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Challenges Faced by Jesuit Worldwide Learning Students: Piloting a Mixed Methods Investigation

Martha Habash
Professor of Classics and Academic Director (USA) of Jesuit Worldwide Learning
Creighton University
marthahabash@creighton.edu

Alexander Rödlach, SVD
Professor of Medical Anthropology
Creighton University
alexanderroedlach@creighton.edu

Jill M. Fox
Instructor of English as a Second Language
Creighton University
jillfox@creighton.edu

Gretchen Oltman
Associate Professor of Organizational Leadership
Creighton University
GretchenOltman@creighton.edu

Ashley T. Abraham
Medical Student
Loyola University Chicago
aabraham12@luc.edu

Yasmine H. Jakmouj
Graduate Assistant
Creighton University
yasminejakmouj@creighton.edu

Abstract

In 2018-2019, Creighton University, a Jesuit university in Omaha, Nebraska, piloted a scholarship program in which a few graduates of the Diploma program living in Afghanistan and Jordan matriculated at Creighton University in its online B.S. in Leadership Studies. These students were enrolled in courses along with non-traditional adult students, and challenges on the part of the students, the faculty, and staff arose. The goal of the exploratory study on which this paper is based has been to explore the usefulness of a specific methodology, Group Concept Mapping (GCM), through its online platform, Group Wisdom (GW), combined with the analysis of narrative course evaluations and interview texts adopting the Grounded Theory approach using a text analysis software (Open Code 4.03) to identify the specific challenges of students, staff, and educators in this program so that they could be addressed.¹ The authors conclude, based on this pilot study, that the use of this combined and integrated methodology is effective to examine challenges that students living at the margins face when pursuing higher education degrees. They propose a larger study using this approach in order to generate the empirical evidence that informs strategies to address these challenges.

Introduction

Jesuit Worldwide Learning: Higher Education at the Margins (JWL) brings higher educational opportunities to people living at the margins of society due to conflict, lack of economic opportunity, natural disasters, and other factors.² It was formed as a consortium of Jesuit universities in 2010 as Jesuit Commons: Higher Education at the Margins and began its pilot phase (2010-2014) in three locations: Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, Dzaleka refugee camp in Malawi, and Aleppo, Syria. In the pilot phase American Jesuit universities donated online courses for a Diploma in Liberal Studies with Regis University in Denver, Colorado as the accrediting university.³ English classes were offered in preparation for entry into the Diploma.

Today, JWL is a global partnership of universities, local communities, humanitarian organizations, and Information Technology companies. As of 2021, JWL has community learning centers (CLCs) in 19 countries and currently serves over 5,400 students per year, with an overall gender balance in all of its programs of 42% male to 56% female.⁴ JWL offers Global English Language classes, Professional Certificate programs, a Certificate in Liberal Studies (CLS), and until recently a Diploma in Liberal Studies.⁵ Since 2014 JWL has designed its own courses for the Diploma, Certificate in Liberal Studies, and its Professional Certificates. The Global English Language program uses the internationally recognized course, *English Unlimited*, that provides materials, workbooks, and tests at 6 different levels of English study. The Professional Certificates are 6-month long courses offered in partnership with accredited universities from around the globe, and include Peace Leader, Learning Facilitator, Youth Sports Facilitator, Ecotourism, Creative Writing and Design, and Ecommerce.

The Diploma consists of 45 credits. Students took one or two 8-week courses per term and selected concentrations in Business, Education, or Social Work for their last five courses. As of 2020, over 1,000 students had enrolled in the Diploma with nearly 70% of them completing it.⁶ Tshilombo and Rega report that 65% of the Diploma graduates pursue other higher education

paths after completion of the Diploma, and 84% of these accessed these education programs through JWL. These graduates have enrolled in 26 different educational institutions around the world. Many did so after resettlement in North America or Australia, while some opportunities have been offered in camps, such as Southern New Hampshire University in Kakuma and Dzaleka; Creighton University in Afghanistan, Jordan, Kenya, and Malawi; and Xavier Institute of Management University in Bhubaneswar, India throughout all of JWL's CLCs.⁷

JWL's offerings engage students through blended learning with online instruction and content, and learning facilitators on-site who meet with students at CLCs. Ignatian pedagogical principles are incorporated into its courses "to promote action-oriented learning."⁸ JWL's programs create online global classrooms. Students from JWL's CLCs from across the globe are placed into one online classroom so that they might share their unique perspectives and contribute to a broader understanding of the material as well as foster a sense of community across cultures, religions, ethnicities, and physical boundaries. JWL's own platform, Humanitarian eLearning Platform (HeLP), was developed to ensure that students living at the margins could more easily access its online programs. JWL's goal is for its students to "contribute their knowledge and voices to the global community of learners and together foster hope to create a more peaceful and humane world."⁹

Graduates of the Diploma are eager to continue their studies. In 2018-2019, Creighton University, a Jesuit university in Omaha, Nebraska, piloted a scholarship program in which a few graduates of the Diploma program living in Afghanistan and Jordan matriculated at Creighton University in its online B.S. in Leadership Studies. These students were enrolled in courses along with non-traditional adult students, and challenges on the part of the students, the faculty, and staff arose. The goal of the exploratory study on which this paper is based has been to explore the usefulness of a specific methodology, Group Concept Mapping (GCM), through its online platform, Group Wisdom (GW), combined with the analysis

of narrative course evaluations and interview texts (called “text data” in this article) adopting the Grounded Theory approach using a text analysis software (Open Code 4.03) to identify the specific challenges of students, staff, and educators in this program so that they could be addressed.¹⁰ This integrated methodological approach is inspired by the constructivist paradigm that encourages researchers and evaluators to identify the diverse values, experiences, perceptions, and perspectives of multiple groups of participants and using them when planning, designing, or evaluating a program or a social policy.¹¹ GCM seems to be particularly useful for this approach as it “creates a stakeholder-authored visual geography of ideas from many communities of interest, combined with specific analysis and data interpretation methods, to produce maps that can then be used to guide planning and evaluation efforts on the issues that matter to the group.”¹² GCM combines qualitative and quantitative research techniques that have been effectively used for program planning and evaluation,¹³ including studies ranging from examining success and failure factors of educational projects to assessing needs for a social support system in a learning network, and was therefore deemed an appropriate tool for this study.¹⁴ GCM becomes even more useful when its results were compared and contrasted with the results of the analysis of other data sets, increasing the credibility or trustworthiness of the GCM findings as well as their validity.¹⁵ The second set of already existing data, which we used, includes anonymized admission essays, coursework essays written by the JWL students enrolled in the Creighton University B.S. program as well as their narrative course evaluations and interviews with them. These texts were analyzed using Grounded Theory, which constructs theories through repeatedly reviewing the data until ideas and concepts become apparent and are tagged with codes, which are then grouped in broader categories that may become the basis for a new theory, suggesting a relationship between two or more categories that helps to interpret the data. The authors conclude, based on this pilot study, that the use of this combined and integrated methodology is effective to examine challenges that students living at the margins face when pursuing higher education degrees. They propose a larger study using this approach in order to

generate the empirical evidence that informs strategies to address these challenges.

This article first provides a concise review of relevant literature, then outlines the methodology, subsequently summarizes the results, and finally interprets the findings and presents suggestions for the use of this methodology for future research exploring barriers to successful learning for JWL students.

