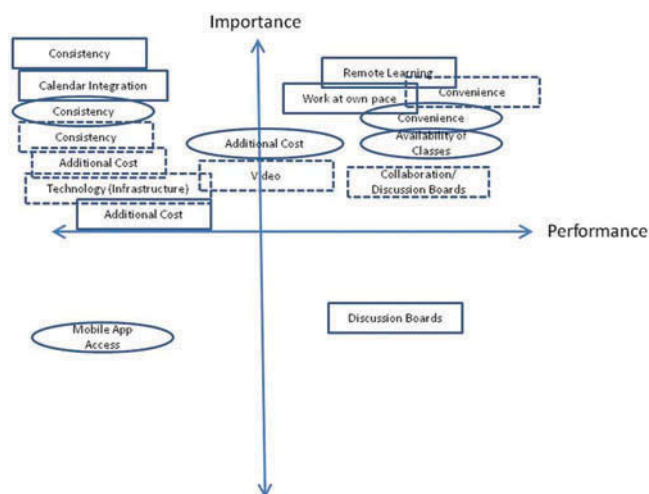
Table 2. Categorization of open codes.

Course—pedagogical aspects	Course—technological aspects	Faculty interaction aspects	University aspects	Online—lifestyle aspects
Busywork Syllabus	Calendar Mobile devices	Lack of Communication Professor should tech support	Quality Perception # of seats/registration	Convenience Cost
Consistency across courses	Learning new technology	Discussions—faculty input Professor experiences Professor response time	Consistency across courses Cost justification	Work at own pace within schedule Location can change Flexibility
Videos—too long Collaboration between students Content Organization/Structure Team Projects Quizzes Exams Discussions—rules Discussions—usefulness On campus exams—positive On campus exams—negative	Search function Technology Limitations (infrastructure, 3rd party) Discussions—technology			

Table 3. Combined group free-association exercise.

Focus Group 1	
Positives	Negatives
work at own pace work on own time conferencing/groups learning skills for business discussion boards	conferencing improvement in technology cost more /why? discussion layout lack of connection with students and faculty demands more work
relevant interaction with professor virtual lectures	slow response from other students and professor enables cheating
written notes on side while talking (video)	
Focus Group 2	
Positives	Negatives
independent on my own time technology time management personal responsibility flexibility convenience syllabus discussion boards	lack of structure lack of consistency discussion boards amount of participation time management additional cost
Focus Group 3	
Positives	Negatives
convenience easy reference well-organized easy to follow no parking needed on my own time videos able to do while traveling at my own pace personalized/informal	busy work discussion board required posting group assignments better calendar date consistency between classes more consistency between classes

not simply abstract ideas about online education, to design this chart. Thus, the quadrants developed depict the cumulative view of multiple course experiences. The combined results of this exercise for the three focus groups are depicted in Figure 1. The factors identified by each focus group are coded with a

**Figure 1.** Combined focus-group perceptions along two dimensions.

different shape design. One view that this study design allows us to examine is the importance of and poor execution of consistency between courses at the institution. Simply examining feedback from a single course would obfuscate this finding. Also noteworthy was one group's view that discussion boards were relatively well done at the institution, but not that important to their educational experience. While this figure is not exhaustive relative to the broader discussion that had taken place prior to its creation, it does illustrate some concepts that rose to the top again.

Findings and discussion

The individual and group exercises, along with discussions within focus groups, yielded some dominant themes. Comments from students in the focus groups, provided in Table 4, reinforce a number of

Table 4. Students' perspectives of benefits of online course format.

Uma	I can only take one or two [classes] at a time because I run my business. And I find that online classes are very convenient for me because of that ... the material online is always there to refer back to. When I go to class, the professor talks and if you don't take good notes, then you know it's kind of gone. That's one reason I like the convenience and the material is always there to reference.
Valerie	I like [online classes] because they're so convenient. I don't have to worry about having to leave the house to get parking.
Valerie	Like when you have an assignment, you know, you can have between Saturday and Tuesday to complete it. You don't have to worry about doing it right at 8:00 on one day if you've got something to do.
Slade	What I like about it is just being able to complete assignments while travelling. Because for work I do a lot of traveling, so traditional classes just don't work for that. The current system works on an iPad or on a smartphone or whatever, it's amazing that I can do all that stuff while I'm in the car or something.
Uma	I live way out in [town], so the distance ... online learning is great for when you live far away. I can't get up here all the time.
Corbett	You can do [work] from multiple places, like I don't have to be at the school. I can be at home. I can be on my own time.
Brooke	I can do my work on Monday or Tuesday, or if I'm busy that week, I can do my work on Friday and Saturday. So I really like that and you don't have as much control over that in a normal class environment.
Brooke	For the first couple of years I attended here, I worked a full-time job, 60 hours a week. A lot of classes aren't offered in the evenings or on the weekends, so I have no choice but to ... do an online class. Other times it would be a convenience where I don't want to get off work at 7 and try to get up here for an 8 to 11 class.
Corbett	It's how far they are from school and not wanting to drive down here ... because I know I had a semester where my truck was broken down and I didn't want to drive all the way ... it was drivable, but it wasn't driving good and I just did not want to drive up here. And I took all online classes that semester.
Brooke	I've got a couple of students in my online class who have moved to New Jersey and New York, and so that's why they're finishing up with online ... I think it ultimately goes back to working, like scheduling with work whether you've got a 9 to 5 job or just a Monday, Wednesday, Friday job or something.
Kyle	Some of the things I noted about online classes is that they're convenient. I know during one summer I had to work a lot and was actually out of the city and so I was able to take an online class during the course of the summer.
James	If it's available online, I'm taking it online. I mean I live close to campus. I'm only a 15 minute drive. But that's 15 minutes and the 10 minutes of parking, and 10 minutes of walking. That's an extra hour plus out of my day.

