FACULTY PERCEPTION OF ONLINE INSTRUCTION AND STUDENT LEARNING

By

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ABSTRACT

Online learning is continually growing across the globe and a current concern in academia is whether students are learning at higher levels in this medium. The purpose of this study was to investigate faculty perceptions of student learning in online courses versus the traditional, face-to-face environment at a Hispanic-Serving institution. A survey instrument was created and distributed to faculty at one South Texas Hispanic serving institution to address the topic of faculty insight toward online learning. Results of the study found that there is a direct relationship between faculty tenure status, faculty who taught online courses, and faculty who taught online courses for five or more years with regards to perceptions of student online learning.

Keywords: Faculty Perceptions, Student Learning, Online Courses, Hispanic Serving Institution.

INTRODUCTION

Online education, also referred to as distance learning or E-Learning, continues to grow in all areas of education from grade school to graduate school (Ferguson & DeFelice, 2010). After surveying more than 2,500 colleges and universities, Allen & Seaman (2010) discovered that most postsecondary institutions consider online learning an essential element of their long-term strategy. Allen & Seaman (2010) also found that in the fall 2008 semester, over 4.6 million students were taking at least one class online. This was an increase of 17% from the previous year. The projection is that by 2014, only 5.1 million students will take all of their courses in a physical classroom, 3.5 million will take all of their courses online and 18.6 million will take some of their classes' online (Neely & Tucker, 2010). There is no doubt that online education is now part of the higher education landscape.

Despite the demand among students for new online course offerings and programs in higher education, the acceptance for online learning among faculty has decreased. Allen & Seaman (2010) report a 3% drop in faculty acceptance of online instruction. In contrast, when comparing the learning outcomes in online education versus face-to-face there is an overall increase in rating online education as the 'Same,' 'Somewhat Superior,' or 'Superior' from 57% to 68% to traditional courses (Allen & Seaman, 2010). As online education increases, faculty perceptions of teaching and learning online show uncertainty and a lack of commitment. Learning how faculty perceive the effectiveness of instruction and student learning in online courses is valuable to educational institutions and important to the success of online learning education (Curran, 2008). This study investigates how faculty perceive student learning in online courses versus the traditional, face-to face environment at a Hispanic-Serving institution.

Theoretical Framework

While online enrollments are on the rise, most colleges and universities are facing severe pressures to cut costs due to cuts in state funding for higher education and a decrease in university endowments (Neely & Tucker, 2010). One answer to the pressure to reduce costs for many colleges

has been to offer online education as a format for lowering instructional costs. While higher education institutions and students have embraced technology with ease and enthusiasm, faculty seem to be disconnected and lacking interest in e-learning or online education (Newton, 2003).

Many studies have shown faculty members are concerned about and hesitant to teach online. There are many factors that often deter faculty from teaching online such as lack of technical skills or knowledge, lack of institutional or technical support, or lack of time and resources while teaching in an online environment (Maguire, 2005; Naidu, 2004). Bender, Wood, & Vredevoogd (2004) showed that the investment in time to teach distance education courses is higher than a traditional course which can present itself as an obstacle for faculty acceptance and commitment towards online education.

Researchers have found that the primary reason for a lack of commitment to online teaching among faculty is the concern they have regarding quality of online courses. Some faculty have a preconceived notion that online education will compromise effective learning among students (Uhlig, 2002). Many of these concerns come from faculty who are not involved in teaching online and only teach in the traditional classroom environment (Dooley & Murphrey, 2000; Jones & Moller, 2002; O'Quinn & Corry, 2002). Due to their perception of sacrificing quality in learning, many faculties do not use the online method of teaching. Conversely, Ulmer, Watson, & Derby (2007) found among experienced online faculty a divide between their belief that distance education is effective and their belief that the overall quality of instruction and student learning is compromised due to the mode of delivery.

O'Quinn & Corry (2002) found that faculty support face-to-face, traditional instruction over online teaching because they believe that online learning is not appropriate for traditional students. Mills, Yanes, & Casebeer (2009) found in a qualitative study that faculty perceive distance courses as inferior to the traditional classroom where teaching certain concepts is more conducive and effective with students. There continues to be negative feelings towards online education because of the notion that online courses are "not credible or equivalent to traditional classroom education because of the perception that it is diluting the quality of higher education" (Yick, Patrick, & Costin, 2005).