Literature Review

Three studies concerning JWL students studying in a global classroom with students at Creighton University have recently been published. Habash examines the self-reported benefits to traditional undergraduate university students studying in a global classroom at Creighton University with people living at the margins, concluding that traditional students become more empathetic and motivated to perform service for justice after studying with people living at the margins. Oltman and Habash discuss the inception, implementation, and issues faced by the leadership, administrators, and faculty as well as the benefits to all involved in this scholarship program in the same Creighton University scholarship program for the JWL Diploma graduates as discussed in this paper. Identified issues included reliable access to the Internet, challenges with communications between faculty and students, and the inherent obstacles students face in an accelerated course design. Riva’s article articulates her experience in the global classroom with these students as she views teaching as “accompaniment” and describes how she provided an adapted online learning environment to fit the needs of this population of students via altering the time given for quizzes and allowing multiple attempts at quizzes in order to teach rather than just to evaluate student learning.¹⁶

Additionally, there are a few noteworthy articles concerning JWL’s Diploma in Liberal Studies. Crea and McFarland give the history of the Diploma program, its methods, its objectives and the students’ perspectives of the pilot years of the JWL Diploma in Liberal Studies. Crea examines the contextual challenges and implications for JWL’s program design in its pilot phase from 2010-2014. Crea and Sparnon review the

implementation of the JWL program in its pilot phase with a focus on faculty and practitioner perspectives, and conclude that some faculty appreciated the communication among other faculty teaching the same course, the support of on-site staff, and the sense of fulfillment in teaching these students while others complained of communication issues involving other faculty and on-site staff, the relevancy of some of the material, and clarity of expectations for students, faculty, and staff.¹⁷ Among the staff perceptions concerning the benefits of this program are community building; its impact on assisting in empowerment, advancement, and increased employment; skill building; creating a positive outlook; and increased cultural understanding. Two of the challenges mentioned in previous literature cited above were also apparent in this study: communication and cultural/contextual issues.

Serving Those Living at the Margins

Most governments and NGOs prefer to sponsor primary and elementary education because of the higher costs associated with offering tertiary education. Nevertheless, JWL is one of several NGOs offering tertiary education to those living at the margins; others include Coursera Learning Hub, The Free Syrian University, and Borderless Higher Education for Refugees, to name but a few. These are online and, in some cases, in-person offerings serving those with little or no access to higher education. JWL differs from these other NGOs in that it employs blended learning and is a Jesuit initiative, and therefore, incorporates Ignatian pedagogical principles in its offerings. The need for higher educational offerings is great. In 2018 only 3% of refugees had access to higher education compared to 37% of the world's population; UNHCR's target for 2030 is to have 15% of the world's refugees enrolled in tertiary educational programs.¹⁸

There are numerous challenges to delivering higher educational opportunities to people living at the margins but also tremendous rewards and benefits. Among the challenges are bringing internet service to remote areas of the world (JWL set up solar panels in Afghanistan to do so); convincing parents and community leaders to allow girls to continue their education beyond

high school; competing with daily chores, including caring for family members; contending with jobs required to feed the family (some obtained illegally and requiring hard labor in unsafe conditions); providing transportation to and from the community learning center (sometimes through unsafe neighborhoods); addressing the feeling of hopelessness in those who feel forgotten by the world; and managing one's time at the community learning center because there's no electricity at home.

The benefits of providing tertiary education to those living at the margins, however, outweigh the challenges. Tertiary education has the ability to play a role in "peacebuilding and conflict transformation through its role in mediating the identity bases of conflict."¹⁹ Tertiary education addresses the feeling of hopelessness that can often lead young people to be vulnerable to radicalization. Furthermore, providing tertiary education to those living at the margins in their current location rather than relocating them for their studies allows them to share their knowledge with the community in exile and when the time is right, they are more likely to return home to rebuild their country than those who relocate for educational opportunities and find lucrative work there.²⁰

The Global Classroom

Blended learning is defined as "the integration of useful aspects of online and face-to-face learning environments, where students and teacher interact both with and without the use of technology."²¹ It is an excellent mode of learning when face-to-face learning is possible because it provides greater resources for students to use at their leisure while also enabling community building and peer-sharing experiences within a classroom. "Effective blended learning plays on the strengths of face-to-face and online learning and combines the best of both approaches to facilitate the best learning outcomes for students..."²² Furthermore, the blended learning model allows for the Ignatian pedagogical principle of guidance and companionship.

JWL has been successful in terms of student retention and completion because of its blended learning modality (circa 70% of the JWL Diploma

students completed their Diploma).²³ JWL provides to students at its Community Learning Centers (CLCs) a wrap-around service that includes learning facilitators and advisors and requires a weekly in-person meeting that includes discussion of the course unit's material.

Ignatian Pedagogy

In addition to employing the blended learning modality, JWL incorporates Ignatian principles within its classes, following the traditional steps of Ignatian pedagogy: context, experience, reflection, action, and evaluation that contribute to forming men and women for and with others. A recent study by Honen-Delmar and Resa of 136 Diploma graduates looked at their community service participation and attitudes. 79% of the Diploma graduates reported that they engaged in community service upon completion of the Diploma and the “graduates articulate[d] their sense of community in terms of providing compassion, support, and care for marginalised/vulnerable peoples.” They also reported that “Graduates’ sense of community is driven by an empathetic and servant leadership approach seeking to address challenges in the community, using the interconnected element of community to widen the benefits of this involvement.”²⁴

Scholarship Program at Creighton University for Graduates of the JWL-Regis Diploma

Through an internal Creighton University (CU) Global Initiative grant awarded in 2017, 20 scholarships were awarded to graduates of the JWL Diploma in CU's online B.S. in Leadership Studies with a minor in Healthy Lifestyle Management. These two programs were the only ones delivered online in 2017 and, therefore, available to JWL students. In the academic year 2018-2019, Creighton's program enrolled 10 students living in Bamyan, Afghanistan, 1 in Herat, Afghanistan, and 2 urban refugees living in Amman, Jordan. Once they matriculated these students became Creighton students, and thus, have access to the learning platform, Creighton's online library, online tutoring services, IT assistance, and instruction. Creighton also provides books and has been setting up small libraries in the learning centers where these students study. JWL provides

access to the internet and a computer. Most of the Afghan students belong to an ethnic minority and are Shia Muslims, which is a minority religion in predominately Sunni Muslim Afghanistan. The two Jordanian students are originally from Somalia and South Sudan. All of these students were concurrently studying and teaching English or providing other work for JWL or Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) as a partner in the NGO that the Afghan students created, New Horizon, prior to the Taliban takeover of the country in August 2021.²⁵ Most of the Afghan students lived and taught English in pairs in remote villages. Most did not have access to electricity or the internet once they left the CLC. Internet service is dependent on solar power and is spotty during the winter months when the weather is cloudy. The students in Jordan are urban refugees living in Amman. As refugees, legal work is restricted, and food, rent, and transportation costs are expensive in Amman.

Three Creighton University students,²⁶ one of them a co-author of this article, collaborated with two of the co-authors²⁷ to develop and implement a research project during a course,²⁸ taught by one of the co-authors,²⁹ to explore barriers faced by JWL students enrolled in Creighton's B.S. program. The purpose of this project was to test if GCM, and the GW software, combined with the analysis of narrative course evaluations and interview texts, the text data, adopting the Grounded Theory approach using the Open Code 4.03 text analysis software can further our understanding of barriers and struggles faced by JWL students and their instructors, can help strengthen institutional gaps in international learning, and can be used for a future study.³⁰ The process and the results strongly suggest that the methodology is indeed appropriate to systematically study this or a related research question and that the two software programs are a useful tool for this purpose. We would like to note that the results of this pilot project highlight specific trends but, because of the small number of study participants, cannot be generalized nor was this the goal of this study. Beyond being a useful research approach for JWL, the authors contend that the methodology and software associated with it can be effectively used to plan, design, and evaluate online global education to those living at the margins.