commonly accepted valuable aspects of online college education (e.g., Arbaugh, 2000; J. B. Arbaugh, 2010; Cole, Shelley, & Swartz, 2014; Kowalski & Dolph, 2015; Marks et al., 2005). Among these are the convenience associated with flexible scheduling of course work during the work period (there are deadlines throughout the semester, unlike a correspondence course that often has a single set of submissions at completion), the ability to complete the work wherever they have Internet access, the ability to work at their own pace (within the deadlines), and the flexibility it gives the students in conjunction with face-to-face course schedules. Aside from the perceived benefits students claim to have about online

education in general, our analysis is focused on student perceptions of various aspects and components within an online program that enhance or hinder student learning. In the following sections, we frame our findings and discussion in terms of major themes that surfaced in the focus-group discussions, along with supporting quotations from the students in various areas.

Degree of learning in online classes

One of the critical aspects to understand, as an institution, is how student learning in online classes compares to traditional face-to-face courses. Across the university, data are collected to make these comparisons through course and program assessments. Another area of consideration, however, is how students perceive their level of learning in online classes compared to that in face-to-face environments.

In the first focus group, perceptions of online learning effectiveness relative to face-to-face were mixed and had some additional dimensions. Anna stated, "for me, I like to have a professor in my face."

Brooke said,

It really depends on the type of class ... a lot of times, my mind works better when I'm introverted [read: alone] and so for me to sit at home, I can focus better than I can sitting in a classroom ... my attention span in a classroom is just gone. So I pay attention for the first 5 to 10 minutes and then it's just, I'm not thinking and paying attention. So there are a lot of classes I've taken to where there's no doubt they were more beneficial for me personally to take online.

Anna elaborated on a personal accountability and peer pressure dimension. She stated,

For me, it would be in person, face-to-face because, at least in the upper level classes ... because we do a lot of group discussions now in class where you get points for participation ... So I am more likely to get involved and have a real discussion if it's in my face ... and that way, I don't want to sound stupid when I open my mouth, so I will go home and look at the material and get deeper into it and really think about it and challenge myself more in class if we're having these open discussions.

Brooke noted the subject and professor mattered more than the delivery format. She said,

My focus is on music business and it's what my work involves ... so the majority of my extra learning is all done on the music side of things ... so I'd rather be studying the marketing in the music business [course] instead ... I don't think it matters whether it is online or in person, it depends more on the professor ... I've had the same professor in class as I've had online

before a couple of times, and that professor typically will do about the same type of teaching style in both classes and interest me in the same way.

Corbett, in the first focus group, stated,

I'm going to have to agree that in class, kind of makes you want to dig in a little more just for fear of looking stupid. It's a lot easier to B.S. your way through class when you are online. It's a lot easier to sound smart because you've looked everything up just before you post it.

In the second focus group, students commented on whether online learning is better or worse at the institution.

James said, "For me, I would say it is the same or better, just because there are less distractions for me and I read the textbook at home anyways even in face-to-face courses."

Leo continued,

I would say it's the same or honestly a little bit less. I agree with him on the distraction part. I've had classes where I got that guy in front of me doing whatever on his computer and his cell phone and honestly it's distracting ... but as far as retaining information, I retain information as well online, if not more in some cases, if it is structured correctly.

The third focus group was much less wordy on this topic, but had solid endorsements for online learning. Valerie replied with a simple "yes" in response to whether they get as much learning or content retention out of online courses as they do in class. Uma said, "Oh, a lot better, I think. Yeah." Slade simply said, "Sometimes even more."

While the students' responses are primarily based on the comparison between online and face-to-face learning, the issue of learning is essentially the primary emphasis and bottom line for any institution focused on their teaching mission. The students' responses indicate that we are as effective, more or less, as our face-to-face environment in terms of perceived learning. This gives us some insight into students' perceived effectiveness, research question 2, for the program overall, but further refinement isolates areas that still need improvement and are worth greater consideration.

Perceptions of program elements

Hung and Chou (2015) identify five factors that impact students' perceptions of learning and satisfaction in online classes: course design and organization, facilitation of discussions, social support, technology support, and assessment measures. Other studies find that teaching presence and instructor immediacy are good

predictors of students' perceptions of learning and satisfaction (J. B. Arbaugh, 2010; Cho & Cho, 2014; Mazzolini & Maddison, 2007). Several of these factors are apparent in the comments of focus-group participants presented in this section.