Faculty perceptions of their online teaching and the quality of education are vital for positive growth of online programs in higher education. Students are shown to be the most important factor in influencing the satisfaction of online faculty (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009). When faculty perceive that students are learning, they will be more likely to accept online education and have a more positive view of the delivery method. Quality in education and student learning is important for all educators regardless of the instructional environment. Assessing faculty perceptions towards online education will assist in the implementation of online programs at higher educational institutions.

Methodology

This study was conducted to assess faculty's current perceptions of online student learning. A mixed methods approach including quantitative and qualitative research was incorporated into the research design in order for inferences to be made. The entire faculty population at a university in south Texas was selected to participate within the study. A single-stage sampling procedure was used in which the researchers had access to names and email accounts of faculty members that could be sampled directly. The faculty email accounts were available from the university's list-serve and made accessible to the examiners. Stratification of the population was not involved before selecting the sample and various characteristics within the population were represented.

The researchers created an online survey instrument to be used as the preferred type of data collection for the study. The survey was made available online on a secure server with the approval of the University's Institutional Review Board. An email was sent out to all faculty members at this particular university in south Texas inviting them to participate. The participants were initially directed to an online consent form and reminded that participation was completely voluntary. The survey was left open for a period of five weeks and four reminders were sent out during this time frame to increase the response rate.

The instrument had a total of eleven questions. The first question was the consent form and the remaining ten

made up the instrument. Nine out of the eleven questions included demographic variables regarding: participants age, gender, ethnicity, experience teaching in higher education, experience teaching at this particular institution in south Texas, experience teaching online courses, academic rank (adjunct, lecturer, assistant professor, associate professor, or professor) tenure status, and employment status (full time or part time). The last remaining question was on a continuous scale (e.g., strongly agree to strongly disagree) that addressed faculty perceptions toward student online learning. This question consisted of five sub-questions that assisted the researchers to address the topic of faculty insight toward online learning. During the five weeks that the instrument was available online, 44 faculty members responded and gave consent to participate. Data was downloaded and analyzed using SPSS to determine descriptive statistics that represented various frequencies and percentages. Spearman's rho (non-parametric) was utilized to determine if there was a relationship between ethnicity, age, tenure and how many years of online teaching experience faculty members had versus the research question examined. Two separate Spearman's rho correlations examined if i) there was a direct relationship between participants who taught online and who did not and ii) participants who had less than five years of teaching online experience versus over five years.

Quantitative Analysis

An invitation to participate and view the instrument was sent to all faculty members in the College of Education of a south Texas Hispanic serving institution. There were a total of 44 faculty members who accessed the instrument and completed the demographic section and a second question with five sub-questions regarding their perceptions toward student online learning. Table 1 shows the breakdown by ethnicity of the 44 faculty members who participated. The age groups of the 44 faculty members who participated can be observed in Figure 1. The collected sample included 24 female and 20 male respondents.

In recent years, technology use in educational settings has increased. Innovations in technology have made teaching

Ethnicity	f	%	Cum%
White/ Non-Hispanic	29	65.9	65.9
Black/ African-American	1	2.3	68.2
Hispanic	10	22.7	90.9
Asian/ Pacific Islander	3	6.8	97.7
Other	1	2.3	100.0
Totals	44	100.0	

Table 1. Frequency Table for Ethnicity

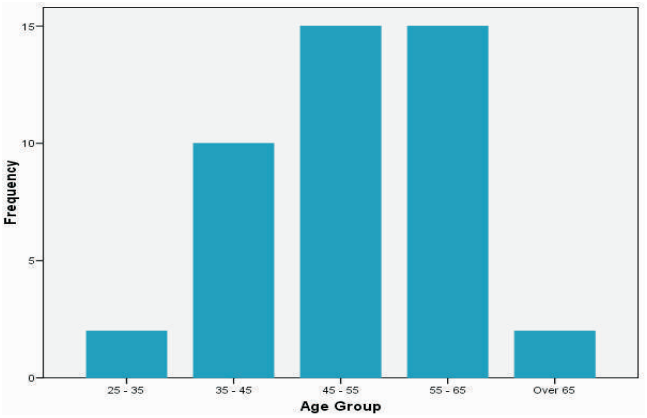

Figure 1. Frequency of age of faculty who participated in the survey by age groups.

through the use of the Internet a growing development in higher education. Since the use of technology is a necessity for faculty to be able to teach online courses, a variable that is seen as having a potential for affecting online instruction is the age of faculty. Another factor that was taken into account from the responses was whether faculty had taught online classes. The frequency for instructors who taught online courses is shown in Figure 2.