Methodology

This pilot study included students, faculty, and staff in Creighton University's JWL Diploma Scholarship program in the 2018-2019 academic year that included 13 students, 8 course instructors, the program's academic coach, the on-site coordinator, and the program's director at Creighton University, totaling 24 individuals. The text data were already available to the research team. As over half of the participants reside outside of the United States, the team decided to collect Group Concept Mapping data only online, facilitated by Group Wisdom, a robust online platform for the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data. Numerous emails were sent out at all stages to prospective participants, encouraging them to participate in the pilot study and giving them clear instructions for using the online platform. It was difficult to engage with and receive responses particularly from the JWL students. In an attempt to elicit more responses an email was even sent out to the JWL students in Arabic.³¹ Despite these efforts, response rates were low. Overall, faculty and staff participated more in the beginning of the project during the brainstorming stage, while the JWL students participated more in the sorting and rating stages as well as responding to the demographic questions. This difference warrants further discussion but is likely to be related to communication issues, involving language and cultural patterns of engagement, which will be addressed during a follow up study.

The first step in the Group Concept Mapping component was to formulate a focus prompt, which takes the form of an open-ended sentence that respondents complete and generates data that

help to understand barriers to effective teaching and successful learning. After discussing key concepts implied in this general question, e.g. how to define "success," "barrier," and "learning," we decided to use the following prompt: "Challenges and obstacles to being successful for JWL students include ..." JWL students, faculty, and staff were invited to respond to the prompt and to complete the sentence by listing at least five responses that come to their mind to ensure that a broad range of thoughts and experiences is included in the responses. This step is called "brainstorming". Their responses were combined into a single list of statements, which was then prepared for the next step by removing duplicates, editing statements for clarity, divvying up statements that include several distinct thoughts, and deleting those that are not related to the research question. This step is called "idea synthesis" and "produces a well-informed set of items that represent the body of knowledge"³² related to the research question. Even though some researchers use lists with up to 100 statements, based on our previous research using similar methodologies (freelists and pilesorts), we consider it problematic to use such long lists of items because completing the next GCM steps then requires a significant amount of time with respondents losing interest completing these steps or rushing through them, compromising the validity of the data.³³ Using a list with about 25 items seems more appropriate and increases the validity of the resulting data.³⁴ The initial brainstorming yielded 42 statements, resulting in a final list of 26 statements. Table 1 includes the list of statements in no particular order. The number assigned to individual statements helps to identify them in the graphs included later in this article.

Table 1. Final Statement List

Statement #	Statement
1	Western cultural influence on class content
2	Struggle to balance work, family life, and studying
3	Working long hours in a regular job with little time to spend on assignments
4	Poor time management skills
5	Not being proactive in the learning process
6	Not incorporating feedback from the instructor
7	Late submission of assignments
8	Not checking email or Blueline ³⁵ announcements
9	Long distance from home to learning center
10	Difficulty communicating with US students in courses
11	Difficulty communicating with class instructors
12	Struggle to adapt to a different learning style ³⁶
13	Limited English fluency
14	Course materials that challenge students' beliefs, values, and practices
15	Ill health
16	Limited access to electricity and the internet
17	Reluctance to communicate struggles to faculty, advisor, or tutor
18	Lack of communication with on-site JWL supervisor
19	Lack of familiarity with U.S. education system
20	Lack of clarity in course instructions
21	Lack of face-to-face interaction with instructors
22	Physical distance between students
23	Not spending sufficient time on assignments
24	Economic conditions in the country
25	Violence in the country
26	Lack of familiarity with academic honesty

These statements indicate broad themes that also emerged during the analysis of the second data set, the text data, particularly language barriers (13), balancing learning with other commitments (2, 3, 4, and 23), communication (8, 10, 11, 17, 18, 21, and 22), financial constraints (22), limited access to the internet and electricity (16), lack of understanding assignments (1, 20, and 26), environmental factors (2, 3, 9, 16, 21, 22, 24, and 25), illness (15), struggle to build course-related relationships (10, 11, 17, and 18), difficulties comprehending assignments (1, 5, 12, 14, 19, 20, 23, and 26), family issues (2 and 3), issues with transportation (9), personal characteristics negatively impacting learning (1, 5, 6, 7, 8, 14, 19,

23), and the different time zones of students and course instructor (10, 11, and 22). The analysis of the second set of data further indicates that these and other less frequently mentioned themes can be grouped together in three categories:

- Internal challenges related to aspects of students' individual characteristics and lives, such as personal character traits and flaws as well as cultural and religious beliefs that may negatively impact students' commitment to learning and motivation to finish assignments.
- External challenges related to students' social, cultural, and environmental

contexts, which are beyond the control of the student or the Creighton University program, such as lack of electricity, distance from the learning center, and work and family commitments that demand attention and time.

- External challenges related to the organization and structure of the Creighton University program, such as receiving late feedback from the instructor, struggling with the timing of assignments, and assignments' requirements not accurately understood.

The third category was the most frequent within the second data set, which is important to note for the interpretation of the GCM results. We also observed in the second data set that “language” (related to statement 13 in the GCM list) came up much more often in the text data than other themes, generally related to another theme, students lacking fluency in English. Students commented on their struggles to write papers with a convincing thesis argument. Most of them indicated that language challenges decreased over time as they became more familiar with reading and writing in English. Future research could explore if a decrease in language as a barrier to successful learning is also associated with JWL students teaching English at their on-site learning centers. Among the positions held by the students, one was an English teacher/Peace coordinator with JRS, 2 were Global English Language Facilitators, 5 are Community Learning Center Coordinators with English teaching duties, and 1 was a Diploma Facilitator, also with English teaching duties. Additionally, 7 of these students co-founded their own NGO in collaboration with JWL, “New Horizon”, and through this NGO they operate Community Learning Centers and deliver JWL educational programs to students in rural Daikundi province, where the literacy rate is 36.1% (49.2% for males and only 22.4% for females).³⁷ The second data set also indicates that students with English as their first language struggled to communicate with students whose first or native language is not English. Related to “language” is “communication.” Most students expressed their understanding that more communication with course instructors would help the course instructors to better understand students' challenges and to enable them to tailor

the course delivery and assignments accordingly. Lack of communication with their instructor was actually a surprisingly common challenge mentioned by students. It would be worthwhile to further explore this theme that is likely related to cultural expectations of the teacher-student relationship, language, and related issues.

While obvious challenges, such as language competencies, are mentioned more frequently, the text data include frequent references to external factors beyond students' control that impinge on their learning, such as living at home in a small space with siblings and the pressure from expectations to contribute to the income of the household. Many of the students discuss their harsh economic situation and their worries about not being able to balance income-generating work with studying for assignments. They frequently describe how such concerns take a toll on their mental health. Multiple students also discuss how frequent electricity outages made it difficult to complete assignments in a timely manner. Others discussed their struggles to access the internet or having only intermittent access to the internet. JWL generously provides a computer and access to the internet at the JWL Community Learning Centers but internet access may not be available to the students at home if their homes lack electricity. Electricity at the JWL Community Learning Centers is generated by solar power, which is often not sufficient during the winter months. Some students referred to common difficulties with public transportation from their home to the learning centers due to distance, weather, seasons, and other environmental factors. One student mentioned illness as a barrier to success as an eye infection made it difficult for her to work on her assignments.

Having finalized the statement list and corroborated its validity through the second data set, we prepared the next GCM steps, the sorting and rating. The individuals, who participated in the brainstorming, were asked to sort the statements, according to their perceived similarity, and give names to the groups of statements. The only condition for grouping statements is that no statement should be left by itself and each statement can only be in one pile. Finally, they were asked to rate the statements, using a Likert scale, according to the following questions that

sought to elicit responses to shed light on participants' perceptions of "how serious" the challenges to learning are and "how often" JWL students face them:

- "Based on your own personal experiences, please rate on a scale from 1 to 5 how important it is to address this challenge" (1 – not important at all; 5 – most important)
- "Based on your own personal experience, please rate on a scale from 1 to 5 how often you think this challenge affects JWL students" (1 – once a week; 5 – every day).