One theme that was mentioned repeatedly was the need for consistency between courses. While the institution in this study has a formal process for evaluating the organization and structure of individual online courses before they are offered to students, there is considerable latitude in how the course is designed. There was not much discussion among the students to indicate that this latitude is an issue within individual courses, but they commented regularly about the need to address the variations in rules, requirements, deadlines, and locations of content between courses. These are insights that cannot be gleaned from course-level end-of-term evaluations.

Presented next are three areas various students discussed as being managed ineffectively by faculty at this institution. They indicated that they see promise in these areas to assist their learning and satisfaction, but it is clear that the execution is undermining these outcomes to some extent.

Calendar tool

Managing time is often an issue for many college students, no matter which modality they choose to proceed through college. Many students have competing responsibilities such as jobs, families, and other activities and interests. Students in all three focus groups discussed the importance of the effective use of the calendar tool in the learning management system (LMS). Slade noted while advocating for the calendar tool, "There are some classes I found it can be very difficult to keep track of the schedule and due dates because that information is in a few different places."

Tammy acknowledged a frustration with the setup of a global calendar tool:

It will say you have an assignment due that day, but you don't know which class. I'll have three or four classes and it doesn't say, "okay, in Econ, you have this assignment" ... so I have to go through all of them and say "which one [class] was that on" and check.

Robert has developed his own workaround:

What I did is I just went through and printed all the syllabuses and in Excel, I just made my own little calendar for it because otherwise I would be lost if I tried to keep up with the way they had it on [the LMS].

In the second focus group, Kyle mentioned the value of the calendar tool, but had found a workaround since the tool was not used consistently by faculty.

Very few classes actually use the calendar feature, and the ones that do, I really notice because it gives you a reminder of what's coming up ... I found my own way of going around it by putting everything into my Google calendar at the beginning of the semester.

As a comparison, Leo compared the lack of use of the calendar tool in his online courses at this institution to his wife's online program at another institution.

I've navigated their online program ... And I think one of the big differences ... is they use the calendar. [For my classes] I drop everything into my own personal calendar on my laptop.

In the first focus group, Corbett noted the impact of the calendar in online courses.

Look at your syllabus and read it very thoroughly. And probably make your own calendar that has every class in it, every due date for every assignment for every class in one calendar to really keep up with what is due.

While previous research has examined various aspects of virtual learning environments (DeLange, Suwardy, & Mavondo, 2003; Greasley, Bennett, & Greasley, 2004; Moessenlechner et al., 2015; Peltier, Drago, & Schibrowsky, 2003; Young, Klemz, & Murphy, 2003), the value of the calendar tool within the LMS has not been examined specifically. Arbaugh suggests that content repository aspects of LMS will be more important to undergraduate students than graduate students (J. B. Arbaugh, 2010), but does not break out the calendar or scheduling tool aspects. Our focus groups, however, indicated that the calendar tool, specifically, is critical to good time management and, thus, their satisfaction with the online environment. This finding could be an indication that more research is needed to understand the complexities involved for students coordinating activities in multiple online classes.

Discussion forums

In order to provide a richness to online classes that comes from the discussions that occur in face-to-face classes, instructors often add discussion forums (or discussions) and require students to post thoughts and responses on the discussion topics. In fact, using technology to support collaborative learning has a long research history (Alavi, 1994; Leidner & Jarvenpaa, 1993), and discussion forums are one of the key tools of online learning that supports collaborative learning in modern online courses. Discussions were the most talked about topic in all of the focus groups. Student comments on discussions were detailed and multidimensional. Some students had opinions on the "rules"

of the discussions and how other students impacted their ability to complete the work. Leo stated,

It's the time management of the discussion boards that's not in my control. I take online classes to be in control, and the discussion board makes it to where I'm not in control because I have to wait for other people to post ... So here I am sitting, I'm just going to sit down and get my discussion board done, but I can't because I have to post sporadically.

Leo continued,

You're dependent on these people who aren't responsible ... you expect maybe 10 [students] to post by the third day of the week and you only have two posts. And so now my grade is falling on them, and it's always at least 15% or 20% [of your grade], which isn't a lot, but that makes or breaks your A or your B.

However, Kyle noted the usefulness and value of discussions in online classes.

I think the discussion board serves an important purpose. The fact that there are other people taking this course with you and that you can communicate with ... It facilitates communication and conversation on the topic, right? I think some professors get it right ... you can have a deadline in the middle of the week where everybody in the class has to have their original post done ... and then you can go from there.

Leo immediately retorted:

They ruin the class for me sometimes. Not grade-wise, but ... it gives me a bad impression of a class where everything else was fine but that. But it seems like they [faculty] have to do them because they have to simulate some in-class discussion. And I agree with you entirely. They serve a purpose. So I'm not against them on the whole.

Anna noted some limitations of the LMS with respect to discussions:

When you click on '5 Unread Discussions' or whatever ... you can't see where the thread stems from. You can see the subject line and who wrote it, but you have to go back into that and see what has and hasn't been read.

In response, Corbett said,

Let's say you have 20 messages that are unread, you have to go in and out of these different discussion areas looking at individual threads just so you know where they came from.