Since the data collected through the use of the instrument were non-parametric, they were analyzed using Spearman's rank-order non-parametric correlation

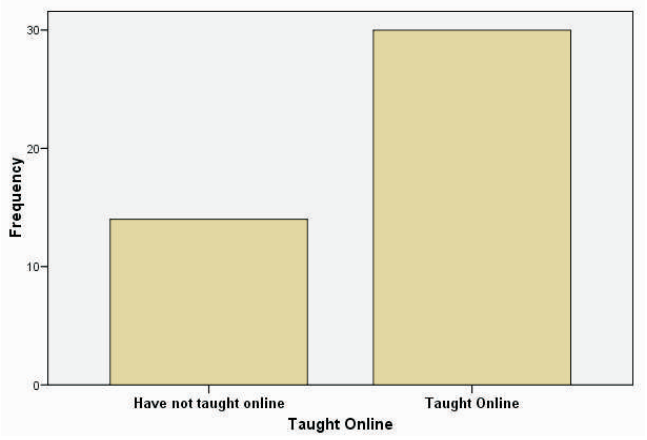

Figure 2. Faculty response to whether they have taught online courses.

coefficient test with the use of SPSS software. The results of Spearman's rho correlation coefficient between a faculty's ethnicity and their perceptions toward student online learning are shown in Table 2.

Data reported in Table 2 indicates that there is no relationship between a faculty member's ethnicity and their perceptions of student online learning. The correlation between a faculty's ethnicity and all their perceptions of student online learning was not statistically significant for all of the perceptions with only a weak relationship between them with r(42).

The results of Spearman's rank-order correlation coefficient between a faculty's age group and their perceptions toward student online learning are shown in Table 3.

Since the correlation data reported in Table 3 were all values between r(42) = .01 and r(42) =.24, it indicated that there was no statistical significance with only a weak relationship between a faculty member's age group and their perceptions of student online learning.

The results of Spearman's rank-order correlation coefficient between faculty's experience and their perceptions toward student online learning are shown in Table 4.

Data shown in Table 4 indicated Spearman's correlation values less than r(42) = .24. The results were not statistically significant and there was a weak relationship between a faculty members experience and their perceptions of student online learning.

	Student to student interaction	Student grades	Relationship with students	Course rigor	Student learning
Ethnicity	-.095	.174	.047	.260	.055

*p < .005

Table 2. Correlation between faculty's ethnicity and their perceptions toward student online learning

	Student to student interaction	Student grades	Relationship with students	Course rigor	Student learning
Age Group	.130	.211	.167	.144	.181

Table 3. Correlation between faculty's age group and their perceptions toward student online learning

	Student to student interaction	Student grades	Relationship with students	Course rigor	Student learning
Experience	-.050	-.068	-.011	-.133	.060

Table 4.Correlation between faculty's experience group and their perceptions toward student online learning

The results of Spearman's rank-order correlation coefficient between faculty's tenure status and their perceptions toward student online learning are shown in Table 5.

Data shown in Table 5 indicated that the values of Spearman's values for all faculty perceptions were between r(42) = .50 and r(42) =.74, p < .001,there was a significant direct relationship that was moderately strong between faculty who taught online courses and all of their perceptions of student online learning. The results of Spearman's rank-order correlation coefficient between faculty who taught online courses and their perceptions toward student online learning are shown in Table 6.

The correlation data shown in Table 6 indicated that there was a significant moderate inverse relationship, r(42) = -.38, p < .005 between faculty who taught online courses and their perceptions of the quality of student to student interaction in online courses. Table 6 also indicated that the other faculty perceptions surveyed had a significant and moderately strong Spearman's correlation values that were between r(42) = .50 and r(42) = .74, p < .001 amongst faculty who taught online courses. The results of Spearman's rank-order correlation coefficient between faculty who taught online courses for five or more years and their perceptions toward student online learning is shown in Table 7.