First, in order to identify possible differences in the rating and sorting responses among respondents, we asked the following demographic questions: role in the JWL program, age, gender, first or native language, and country of origin. 9 of them are students, 1 a course instructor, 1 an academic coach, and 1 an administrator (5 did not respond to this question). The youngest participant is 20 years of age and the oldest 59; the average age of participants is 32.2. Fourteen participants responded to the question asking them to identify their gender: 10 are women and 4 are men. Fourteen responded to the question inquiring about their first or native language: 10 speak Dari and 4 English. For country of origin, 9 of the 13 who responded to this question indicated Afghanistan and 4 the United States. The number of participants is too small to divide

them into sub-groups and compare their sorting and rating data. However, we tested the comparison of sub-groups of a single variable (status in the program). As the pilot suggests the meaningfulness and usefulness of the five variables, we will use them for the follow-up in-depth study with a larger group of participants and compare subgroups, e.g., men versus women and different language groups, through pattern-matching analyses.

The sorting and rating responses were then analyzed using Multidimensional Scaling (MDS) and Hierarchical Clustering (HC), two bivariate statistical methods. MDS is a "general technique that represents any similarity or dissimilarity matrix in any number of dimensions as distances between the original items in the matrix."³⁸ In other words, MDS visualizes in a scatter plot the level of similarity of individual statements in the list. The more often items are grouped together by respondents, the closer they are to each other on the graph, which is a point map. The two-dimensional point map (figure 1) shows respondents' perceived similarity (closeness on the map) and difference (distance on the map) of meaning of the 26 statements in the list. Each point is associated with a number, which refers to a specific statement (table 1). A brief visual inspection of the scatter plot already indicates the clustering of certain statements, such as 21 (lack of face-to-face interaction with instructors) and 18 (lack of communication with on-site JWL supervisor), which makes intuitive sense as both relate to communication with JWL program staff.

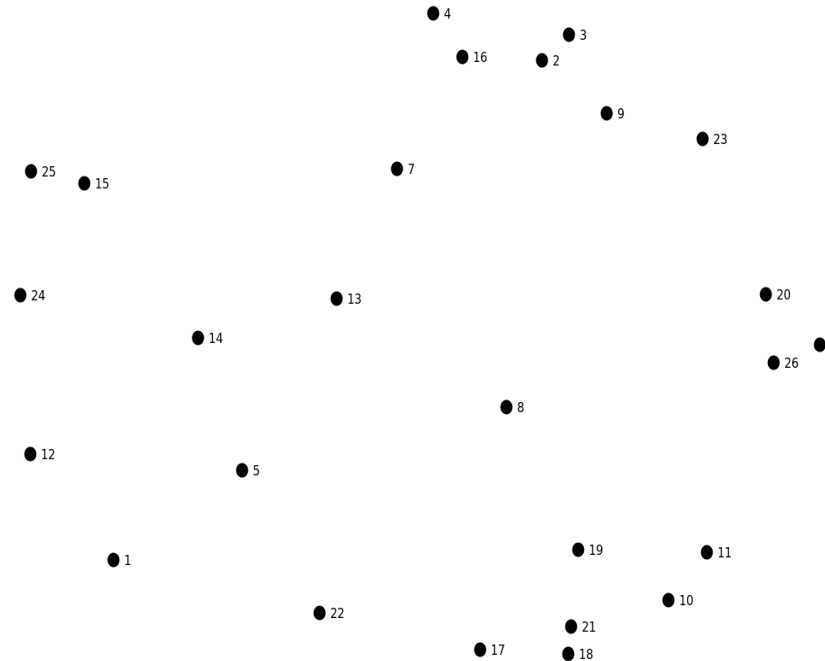


Figure 1: Point Map

The next step was to create cluster maps. HC uses the point map and groups statements into clusters that represent similar concepts, creating cluster maps where the boundaries are drawn around the points to create thematic clusters. These clusters or groups of statements represent perceptions of respondents as a group and help researchers to understand respondents' shared reasoning and understandings. Drawing on the HC analysis, Group Wisdom then suggests varying numbers of clusters and the researcher determines how many clusters are meaningful, considering the research question and the statements in the list. Pile Label (PL) analysis finally selects the most meaningful names for the clusters using a statistical algorithm, from the names given by individuals to groups of items. The researcher can either choose one of the names or, if none of these seems to describe accurately the group of statements, decide on other labels. A map with five clusters and the labels identified through the PL analysis were considered most meaningful, considering the research question (figure 2):

- Communication: this cluster includes difficulty communicating with U.S. students in courses; difficulty communicating with course instructors; reluctance to communicate struggles to

faculty, advisor and tutor; lack of communication with on-site JWL supervisor; lack of familiarity with the U.S. educational system; lack of face-to-face interaction with instructors; and physical distance between students.

- Competing interests: this cluster includes struggle to balance work, family life, and studying; working long hours in a regular job with little time to spend on assignments; poor time management skills; long distance daily travel from home to learning center; limited access to electricity and the internet outside of the learning centers; and not spending sufficient time on assignments.
- Course challenges: this cluster includes not being proactive in the learning process; not incorporating feedback from the instructor; late submission of assignments; not checking email or BlueLine announcements; limited English fluency; lack of comprehension of course instructions; and unfamiliarity with academic honesty.³⁹
- Culture: this cluster includes Western influences on class content; struggle to adapt to a different learning style; and course materials that challenge students' beliefs, values, and practices.

- Societal challenges: this cluster includes ill health; economic conditions in the country; and violence in the country.

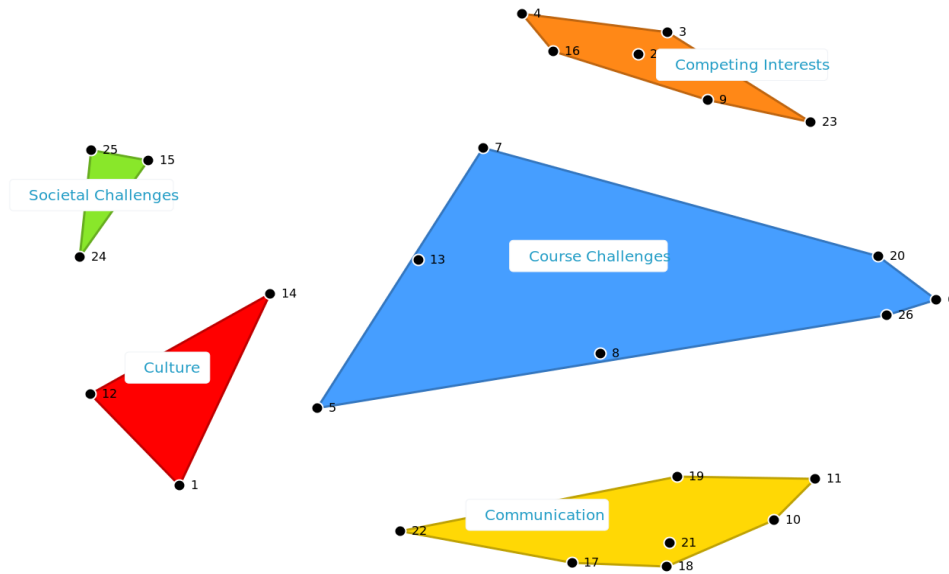


Figure 2: Cluster Map – The colors of the clusters of statements on the map have no significance per se. The color of each cluster is the same in the cluster map here, the cluster rating maps (figure 5 and 6), and the pattern-matching ladder graph (figure 8) to make it easier to visually inspect and compare them.

The average rating for each item for each of the two rating questions was calculated and then overlaid onto the point map, creating two point rating maps (figure 3 and figure 4) and the cluster map, generating two cluster rating maps (figure 5 and figure 6). A visual inspection of the two points rating maps gives a first impression of the whole group’s perception of “how serious” and “how frequent” the 26 challenges are, and it becomes apparent which challenges are considered both serious and frequent, serious but not frequent, not serious but frequent, and neither

serious nor frequent. For example, statement 9 (Long distance from home to learning center) was rated relatively low on “how serious” and relatively high on “how often.” The visual inspection and comparison of the two points rating maps already resulted in insightful conversations among team members about challenges, which challenges should be addressed, and how to address them, underscoring the usefulness of the GCM methodology for future studies.