The dissatisfaction that students are having with discussions is counter to long-held beliefs about the value of student-to-student interaction in online learning (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999; Marks et al., 2005; Williams, Duray, & Reddy, 2006). Recent research has indicated that student-to-student interaction may be perceived negatively because of time inefficiency,

interaction dysfunction, or flexibility intrusion (Kellogg & Smith, 2009). Kellogg and Smith (2009) examined quotes by MBA students associated with “learned least from” aspects of online courses, and found student-to-student interaction was an issue in group projects primarily. Students in the study by Moessenlechner et al. (2015) reported that while student-to-student interaction “adds to” to their enjoyment in the course, it does not lead to success.

Based on these quotes from our focus groups, it appears our undergraduate students are confirming that the time inefficiency and flexibility intrusion aspects are a factor in discussion forums as well. However, based on the richer information gathered via focus groups, the students are not necessarily countering the benefits of learning from interaction with their peers, but the execution is undermining the prospects, particularly when they have multiple online courses. This dichotomy may indicate that more research is needed to parse the distinction between effective student-to-student interaction and the mechanisms that defeat that effectiveness.

Consistency

Much of the discussion in the focus groups regarding the calendar, discussions, and course policies centers on the overarching idea of consistency between classes. While there are conversations between faculty members about the amount of personal responsibility students need to learn when managing “overhead” tasks in college, students in the focus group revealed the impact of inconsistency between online courses. For example, Kyle said,

We don't really respect the calendar feature because no one [faculty] uses it. So you don't check it ... I think if every single professor was told to put what's in the syllabus on their calendar feature ... everybody would utilize it.

Kyle continued,

If you're taking multiple classes, you find yourself having to put three discussion posts of three paragraphs in one class. You have four discussion posts with five paragraphs in another class, which are due on Tuesdays. The other one is due on Sunday ... Basically you have these rules that you have to follow, but the type of rule is very similar in each of these classes, but they vary slightly and [it] makes a big difference.

Corbett had similar thoughts. He stated, “If every class, online class, was consistent in the way it organizes its assignments and the way it conducts itself ... if they were all consistent, then it would just be easier.”

In the third focus group, Tammy stated,

I think it's just their preference on how they do their own class, but they have to realize that we, as online students, may have a couple more online classes and that doesn't always work ... everybody's different. All of them are different.

Later within the same focus group, Slade commented,

Full utilization of the grades tab in [the LMS] because some professors, well it's like the calendar section we talked about. In the program, there's a tab on there for grades, and some professors don't really use it necessarily.

In support, Robert replied, “It all goes back to consistency.”

Recommendations and challenges related to program elements

Arbaugh indicates the value of having a more centralized program focus for online programs (B. Arbaugh, 2010), and one avenue for addressing the issues of consistency between courses is to leverage tools like the calendar tool across the program. Establishing a set of best practices for handling discussion rules, weekly deadlines, location of syllabus and other files, and so on could alleviate some inconsistencies between courses. However, there are a couple of challenges to this idea. First, even if defining these aspects of online courses within a college or department excludes any discussion of “topical content,” faculty members may see this focus as infringing on their “academic freedom,” a term that is effectively used in many places to defend territory. Second, faculty members often see learning value when students are expected to manage their time given multiple inputs and competing deadlines. Thus, it becomes important to help faculty understand the bigger picture and the impact of their individual course policies on the overall online program.

One might question to what degree managing the coordination complexity of multiple online classes becomes overwhelming for students and detracts from the course material. In many cases, online courses have more total assignments than traditional courses in an effort to keep students engaged. Additionally, students may be taking more online courses simultaneously because of an increase in availability, making time management a more important issue. Finally, the proliferation of smartphones continues to change expectations for all technology interactions, and may be a factor here as well.

Relevance

While student enjoyment and connection of concepts has been linked empirically to content relevance, based on the

idea of relevance of course materials to future business careers (Nemanich, Banks, & Vera, 2009), it is not clear whether students perceive a difference in content relevance and relevance of the activity or assignment. Based on the focus-group feedback, it is apparent that faculty members need to do a better job of communicating the relevance of assignments to the subject-matter expertise students are acquiring and its applicability to their future careers or lives. This finding is not unlike the idea of aligning course assignments, assessments, learning materials, and course objectives, but may need to extend to broader career objectives and activities. Perhaps it is a weakness being overlooked in the online format, but for work perceived as assigned just to give students something to do, the students are not as likely to take it seriously or think critically about it.

Two themes emerged from the focus groups that illustrated a need to rethink our emphasis on content relevance: professor experience and interaction, and busy work.

Professor experiences and interaction

Students in the focus groups overall enjoyed and valued the interaction and personal touch that professors could add to online classes. During a discussion about faculty interaction, Corbett pointed out,

[My professor], he has a video that introduces himself in his class ... and then he makes videos throughout the semester. He doesn't just have set videos that he always uses. He actually makes them for that particular semester ... and he also responds to, I'm just going to have to say, 99% of every post that everybody puts. You have to do five posts a week, he actually responds to each one of your posts with relevant discussion. He discusses with you.

However, another student Brooke countered,

It just depends on the professor right now. But I think that's something that really needs to be improved is that professors should be taught more, have some type of training almost to make sure they are ... interactive with students. Because I have had professors that won't sign in for a week, you'd have to send them an e-mail and they won't even check their e-mail.

