

UTILIZING TECHNOLOGY TO MEET THE NEEDS OF NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS IN SOUTH TEXAS

By

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to understand the demographic and cultural factors that define the student population of the South Texas masters'-level counseling program and to understand students' perceptions of online, hybrid, and face-to-face courses, based on their experiences with these types of classes. This study was a survey research conducted online at the South Texas public university to identify and better meet the needs of a largely non-traditional population. This survey focused on multiple demographic, cultural and geographic challenges faced by students returning to school seeking training as counselors. Changes in the counseling programs were suggested based upon the results of the survey and the Council on Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) standards regarding instruction.

Keywords: Distance Learning, Non-Traditional Students, CACREP, Change.

INTRODUCTION

While the term non-traditional student is most often associated with undergraduate students, working on a bachelor's degree, there is a shared similarity to many graduate students. "Graduate students are often adult learners who work full-time while completing their degree" (Renfro-Michel, O'Halloran, Dulaney, 2010, p.1). According to Zafft (2006), The National Center for Education Statistics (2002) points out that there is no single definition of non-traditional students. The Association for Non-Traditional Students in Higher Education (ANTSHE) includes the following characteristics to define non-traditional as: "delayed enrollment, attends part time, works fulltime (35+ hours/wk.), has dependents other than a spouse, is considered financially independent, and is a single parent (ANTSHE.org, 2011)." Western Kentucky University, Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching used the following characteristics to define non-traditional: "may be working full time, be married, or a parent, be older, poorer, have a disability, or come from a family that has not experienced college before"(Berger, 2007, ¶1).

Northern Illinois University includes the following: "off

campus, commuter, and military veterans" (Northern Illinois University, 2012). Many of the institutions of higher learning are focusing on making changes in already existing programs to encourage the enrollment of the adult, non-traditional students (Renfro-Michel, O'Halloran, & Dulaney, 2010).

The public university where the study occurred is located in the vast region of South Texas. This region of Texas reaches to the Texas border with Mexico, and is a sparsely populated land. The university is 147 miles from San Antonio, Texas, and 109 miles from Brownsville, Texas. Many of the students in the graduate counseling program live in these rural communities and commute from long distances to attend a single class period (Figure 1).

This southern region of Texas is rich in history of the early explorers and conquistadors. Much of Texas' battle for independence from Mexico in the 1800s involved this same area of South Texas. Today, the area is frequently in the news because of the battles on the border between the drug cartels, and the illegal immigration and human smuggling into the United States. A U.S. Border Patrol checkpoint is located 20.7 miles from the campus of the



Figure 1. Location of South Texas University

university. The Border Patrol agents make frequent seizures of cocaine and marijuana, in addition to the cargo of human smuggling.

The purpose of this study was to examine the demographic and cultural factors of students who are enrolled in the graduate counseling program at the South Texas university. It was the intention of these researchers to utilize this information obtained in this study, and the students' experiences with online and hybrid courses, as well as "what a student finds matching their learning style and social commitments" (El Mansour, Bassou, Muping, & Davidson, 2007, p. 243) for implementing program changes to better meet their academic needs. Additionally, Dickel (1988) cited CACREP suggestions for the use of electronic telecommunications and computer assignments in core courses of CACREP accredited counseling programs. Dickel's suggestions include "human growth and development, social and cultural foundations, the helping relationship, groups, lifestyle and career development, appraisal of the individual, research and evaluation, and professional orientation" (Dickel, 1988, p.13). In addition to meeting the needs of the students, this study was also to support the counseling program's early stages of preparation for CACREP accreditation.

Method

A non-experimental, mixed design was used in this investigation to obtain both quantitative and qualitative data. A single survey instrument was distributed through electronic mail utilizing the online computerized program,

SurveyMonkey.com. Once permission to conduct the research was obtained from the university's Institutional Review Board, the survey instrument was sent to the email address of the entire population of students enrolled in the counseling program at the south Texas university. Descriptive quantitative analysis was performed using SPSS to obtain frequencies and percentages. Qualitative procedures were used to sort student comments into like groups, code the data, and determine themes. The qualitative data were examined for students' perceptions of online, hybrid, and face-to-face, based on their experiences with these types of instructional design.