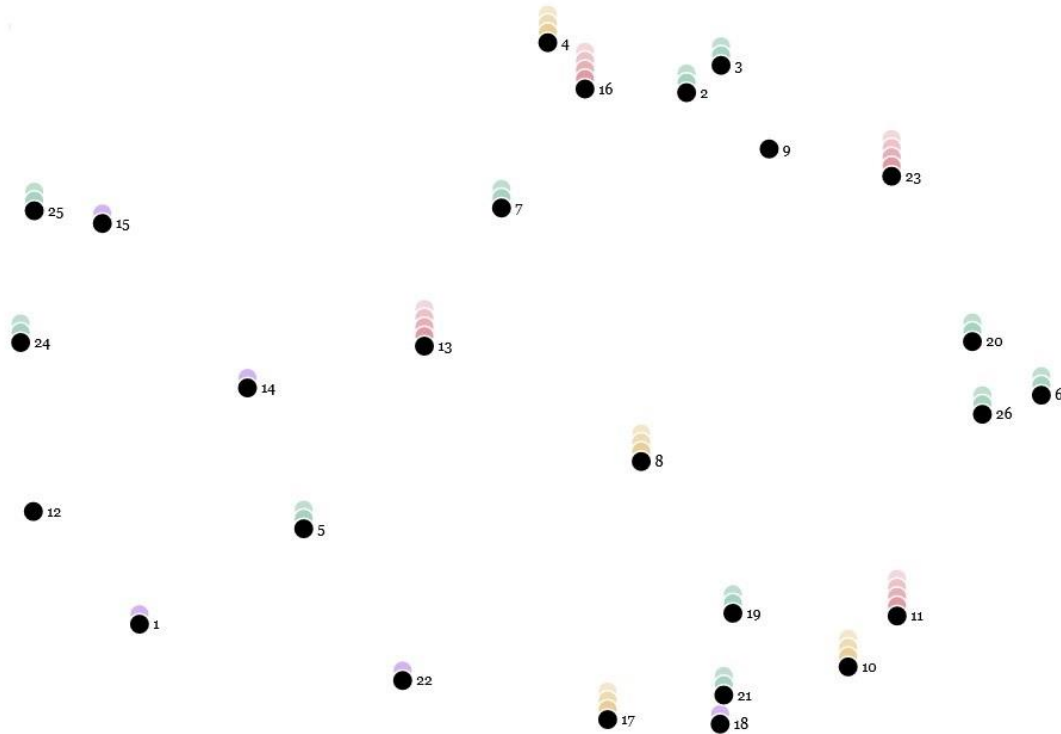


Figure 3: Point Rating Map – “How Serious?” The average rating values are indicated through layers of sickle-shaped colored lines above the circle indicating the statement: 0 layer – 2.90-3.28, 1 purple layer – 3.29-3.65, 2 green layers – 3.66-4.03, 3 yellow layers – 4.04-4.40, and 4 pink layers – 4.41-4.78. The colors for the rating values have no relation to the colors of the clusters.

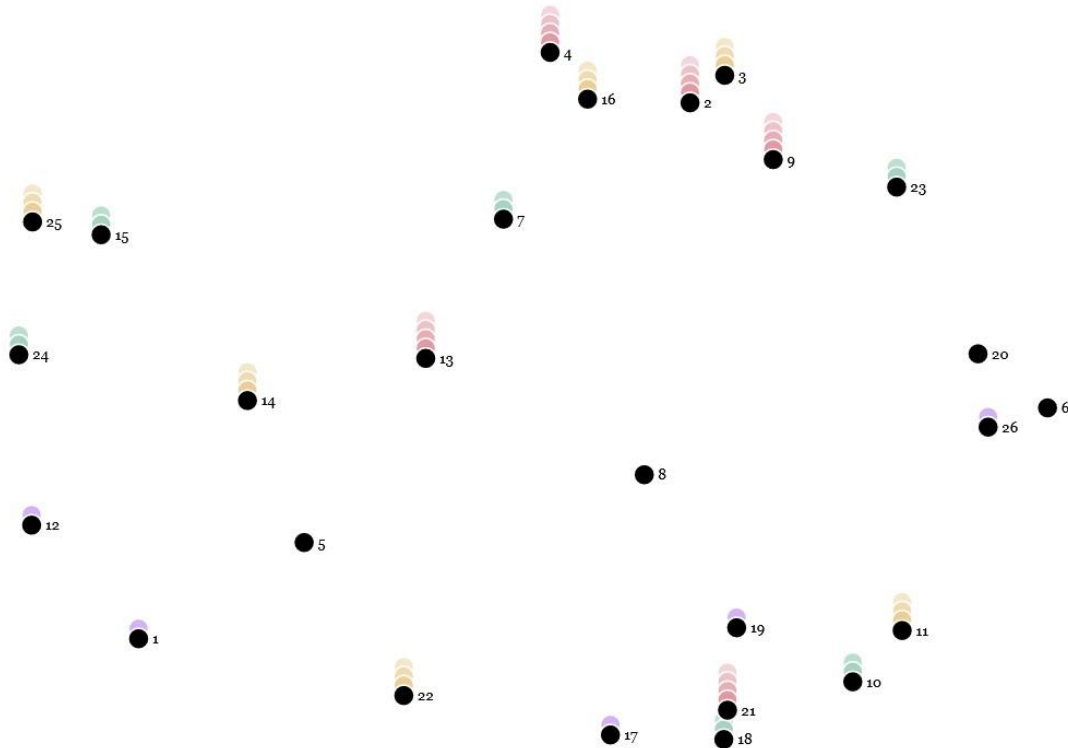


Figure 4: Point Rating Map – “How Often?” The average rating values are indicated through layers of sickle-shaped colored lines above the circle indicating the statement: 0 layer – 2.60-2.92, 1 purple layer – 2.93-3.25, 2 green layers – 3.26-3.57, 3 yellow layers – 3.58-3.90, and 4 pink layers – 3.91-4.22. The colors for the rating values have no relation to the colors of the clusters.

The cluster rating maps are similar in that they shed light on how “serious” (figure 5) and how “frequent” (figure 6) challenges are but their focus is more on groups of challenges and they help to understand the underlying broad themes of challenges. They indicate that while communication, competing interests, and course challenges are considered “serious” challenges, societal challenges and particularly culture are not. The frequency of these challenges suggests that competing interests are the most frequent, followed by communication, societal challenges,

culture, and course challenges. It is interesting that course challenges are considered serious but not very frequent. This needs to be followed up by an in-depth study as it may point at possible avenues to address such challenges. The comparison of the two cluster rating maps led to thoughtful conversations among team members about challenges, which challenges should be addressed, and how to address them, underscoring the usefulness of the GCM methodology for future studies.