Much later in the focus group, the topic of faculty interaction came up again. Brooke stated,

My professor last semester, she did a great job, and she didn't even use video all the time. She just did audio a lot of times because it is faster downloading. But she would do a 10-minute "like okay, this upcoming week in chapters 2 and 3, here's the main key points." She'd point out, if you want to elaborate on this, check out such and such website.

Anna, in the same focus group, continued,

That even makes it more personal also, because you know, there's always that constant feeling of we're not, it's not interactive and we don't know our teacher ... you feel like you know the professor more, like you hear their voice and you see their face.

In the third focus group, a student wished for more "personalized teacher input and interaction," the moderator asked if that meant more of a "connection with the professor." The student, Slade, replied,

No, not a connection, ... but just more personalized things with their own [real world] experiences. That's always been something that I've enjoyed a lot about [online] classes.

Later, Slade circled back to this idea. He stated,

I think it was [professor] who did those essays for each section and the main thing about that was for each chapter, you'd have an essay relating back to his experience in the real world and it was interesting reading. I got a lot more from that than I got from any textbook in any of those courses.

Uma commented on how she responded to the professor's feedback. "I liked his mannerisms. It makes you want to do more. He always thanks you for your hard work. Praises you, I mean it just makes you want to do more."

A number of participants gave very specific examples of faculty interaction and connection that improved their learning and satisfaction with online classes. The explicit use of personal work experiences or other expertise has been found to increase student enjoyment in classes. Additionally, student confidence in faculty expertise has been shown to lead to better understanding of the connections between course concepts (Nemanich et al., 2009). However, Nemanich et al. (2009) also found that students in traditional classroom environments have higher levels of confidence in instructor expertise than in the online environment. This finding further illustrates the importance of our specific examples from the focus groups for improving the confidence of online students in their instructor's expertise. Using personal work experiences or customizing weekly updates to the current class happenings are high-impact and relatively simple techniques that the focus-group students indicated were effective, confirming the value of immediacy behaviors by instructors in online courses (J. Arbaugh, 2010).

Busy work

Another interesting revelation from the focus groups centered around "busy work." All three of the focus groups mentioned busy work from the start of their sessions, unprompted by the moderator. Unfortunately, it was not an area of much deeper prodding. While it

came up numerous times in all focus groups, it was left as self-explanatory. In general, the topic of “busy work” was used in the context of work that was not relevant (in the opinions of the students) and assigned just for the sake of assigning work.

The common example of busy work was discussion posting, though it was not limited to that activity. James stated, “I probably waste the hour doing all the goofy discussion board nonsense.”

In another focus group, Robert noted, “Discussion posts are probably the most common thing they use as busy work. Like they’re every week, you have to post at least four times.”

Anna, in the first focus group, commented on how interacting in discussions are a waste of time. “My opinion is that for me, conferencing in online classes is a waste of time, like as far as discussion boards go, not necessarily group projects.”

Later in the same focus group, Corbett attached the course scavenger hunt to the idea of busy work.

How about earlier open assignments or due dates. Because if it’s a busy work type of assignment, something that’s like a scavenger hunt, why can’t it be open the entire semester?

Valerie described what busy work meant to her: “You’re not necessarily learning anything new, just more participating and turning things in to make sure I’m actually working and reading the book.”

The quick volunteering of the term “busy work” was an interesting outcome of the focus groups. Faculty members at the institution who have reviewed the transcripts or watched the videos were surprised because it was not their intent to assign busy work. It is unclear whether this expression is a generational term or a carryover from previous school levels. Finally, we do not know if this view is also held for traditional face-to-face classes.

Recommendations and challenges related to relevance

In a professional degree program, most would argue strongly for the value of relevant materials and assignments in classes. Students appreciated faculty interaction, which corresponds with prior research in the Community of Inquiry faculty presence and interaction veins (Arbaugh, 2013; J. B. Arbaugh, 2010; J. Arbaugh, 2010). However, it is clear from our focus groups that students also have an underlying doubt about why they are being asked to do particular activities. Presence and interaction may be vehicles for communicating the

relevance of subject matter and assignments, but relevance needs to be clearly communicated.

One aspect that resonated particularly with our faculty members with respect to relevance is the value of folding in faculty members’ practical and personal experiences related to the topic at hand. This focus is similar to empirical findings that confidence in “instructor’s expertise and perceived content relevance” increases understanding of causal relationships between concepts (Nemanich et al., 2009). However, Nemanich et al. (2009) found that students in online courses have less confidence in their instructor’s expertise when compared to face-to-face environments. This finding, along with the techniques volunteered by our students, indicated that instructors need to focus on building student confidence in their expertise in online classes, perhaps via the techniques mentioned by our students.

Additionally, the duality of the value of faculty practical experience in framing aspects of a course and the perceptions that busy work is a component of online courses emphasizes the need to look at the execution of assignments, such as discussions. As a result of this study, we have encouraged our faculty to clearly communicate the relevance of assignments, particularly discussions, to the learning process.