Data shown in Table 7 indicated a correlation between faculty who taught online more than five years and their perception of the quality of student to student interaction was significant, r(42) = .50, p < .001. The data also indicated a correlation between faculty who taught online more than five years and the quality of their relationship with

	Student to student interaction	Student grades	Relationship with students	Course rigor	Student learning
Taught online	.505**	.469**	.654**	.584**	.607**

*p < .005 **p < .001

Table 5. Correlation between faculty's tenure status and their perceptions toward student online learning

	Student to student interaction	Student grades	Relationship with students	Course rigor	Student learning
Taught online	-.376*	.640**	.522**	.510**	.523**

*p < .005 **p < .001

Table 6. Correlation between faculty who taught online courses and their perceptions toward student online learning

	Student to student interaction	Student grades	Relationship with students	Course rigor	Student learning
Taught online	.501**	.448**	.502**	.352*	.417**

*p < .005 **p < .001

Table 7. Correlation between faculty who taught online courses for five or more years and their perceptions toward student online learning

online students was significant r(42) = .50, p < .001. The relationship between faculty who taught more than five years and their perceptions of student grades, online course rigor, and online student learning were all a Spearman r(42) less than .49 indicating that there was a direct moderate significant correlation between them.

Quantitative Discussion

Although numerous studies have been conducted concerning online learning, little is known about faculty perceptions of student learning in online courses versus the traditional face-to-face environment. In order to meet the needs of online learners, higher education institutions must identify faculty perceptions of online learning (Curran, 2008). Since the role of faculty is critical to the successful implementation of any education program, it is fundamental to understand faculty perceptions of online learning (Mills, Yanes, & Casebeer, 2009). Identifying faculty perceptions of online learning will help discover possible areas of need. Discovering possible areas of need will then allow higher education institutions to provide faculty with the appropriate tools, skills, and trainings needed for online learning. Identifying faculty perceptions of online learning could result in increased student learning and improved teaching. The purpose of this study was to investigate faculty perceptions of student learning in online courses versus the traditional face-to-face environment at a Hispanic-Serving institution.

Results of the present study found that there is a direct relationship between faculty tenure status and all of their perceptions of student online learning. Another finding in the present study is that there is a direct relationship that is moderately strong between faculty who taught online courses and all of their perceptions of student online learning. Results of the present study also found that there is a direct relationship that ranges from moderate to moderately strong between faculty who taught online courses for five years or more and all of their perceptions of student online learning. Thus, faculty's tenure status, faculty who taught online courses, and faculty who taught online courses for five or more years have similar perceptions of student learning in online courses versus the traditional face-to-face environment. Faculty's tenure status, faculty who taught online courses, and faculty who taught online courses for five or more years ranked similar in the following statements: (i) the quality of student to student interaction in an online course is equivalent to those in a face-to-face course, (ii) student grades in an online course are equivalent to those in a face-to-face course, (iii) my relationship with students in an online course is/would be equal to that of a traditional course, (iv) online courses are equivalent in rigor to traditional courses, and (v) online course experiences are as effective for student learning as traditional course experience.

These findings may in part explain potential differences in regards to perceptions of student learning in online courses versus the traditional face-to-face environment between faculty who have taught online courses versus faculty who have not taught online courses or have limited experience. One possible explanation is that the faculty who scored higher in faculty's tenure status, faculty who taught online courses, and faculty who taught online courses for five or more years have actually experienced teaching online courses versus faculty who have never taught online courses or have limited experience. Faculty who have never taught online courses or have limited experience answered the questions in this instrument regarding their perceptions of online learning not regarding actual online learning. These findings may in part explain that the more exposure faculty have with online learning the more positive they feel about online learning. On the one hand, faculty who teach online courses report positive feelings toward online learning; a result consistent with other findings (Allen & Seaman, 2010). On the other hand, faculty who have not taught online courses or have limited experience report negative feelings toward online learning a result which appears to be consistent with other research (Dooley & Murphrey, 2000; Jones & Moller, 2002; O'Quinn & Corry, 2002). Therefore, higher education institutions should provide faculty with more opportunities, incentives,

trainings, tools, and skills to enhance faculty perceptions of student learning in online courses versus the traditional face-to-face environment. Future research should investigate whether exposure to teaching online courses changes faculty perceptions of online learning. Future research should also discover the appropriate tools, skills, and trainings faculty need for online learning.