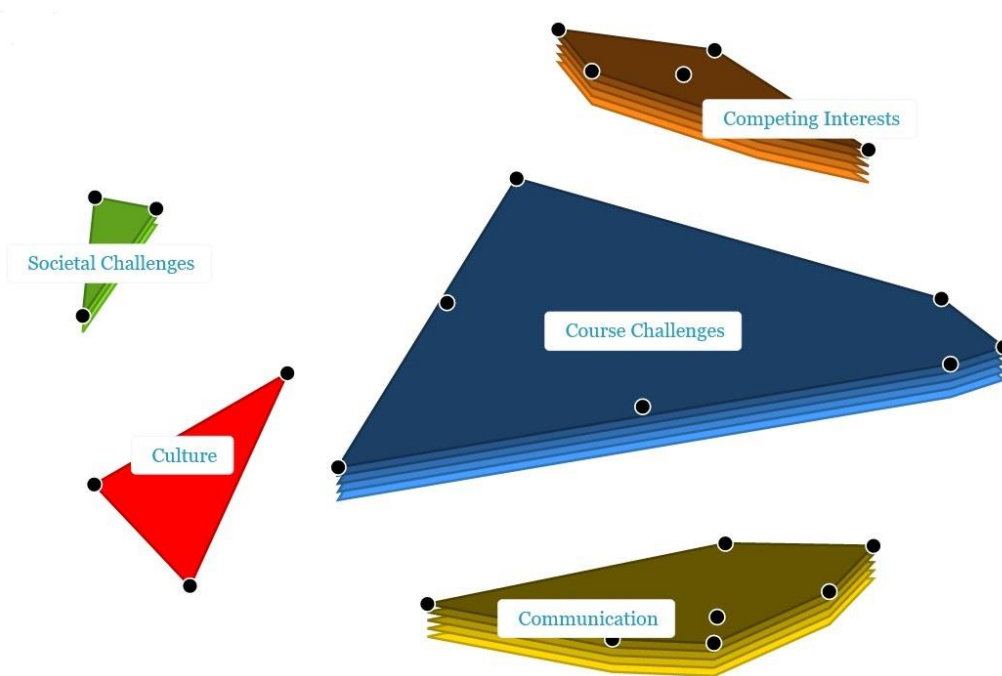


Figure 5: Cluster Rating Map – “How Serious.” The average cluster rating values are indicated through the number of layers: 1 layer – 3.30-3.45, 2 layers – 3.46-3.59, 3 layers – 3.60-3.74, 4 layers – 3.75-3.88, and 5 layers – 3.89-4.03. Furthermore, the more layers, the darker the top color of a cluster.

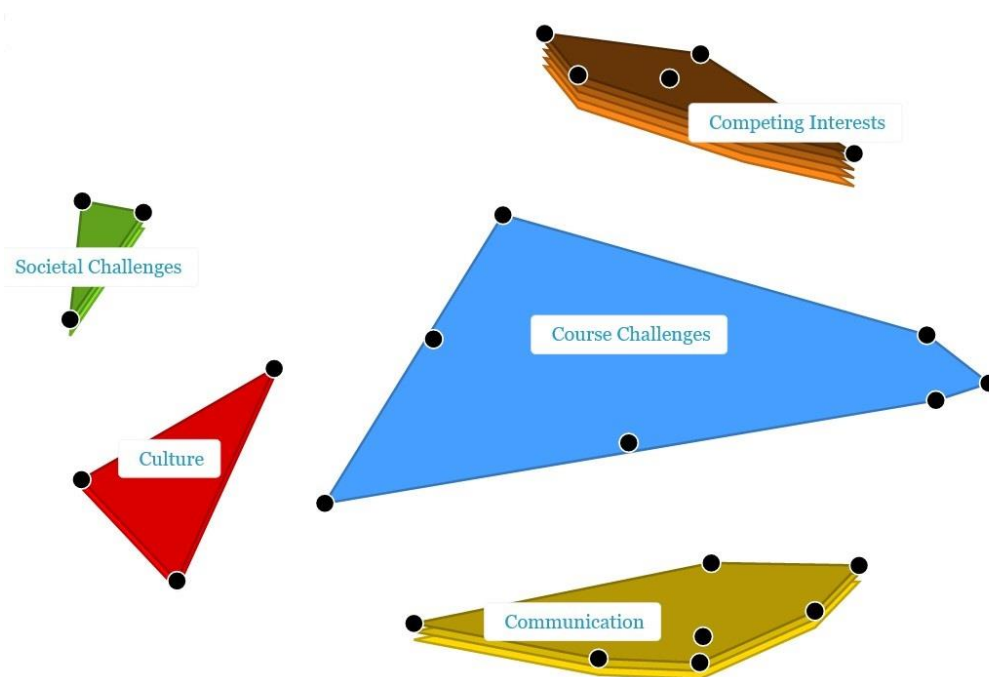


Figure 6: Cluster Rating Map – “How Often.” The average cluster rating values are indicated through the number of layers: 1 layer – 3.12-3.25, 2 layers – 3.26-3.39, 3 layers – 3.40-3.53, 4 layers – 3.54-3.66, and 5 layers – 3.67-3.80. Furthermore, the more layers, the darker the top color of a cluster.

The next step was to create a Go-Zone graph, which is a bivariate scatter plot with four quadrants that visually shows where each statement is placed on the horizontal and vertical axes, representing the rating questions for the project. The X-axis corresponds to the rating question “how serious” with the lowest value of 2.9 and the highest value of 4.78. The Y-axis values correspond to the rating question “how often” with the lowest value of 2.6 and the highest value of 4.22 (figure 7). The top-right quadrant in the Go-Zone highlights the statements which were ranked the highest in both seriousness and frequency, and therefore represent the greatest challenges to success that JWL students experienced that the JWL program should further explore and address. This quadrant encompasses ten statements: (2) difficulties to balance work, family life, and study; (3) working long hours in a daily job which decreases the time available to spend on assignments; (4) time management; (7) turning in assignments on time; (10) difficulties in

communicating with US students; (11) difficulties in communicating with class instructors; (13) fluency in the English language; (16) restricted access to electricity and the internet; (21) lack of face-to-face discussion opportunities between students and instructors;⁴⁰ and (25) violence in the country that impedes students’ ability to concentrate and accomplish tasks. Other notable points are (5 – bottom-left quadrant) not being proactive in the learning process and (9 – top-left quadrant) long distance commutes from homes to learning centers, because they ranked the lowest in one category, but higher in the other: (5) ranked low in frequency and also relatively low in importance, and (9) ranked low in one of the rating questions but relatively high in the other question. Again, discussing the graph was helpful to the research team and suggests the value of GCM for a future more extensive study, that, with a larger number of participants, could then create graphs for sub-groups and compare their perceptions.

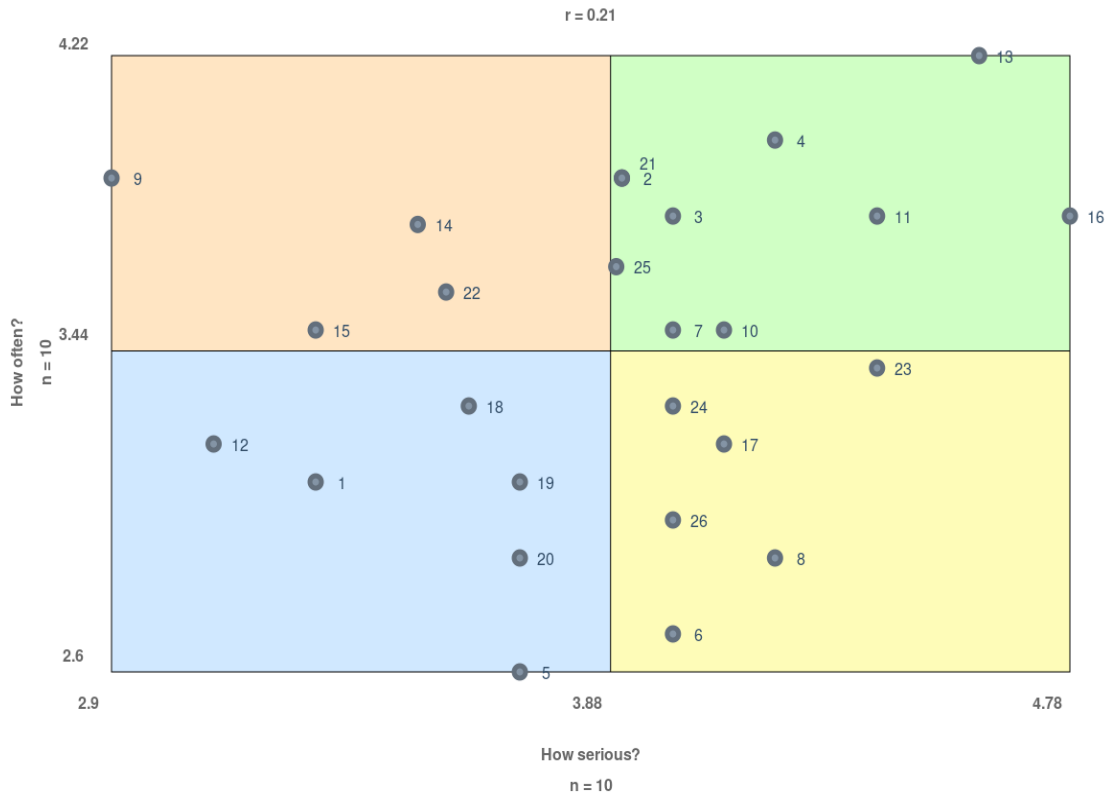


Figure 7: Go-Zone graph – The colors of the graph have no significance; their purpose is to visually distinguish the four quadrants.