Limitations and future research

This study was conducted to collect and analyze rich focus-group data from online students to get a better understanding of the factors within their online program they perceive as important, and unimportant, to their personal levels of learning and satisfaction. An additional goal was to learn what aspects of online courses work well and what needs improvement. As a result, the study yielded some practical lessons, as well as some factors that could be further explored to build richer theory around student success and satisfaction in online courses. Given that education delivery via the Internet continues to grow, this study is becoming a more important issue each year.

As with any research, this qualitative study has limitations. While we made deliberate efforts to make this process and the results valid and generalizable by providing various recommendations, we recognized that the focus-group format has some strengths and weaknesses. Using a professional focus-group moderator, a script that gave students a lot of openness and latitude (and that gradually asked specifics that were not volunteered), and putting the students into groups where they felt less like they were being cross-examined

helped us collect data that appear genuine and honest. Although aware that they were being watched and recorded during the sessions, the participants were willing to share the positives and the negatives without apparent hesitation. They naturally steered clear of most references to individual faculty, positive or negative. Even though they were not instructed to avoid this topic, it may be a sign that they felt pressure not to single out faculty, or they simply might have been happy to talk more broadly about their online experience—with faculty being one aspect.

We also recognized the potential influence of one participant's opinion on others in the room, but noted that the participants were not reluctant to politely disagree with their group. There were a limited number of sessions and participants due to the 2-year window of the business school and the requirements that participants had taken multiple online classes in the business school, were still enrolled as a current student, were within driving distance, and were willing to make the time to participate. These factors, along with the particular characteristics of the subject institution, the processes in place for online learning, the particular courses the students had taken online and in person, and their personal preferences, all inhibit generalizability to some extent. In the analysis phase, we attempted to use examples that would generalize to other online efforts at universities based on our experience working in both face-to-face and online teaching environments.

With these considerations of the possible limitations of the methodology, we have tried to leverage the richness of the student perspectives that we had thus far been unable to examine using standard end-of-semester course evaluations. The results decidedly affected our perceptions as individual faculty and inspired a broader look at the online program overall, as a delivery method for solely online students and for students taking a combination of online and face-to-face courses. We have taken the first steps to systematically identify and organize the unique findings from the focus groups. These findings open the door for more research within the realm of online learning to identify the critical factors for student learning and success. For instance, that each focus group volunteered, unprompted, the term “busy work” at the start of the sessions is particularly intriguing. As a concept, busy work certainly needs more exploration to understand how it is defined in the minds of students, how accurate the term may be in cases, and what can be done to make relevant work seem relevant in online classes. In other words, if students are not seeing the value of the assignments, it may actually be busy work

to them regardless of faculty intent or design. Of course, a comparison of what is termed “busy work” in both online and face-to-face classes might be enlightening.

Additionally, while the students stated that faculty interaction and experiences were valuable to them in online classes, more research is needed to better understand how best to interact with online students as a faculty member. There was information that videos were effective—up to a point. Is it effective to comment on every student post in a discussion? Are short videos or essays about the professor's own experience effective at maintaining student interest in a course? Essentially, how much and what kind of faculty interaction is best?

A new finding in this research was that students in the focus groups emphasized that they would like more consistency across the program between course structure, course rules, and guidelines. Consistency of course elements and the use of the calendar tool fall under the role of course design and organization in the Hung and Chou (2015) list, though previous research does not specifically address the use of the calendar tool in online programs. More research is needed to understand what aspects of course design hinder student efficiency when working across courses, what can be done to improve their efficiency, and what the trade-off is for simplifying competing responsibilities and requirements. It would also be interesting to learn to what extent the students' complaints about lack of consistency stem from their desire to have everything laid out neatly for them to reduce the amount of effort they must expend. What is the balance between providing reasonable support through sound pedagogical development and allowing enough lack of structure to strengthen critical thinking skills and provide some normal chaos through which students need to learn to navigate?

Hung and Chou (2015) point to the need to better understand online instructors' behaviors that prevent them from utilizing the available array of effective tools for online communication and collaboration. An interesting study would be to compare student perception of teaching presence to (1) the instructor's perceived degree of teaching presence and (2) efforts made by the instructor to adapt their pedagogical, social, and technological roles to better fit the needs of an online environment.

While there are concerns about the generalizability of focus-group studies, we believe that readers can extract lessons from this study based on the common delivery systems and techniques used in many institutions of various types in online learning. Readers should recognize where their own programs align

with the tools and techniques mentioned here and consider whether the lessons might apply. In that way, we are hoping to bring awareness to new perspectives that may be more deeply studied.

Conclusion

This research set out to gain a deeper understanding of the views of students about online education than what is collected using the typical end-of-semester survey. Rather than being prompted to focus on particular aspects of a course, as is the case with multiple-choice survey questions, focus-group participants are able to use free-form thinking to explore aspects of the course important to them. We found the usual suspects regarding the value of online learning to the students' lifestyles. They all cited the convenience, the flexibility, the ability to work at their own pace (within the course deadline schedule), and the ability to work wherever they had an Internet connection—even if traveling for fun or work. We noted these commonalities to extend the generalizability of our study, but we did not emphasize these aspects because they are well documented.