Findings

The research population was the graduate students enrolled in the counseling program at the rural, South Texas university. Thirty-nine students ($n=39$) returned usable surveys. The respondents ranged in age from 21 to 60, with 54% being ages 21-30 and 26% being ages 41-50. Ninety percent of the respondents were female, and 10% were male. When asked whether they were full time students, 61% indicated full time, while 39% indicated part time status. Most participants indicated that they were Hispanic (76%), while 3% were Asian, 4% were African American, and 16% were Caucasian. Fifty-nine percent were first generation college students, while 41% were not. Only 10% were single, head of household, while 90% were not. Sixty-seven percent of the respondents graduated with a bachelors degree within the past five years; however, 34% graduated more than 5 years ago. Most of the respondents work as well as attend graduate studies: 70% full time, 20% part time, and only 10% not employed (Table 1).

Hybrid classes are defined as partly online and partly face to face classes. Respondents were asked whether they have taken hybrid classes. Eighty percent responded that they have taken hybrid classes, while 20% of respondents have not. Respondents were asked whether they had taken face to face courses as part of their graduate studies, and almost everyone had (95%, yes and 5%, no). Ninety percent of participants had taken online classes, while 10% had not. Participants were asked whether they commute to class. Fifty-six percent responded that they do commute, while 44% live near the university (Table 2).

	Response Percent	Response Count
Age		
21 - 30	54%	21
31 - 40	13%	5
41 - 50	26%	10
51 - 60	8%	3
Gender		
male	10%	4
female	90%	35
Enrollment Status		
full - time students	61%	24
part - time students	39%	15
Ethnicity		
Hispanic	76%	29
Asian	3%	1
African American	4%	2
Caucasian	16%	6
First generation college student		
yes	59%	23
no	41%	16
Single parent (HOH)		
yes	10%	4
no	90%	35
How long has it been since finishing a bachelor's degree		
Less than 1 year	21%	8
1 - 5 years	46%	18
5 - 10 years	8%	3
10 - 15 years	13%	5
Greater than 15	13%	5
Employment Status		
full - time	70%	27
part - time	20%	8
not employed	10%	4

Table 1. Demographic Information

	Response Percent	Response Count
Has taken hybrid classes		
yes	80%	30
no	20%	8
Has taken face -to -face classes		
yes	95%	37
no	5%	2
Has taken online classes		
yes	90%	35
no	10%	4
Is a commuter		
yes	56%	22
no	44%	17

Table 2. Student Data on Distance Learning

Qualitative Perspectives

Preference for Types of Classes

Participants commented on their preference for face to face, hybrid, or online classes. The comments were varied, but most supported some component of distance learning, such as *"I feel that not all classes should be held face-to-face because a student can learn the same on a computer;" "I feel like hybrid is great, and if it is online, then I like to meet with the professor once;"* and *"A combination of 3 different types would be better than just 1 specific type."* Other students believed that face to face courses provided for more learning: *"This is my first semester taking*

online courses and I do not feel I learned anything;" "Not all classes should be online. It is important to not just read the material, but to also gain knowledge from professors that have experience in the field;" and *"Online courses take from the one to one aspect of teaching and learning."*

Commuting Students

Many participants indicated that a distance format would be helpful, considering the number of miles they commute. Some comments were *"All classes being face-to-face makes it very difficult to continue with the program due to commuting;" "I strongly agree that classes that classes should be hybrid because it gives the student the best of both learning opportunities. Plus it helps when you are a commuter;"* and *"I like half on-line and half face-to-face because I have to travel so doing some online helps me with mileage and time."*

Working Students

Other participants noted that they work, which makes face to face classes more difficult to attend. Comments included, *"Online classes are very efficient to graduate students because most students have full-time jobs and it is easier for them to take them online instead of face-to-face,""Undergrad I preferred face-to-face, but now that I am in grad school, online and hybrid classes work best with a full-time job and a commute;"* and *"Online classes are so much more convenient for those who have small children and work full time! I would not have been able to complete my master's degree if it were not for online courses."*

Conclusion

The participants in this study were generally full time students who held full time jobs. They tended to live some distance from the university, which itself is located in a rural area of the country fraught with border disturbances. Most of the participants supported some use of distance learning delivery for their courses.

In line with the findings of El Mansour, et al (2007), that "it becomes a question of what a student finds matching their leaning style and social commitments that provides the best delivery strategy" (p.246) the CACREP suggestions cited by Dickel (1988), and guided by the input of the

participants in this study, distance learning could occur in the delivery of theories, assessment, research and evaluation, and career counseling. Other courses should maintain some face to face contact, with the possibility for hybrid teaching/learning, including: group counseling, professional orientation, multiculturalism and diversity, and counseling techniques.

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