The following and final step is to create Pattern Matching graphs. Pattern Matching compares “average cluster ratings for a rating variable between demographic groups, points in time, or other variables”.⁴¹ It creates ladder graphs that compare the cluster ratings of different demographic groups or data collected from respondents at different points of time. Using the demographic questions, responses from various subgroups are compared to identify similarities and differences in their perception of “how serious” and “how frequent” challenges to successful learning are. As this pilot study had a very small group of study participants, we did not compare most of the subgroups but tested the comparison with two groups. The first pattern matching ladder graph (figure 8) compares the responses of JWL students with those of faculty/staff to the question of “how serious” these challenges are. This comparison shows some striking differences, with both groups only agreeing on the relative importance of the culture cluster – every other cluster was ranked very differently by the two participant groups. The students ranked the Communication cluster as the most “serious,” while the Creighton University faculty and staff ranked the Course Challenges cluster as the most “serious.”

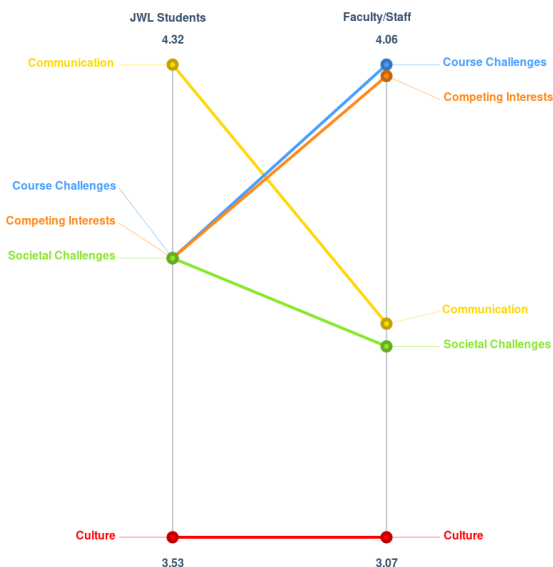


Figure 8: Pattern Matching – “How Serious” – Comparing Students’ and Faculty/Staff’ Responses

The second Pattern Matching graph (figure 9) compares the responses of the JWL students and

the Creighton University faculty and staff to the question of “how often” these challenges are faced by students. This ladder graph shows less differences compared to the first; the only major disagreement observed is in relation to the frequency of the communication cluster which students ranked as the most frequent type of challenge while faculty and staff did not give these challenges such prominence. Comparing both graphs show a disconnect between students’ perceptions and those of faculty and staff, which a future study needs to explore further.

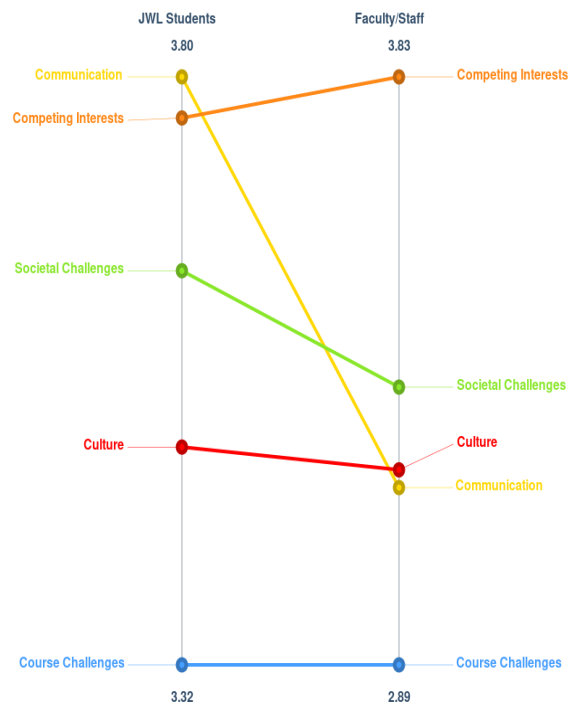


Figure 9: Pattern Matching – “How Often” – Comparing Students’ and CU Faculty/Staff’ Responses


Recommendations

This pilot study confirmed that adopting the constructivist paradigm to research challenges faced by JWL students is appropriate.⁴² This paradigm encourages researchers to pay attention to varying perceptions and experiences of diverse groups and focused our attention on comparing and contrasting perceptions of JWL students, instructors, and staff. The pilot study also confirmed that perceptions vary among students and between students and their instructors as well as program staff. This is hardly surprising as

Berger and Luckman⁴³ argue that knowledge is socially created. Thus, perceptions too are socially constructed. Embedded in the social these cannot be understood isolated from political, religious, economic, or social issues as well as material conditions.⁴⁴ Better understanding of students' perceptions and their social context will be important for the in-depth follow-up study that aims at improving students' learning experiences and increasing their learning outcomes.

We learned during this pilot study with a small group of respondents that the integration of GCM with the analysis of text data is a suitable approach to evaluate challenges to learning faced by students in Creighton University's scholarship program for JWL Diploma students in its B.S. in Leadership program. Piloting the focus prompt as well as the rating and demographic questions indicates that they are useful for an in-depth follow-up study. Further, to increase a follow-up study's response rates, we will integrate data collection exercises into JWL students' course assignments and work with the local on-site coordinator.

We also gained through this pilot study a deeper understanding of challenges faced by JWL students that a future study can further explore, such as lack of English language proficiency, communication difficulties, and cultural barriers. Creighton University has meanwhile addressed the English language and writing challenges through requiring students to take an English proficiency exam before taking courses, thoroughly assessing the students' writing admissions essays, enrolling students in an English academic writing class offered through Creighton's Intensive English Language Institute, and providing ongoing English language support throughout the program.⁴⁵ Further, both students and faculty are enrolled in cultural and technical orientation courses before JWL students take regular courses.

A future study needs to pay particular attention to challenges to students' learning that are related to asynchronous remote learning and cultural diversity among students, difficulties arising from culturally determined differences in and expectations of advising and mentoring, and socioeconomic factors complicating learning. 

Endnotes

¹ B. Glaser and A. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction, 1967 [2012]; Concept Systems Incorporated. *groupwisdom*TM. Concept Systems Incorporated. <https://groupwisdom.com>. 2020; ICT Services and System Development and Department of Epidemiology and Global Health. *Open Code* V. 4.03. University of Umeå. <http://www.phmed.umu.se/english/units/epidemiology/research/open-code>. 2015.

² For a brief description of JWL's offerings, learning centers, mission, how it operates, and opportunities for involvement, see M. Habash, "Five Things you Should Know about Jesuit Worldwide Learning: Higher Education at the Margins," *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* 9, no. 1 (2020): 150-153.

³ For an assessment of the pilot program of Jesuit Worldwide Learning: Higher Education at the Margins (formerly Jesuit Commons: Higher Education at the Margins), see T. M. Crea and M. McFarland. "Higher Education for Refugees: Lessons from a 4-year Pilot Study," *International Review of Education* 61, no. 2 (2015): 235-245.