Overall, students in the focus group perceived the degree of learning in online courses to be at the same level as or higher than in face-to-face classes. It was also their opinion that two of the more effective aspects of online courses were evidence of the instructor's personal work or other experiences in the real world relevant to the course material and faculty–student interaction. With the immense amount of information at their fingertips, students still appreciate the grounding and guidance that comes from having someone point them in the right direction and relate those lessons to their lives. The value of faculty practical experiences may be an extension to the community of inquiry framework on teaching presence and immediacy behaviors (Arbaugh & Hwang, 2006; J. Arbaugh, 2010; Nemanich et al., 2009) that is worth researching further. The students also appreciated richer media, like video and audio, that they could rewind, play back, and stop to make notes, as long as the presentations were not “too long.”

Also among our findings is that when students take multiple online classes, they can get overwhelmed by many competing deadlines in multiple classes, the lack of clarity around the rules in each class related to assignments (particularly discussions), and confusion about where to locate important course materials and information in the learning management system for different courses. The students in all three focus groups

discussed the potential effectiveness of the calendar tool for managing deadlines in multiple online courses, if implemented by faculty across the program. While juggling responsibilities for multiple courses is good training for a demanding career and life, faculty members should keep in mind that online classes often have more assignments and interactions than face-to-face classes and that the potential for a student to feel isolated is much greater in an online class. Thus, course design guidelines that provide more consistency related to execution of the courses within an online program is another recommended improvement.

Lastly, this study highlights that faculty members need to demonstrate how course assignments relate to students' future career objectives and, also, effectively use online teaching tools to convey such relevancy. In particular, students in the focus groups did not perceive their interactions within discussion assignments to be of value in the learning process. In fact, they referred to discussion activities as “busy work.” More research is needed to determine if the issue at hand is the teaching mechanism itself (e.g., the discussion platform), the instructor's knowledge of how to effectively use the mechanism, or the lack of clarity as to how the assignment relates to the learning objectives and their lives overall.

In conclusion, the use of the focus-group method provided us with various insights into our online program that cannot be gleaned from traditional course evaluation instruments. Several of the student perceptions we uncovered are consistent with findings in previous literature. However, by leveraging the strengths of focus groups, we did discover some new wrinkles about aspects of the online program that the students found effective and ineffective, as well as some changes that they would recommend. These have enabled us to make recommendations for program-wide improvements. Finally, the additional specificity about aspects of online courses we uncovered allows researchers to proceed with a more nuanced approach to well-researched concepts.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Student Evaluation of Teaching Instrument.

Course-related questions (5: <i>strongly agree</i> ; 1: <i>strongly disagree</i>)
1. The course materials contributed to my learning.
2. The graded activities were consistent with the objectives of the syllabus.
3. The amount of work needed to do well in this course was appropriate.
4. The course content reflected relevant real-life applications.
5. Learning modules and materials were well organized.
6. In this course I learned to think and reason (not just memorize material) about the course topics.
7. Taking this course has improved my ability to identify problems, analyze solutions and make decisions.
8. Taking this course has improved my ability to recognize ethical dilemmas.
9. Taking this course has improved my ability to communicate business concepts.
10. Taking this course has improved my understanding of global issues that affect business decisions.
11. Overall, I am satisfied with the course.
12. Overall the content of this course contributed to my knowledge and intellectual skills.
Please comment on the content of the course. (Open-ended Responses)
Instructor-related questions (5: <i>strongly agree</i> ; 1: <i>strongly disagree</i>)
1. The instructor(s) followed the course plan as outlined in the syllabus.
2. The instructor(s) explained the grading system.
3. The instructor(s) returned graded assignments/exams/projects on a timely basis.
4. The instructor(s) implemented and maintained an effective schedule.
5. The instructor(s) answered questions respectfully and clearly.
6. The instructor(s) was accessible and responded to student questions in a timely manner consistent with the conditions set in the syllabus.
7. The instructor(s) delivered the materials effectively.
8. The instructor(s) created an environment which motivated me to learn.
9. The instructor(s) was enthusiastic about teaching this course.
10. Overall, I would rate this instructor(s) as effective.
11. Overall, I am satisfied with the instructor(s).
12. I would recommend to other students that they take a course from this instructor(s).
Please comment on the instructor's strengths. (Open-ended Responses)
Please comment on ways the instructor might improve. (Open-ended Responses.)

Appendix B: Moderator script

(A) Introduction/Guidelines (5 min.)

Greeting: Thank you for coming here today. I am [NAME] and I will be leading this discussion. Our purpose today is to talk about online and face to face courses that you take through the College of Business. I will invite you to suggest comparisons and make improvements for the online courses. Also, to generate some ideas towards what the ideal course format might look like so that you can maximize your learning. There are no wrong answers and this is to be an open and honest discussion.

Agenda: We'll be doing several things. I will invite you to participate in group discussions, private reflection and also develop new ideas, so I want you to wear your creative hats and come up with lots of ideas. This is a free-flowing discussion so feel free to speak your mind and speak at any time but

please let's have one discussion at a time. I am looking for different points of view. For the next two hours the sky is the limit.

Mod. Info: I work for an independent market research firm. I do not work directly for [the college of business]. I'm working on this project as a research consultant. My job is to ask questions, listen, and when done, write a report.