The limitations of this study revolve primarily around the measurement used. The survey used may not be adequately measuring faculty's perceptions of student learning in online courses versus the traditional face-to-face environment since the survey produced has no established validity. Future research should revise the measure to ensure its validity. Additionally, respondents' answers to the open-ended questions might have been influenced by their completion of the scale. A follow-up study should redesign the survey to pose open-ended questions first. Furthermore, the sample size and respondents' were limited to 44 volunteer faculty members at a south Texas university. Thus, future research should attempt to increase the number and locations of respondents to increase the generalizability of the findings.

Duran, Kelly, and Keaten (2005) have suggested future research to investigate the impact of packaged electronic classroom programs upon faculty student communication and relationships. McCroskey and McCroskey (2006) accurately emphasized how current media research focuses exclusively on cognitive learning and suggested future research to determine the impact of technology on psychomotor and affective learning. In agreement with such findings, the research lacks a specific prescription for appropriate use of technology. McCroskey and McCroskey (2006) did an excellent job in highlighting the lack of research that shows how technology should or should not be incorporated in the classroom when they mention that "we need statistically significant and socially meaningful research that focuses on how the integration of media technologies into existing instructional systems will enhance student learning" (p. 42).

Qualitative Analysis and Discussion

In addition to the collection and analysis of quantitative data, one open-ended question was included in the survey instrument with the generic title of additional comments. Thirteen respondents commented in this area and three themes were found: The role of the subject matter, the maturity level of the student, and the quality of instruction by the instructor.

The first theme focused on the area of learning with five respondents commenting that the type or course is a factor in the success of instruction through online learning. One respondent commented, "Whether online courses are equivalent to f2f courses really depends on the type of on-line course. If I were thinking of a theoretical-conceptual course - then I could strongly agree." Another respondent noted that "the effectiveness of an online course can vary significantly. Some courses are more amenable to being taught online than others" while another specifically pointed out that only a few would not fit the online modality. The idea that theoretical courses lend themselves to online learning while skills-based courses would be more of a challenge was prevalent in many responses.

The second area of note was the maturity level of the student. Two respondents commented on the value of online learning specifically for more mature students. One stated, "The effectiveness of online courses varies greatly between the disciplines and is highly correlated with student maturity. Most of my lower division students would do poorly in online courses compared to traditional face to face instruction." The idea that online learning would be more successful at the graduate level was noted by 25 percent of the respondents.

The final area of note was the focus on the teacher's addition to the course with instruction. The theme specified that the teacher's motivation and expertise would drive the success of the class rather than the modality. One respondent commented, "A really first-rate teacher may be able to teach online with rigor, excitement, etc. However, a really mediocre person without a very strong drive toward excellence could easily slide into a style of teaching not conducive to learning." This was also alluded to in two other comments that stated that teacher quality determines success rather than the delivery system.

Among responses, one focused on the convenience for travelling students and the encouragement for

participation found in online courses while another offered the opposite, stating, "I remain strongly prejudiced against the idea that a machine can offer the same experience as that offered in a face-to-face class." In evaluation of quantitative and qualitative analysis, it was found that the one respondent who was opposed to online learning had not yet taught any courses in this format.

Conclusion

Numerous studies have been conducted concerning online learning, however few studies have been conducted regarding faculty perceptions of student learning in online courses versus the traditional face-to-face environment. Empirical studies have shown that online learning is unprecedentedly growing in higher education (Ferguson & DeFelice, 2010). Learning how faculty perceive the effectiveness of student learning in online courses is valuable to educational institutions and important to the success of online learning education (Curran, 2008). It is vital, therefore, that we examine faculty perceptions of student learning in online courses versus the traditional face-to-face environment.

This study was conducted to assess faculty's current perceptions of online student learning. A mixed methods approach including quantitative and qualitative research was incorporated into the research design. Results of the present study found that faculty's tenure status, faculty who taught online courses, and faculty who taught online courses for five or more years have similar perceptions of student learning in online courses versus the traditional, face-to-face environment. Higher education institutions cannot assume online and face-to-face courses are the same, and the evidence is clear that instructors need the specific skills, information, and direction that face-to-face courses already possess.

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