⁴ Jesuit Worldwide Learning, *Annual Financial Report 2021*, accessed January 16, 2022, <https://www.jwl.org/>.

⁵ Regis University taught out the Diploma in Liberal Studies in December 2021. In its place is a JWL certificate in Liberal

Studies with Xavier Institute of Management University in Bhubaneswar, India as the school of record, and beginning in August 2022, Creighton University will be the school of record for a JWL Pre-STEM certificate.

⁶ Jesuit Worldwide Learning, *Annual Report 2020* (2021), <https://www.jwl.org/en/home>.

⁷ I. Tshilombo and I. Rega, "Transformation at the Margins: Diploma in Liberal Studies as a Catalyst for Personal and Community Development," no. 1 (May 2021), accessed May 13, 2022, www.jwl.org/en/news.

⁸ Jesuit Worldwide Learning, *Annual Report 2020* (2021): 24, <https://www.jwl.org/en/home>.

⁹ Jesuit Worldwide Learning (n.d.), Home, accessed May 13, 2022, <https://www.jwl.org/en/home>.

¹⁰ Glaser and Strauss, "The Discovery;" "groupwisdomTM;" "Open Code 4.03."

¹¹ D. Mertens and A. Wilson, *Program Evaluation Theory and Practice*, 2nd ed. (New York: The Guilford Press, 2019).

¹² M. Kane and S. Rosas, *Conversations about Group Concept Mapping: Applications, Examples, and Enhancements* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2018), 4.

¹³ M. Kane and W. Trochim, *Concept Mapping for Planning and Evaluation* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2007).

¹⁴ I. Wopereis, F. Paas, S. Soyantov, et al., “Failure and Success Factors of Educational ICT Projects: A Group Concept Mapping Approach,” *British Journal of Educational Technology* 36, no. 4 (2005): 681-684; D. Nadeem, S. Stoyanov, and R. Koper, “Using Concept Mapping for Needs Analysis for a Social Support System in Learning Network,” *International Journal of Interactive Mobile Technologies* 5, no. 1 (2011): 41-45. For further examples of GCM mapping in various projects, see <https://groupwisdom.com/bibliography>.

¹⁵ N. Denzin, *The Research Act: A Theoretical Introduction to Sociological Methods* (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1970).

¹⁶ M. Habash, “Learning with Students at the Margins: Creighton University’s Pilot Program with Jesuit Worldwide Learning 2017-2018,” *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* 9, no. 1 (2020): 7-17; G. Oltman and M. Habash, “Online Education for Students Living at the Margins: One US University’s Outreach,” in *Leadership in Higher Education: The Encounter with Chaos in an ICT-conscious Institution (What Faculty, Staff and Administrators Can Do to Thrive Amidst the Chaos)*, ed. Jennifer Moss Breen, Anna Visvizi, Miltiadis D. Lytras (Bingley: Emerald Studies in Higher Education, Innovation and Technology, 2020): 19-32; S. Mossman Riva, “Translating Ignatian Principles into Artful Pedagogies of Hope,” *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* 9, no. 1(2020): 106-121.

¹⁷ Crea and McFarland, “Higher Education”; T. M. Crea and N. Sparnon, “Democratizing Education at the Margins: Faculty and Practitioner Perspectives on Delivering Online Tertiary Education for Refugees,” *International Journal of Education Technology in Higher Education* 14 (2017), <https://educationaltechnologyjournal.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s41239-017-0081-y>; T. M. Crea, “Refugee Higher Education: Contextual Challenges and Implications for Program Design, Delivery, and Accompaniment,” *International Journal of Educational Development* 46 (2016): 12-22.

¹⁸ UNHCR, *Refugee Education 2030*, 2019 ed., accessed May 13, 2022, <https://www.unhcr.org/5d651da88d7.pdf>.

¹⁹ S. Milton and S. Barakat, “Higher Education as the Catalyst of Recovery in Conflict-Affected Societies,” *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 14, no. 3 (2016): 414.

²⁰ H. Avery and S. Said, “Higher Education for Refugees: The Case of Syria,” *Policy & Practice: A Development Education Review* 24 (2017): 104-125.

²¹ B. Waha and K. Davis, “University Students’ Perspective on Blended Learning,” *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 36, no. 2 (2014): 173

²² Waha and Davis.

²³ “Report on 10 Years of the Online Diploma in Liberal Studies for Refugees and Marginalised Communities,” <https://www.jwl.org/research>.

²⁴ M. Honen-Delmar and I. Rega, “A Journey Towards Empowerment: The Impact of Liberal Studies on Graduates and their Communities” Jesuit Worldwide Learning Research Report no. 2 (September 2021), 94, 99, accessed May 13,

2022,

https://www.jwl.org/Articles/Jte%20report%20full/jwl_diploma_impact_report_04_complete2.pdf.

²⁵ Of the original 10 Afghan students, two transferred to universities in countries bordering Afghanistan within two years of beginning the program. Four of the remaining 8 were relocated to Italy in August 2021 and continue their studies, while 3 /4 remaining in Afghanistan continue their studies. One of the two students living in Jordan dropped out within his first year in the program.

²⁶ Michael Galeski, B.S., Yasmine Jakmouj, B.A. and Maria Valadez, B.A.

²⁷ Martha Habash, Ph.D., and Alexander Rödlach, Ph.D., SVD.

²⁸ ANT 491 Applied Research: Needs Assessment and Program Evaluation, Spring semester, 2019. As this project was conducted as part of a course and because of the exploratory nature of the study, we did, after consultation with Creighton’s IRB, not solicit approval from the board.

²⁹ Alexander Rödlach, Ph.D., SVD.

³⁰ Kane and Trochim, “Concept Mapping;” Glaser and Strauss, “The Discovery;” “groupwisdom™;” “Open Code 4.03.”

³¹ A Creighton University student, Ali AlZahrani, kindly translated the communication into Arabic in an attempt to encourage the students living in Jordan to participate.

³² Kane and Rosas, “Conversations,” 30.

³³ Kane and Trochim, “Concept Mapping.”

³⁴ A. Rödlach, “Faith Community Nursing and Health Ministries in Religious Congregations: The Best-Kept Secret in Public Health, Summary Report of a Mixed Methods’ Study from July 1, 2014, to August 1, 2015” (unpublished manuscript, 2015).

³⁵ BlueLine is Creighton University’s online learning management system, based on Canvas.

³⁶ This statement was originally “struggle to adapt to a different online learning system from previous JWL courses” (The Diploma courses were delivered on Blackboard and the Creighton courses are on CANVAS). However, study participants interpreted this statement very differently and by and large understood it as referring to different learning styles, e.g., in the United States and Afghanistan.

³⁷ Afghanistan Energy Survey, *Daikundi*, accessed May 13, 2022,

<https://sites.google.com/view/afghandivisions/provinces/daikundi>.

³⁸ Kane and Trochim, “Concept Mapping,” 93.

³⁹ The first course in the JWL Diploma and the first course in the CU program devote a unit of study to academic honesty.

Regis University and JWL carefully monitor and track academic violations and enforce appropriate consequences while also providing learning opportunities as does Creighton University. One interpretation of this statement is that the student did not realize the full consequences of academic violations at Creighton University.

⁴⁰ Many instructors set up Zoom sessions with these students, perhaps not at the frequency that some of the students would like. The time difference between Omaha and Afghanistan is 10.5 hours.

⁴¹ Kane and Trochim, "Concept Mapping," 106.

⁴² Mertens and Wilson, "Program Evaluation."

⁴³ P. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1966).

⁴⁴ D. Fassin, "Introduction: Toward a Critical Moral Anthropology," in *A Companion to Moral Anthropology*, ed. Didier Fassin (Malden: John Wiley and Sons, 2015), 1-17.

⁴⁵ JWL has now addressed the English preparation deficiency in its students by introducing the Global English Language program in all of its Community Learning Centers, which better prepares students for academic work in all four skills of English proficiency.