Disclosures: The session is being taped so I can concentrate on what was said rather than who said what. It helps me write my report. There are also colleagues taking notes because we work on this project together.

Permissions: At any time feel free to get up and use the restroom or to get something to drink. I just ask that you do so one at a time.

Guidelines: Please talk one at a time. Talk in a voice as loud as mine as I am recording. Please avoid side conversations. I need to hear from everyone but you do not have to answer every question. Say what you believe, whether or not anyone else agrees with you.

Exercise prior to discussion (Immediate personal preferences) 5 min

Let's start with a "Free Associations" game.

On a sheet of paper, write down privately ... When I say "Online courses" what immediate thoughts come to mind? Things you might enjoy or make you feel good about taking an online course or perhaps things you have concerns or don't like about online courses.

Now do the same for face-to-face courses.

b. Introductions (15 min.)

(1) Please introduce yourself to me by telling me:

- Your name, as you like to be called.
- What year are you in and what is your major?
- How many online courses have you taken? What subjects?
- When did you last take an online course
- What associations did you write down from the previous exercise? (Attributes)

50 minutes

Tell me ...

- Benefits/attributes—15 (on easel)
 - What are some of the reasons that make you decide to take online courses? What do you look for in online courses?
 - What was your best online course experience and what made it stand out?
 - Are they all created equal? Are they consistent?
 - What were they like outside of [the college of business]? Do you have any experience with other schools?
 - What did you find helpful to your learning experience when taking an online course?
 - FOR THOSE WHO HAVE TAKEN ONLY ONE ONLINE COURSE—Why have you not taken any other online courses?(Benefits)

- Online vs. face-to-face—10
 - How would you compare online courses in terms of difficulty?
 - What is essential for you to make a decision to take an online vs. a face-to-face course? What are the critical differences to help you with your decision? (Critical differences)
 - How would you compare the level of learning and retention of the two types of courses?
 - What are some things that motivate you to really dig into a class to learn the material versus just skimming through, reading just enough to complete the assignments?
 - What would you say to other students who have not taken online courses? What sort of “tips would you give them? What would you suggest to the faculty as improvements?
 - Overall, do you prefer online courses or classroom-based courses? Why so?
 - Likes—5
 - What do you find attractive when taking an online course? What do you like? What do you hope it will offer you? (Likes)
 - Concerns—10
 - What are some concerns or dislikes about the total experience of taking an online course? OPEN ENDED FIRST
 - Registration?
 - Getting information about the course?
 - Elements about the course?
 - What else is/was hard to deal with?
 - What is hard to deal with during the course? OPEN ENDED FIRST
 - Assignments?
 - Seeing the professor or communications?
 - Exams?
 - What else?
 - Improvements—10
 - What are some suggestions for improvements you might have when it comes to online courses? PROBE: Video lectures, audio presentations, quizzes, homework, discussions?
 - Can you make suggestions for improvement in terms of lecture notes, organization or other tools? (improvements)
 - What would you like to see happen during the course so that you can have a great experience?
- C. Top of mind expectations when taking an online course (10 min.)
- (1) When taking an online course what are some of your expectations that you would like to see fulfilled?
 - (2) Which ones were and which were not fulfilled? What made it that way?
 - (3) What was missing that would make difference in your experience?
 PROBE FOR ANY COURSE-SPECIFIC EVENTS.
 D. Design of the course (20 min.)
 Split the group into pairs. Each pair will be told the following:
 You are the team given the responsibility to come up with an outline and the technology you would deliver an online of a course. You can select what course it might be and don't worry about the content.
 I am interested in the logistics of making it a delight for the students who decide to take it and also you will need to have a complete set of presentation materials so that the students who take the course will have a great experience. This is from beginning to end!
 Use your imagination and come up with an outline to address the following items:
 - What are all the things to consider? You can put any activities you feel are important in it as long as it is very desirable for you to use.
 - How should it be announced?
 - Who are the people who would use it? Characteristics of the students.
 PRESENTATIONS—Each team presents their ideas about the course and comments are offered by others.
 E. On technology (10 min.)
 - How would rate the online support to help with online class issues?
 - How would you compare [the university's] infrastructure for online courses when compared to that of other schools where you might have taken online courses?
 - Are there enough opportunities to pursue a [business] degree fully on line?
 - Can you always find your way through materials to handle online course setup, expectations? What are some hurdles?
 - How would you rate the on campus exam arrangements? Is it easy finding a proctor?
 F. Convergence and prioritization (10 min.)
 Using the prepared Attribute/Benefit cards, do a “table sort” for the IMPORTANCE on the selected items. Add any other additional items which might be missing.
 Probe: Thoughts, feelings, associations on those items.
 - What makes it important for you?
 - How do you deal with it up to now?
 - How would you like to have that wish answered?
 - What can be the answer? How so?
 G. Conclusion (5 min.)
 - (1) Out of all of the possibilities that we have looked at, which one is of most utility to you?
 - (2) Which one speaks to you the most—meaning it seems the most relevant to your online course experience?
 - (3) Remaining questions from the research team.
 - (4) Thank you for coming.