

Business student preferences toward traditional, hybrid, and online deliveries: pre and post covid-19

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory research paper addresses undergraduate business student course instruction method preferences both pre and post COVID-19. A survey was given to a convenience sample of undergraduate business students across four areas of business: Accounting, Financial Services, Marketing/Management, and Health Care at a small university in the southeastern United States in spring 2019 (N=246) and again in spring 2021 (N=103). The purpose of the survey was to identify undergraduate business student preferences for both pre-Covid (spring 2019) and post-Covid (spring 2021) regarding Online, Hybrid, and Traditional (face-to-face) classes. The findings of this study show student preferences for the three types of delivery, as well as the change in preferences between spring 2019 and spring 2021. Future recommendations for study include an expanded study across disciplines and emphases. A qualitative investigation into the reasons for student survey responses is also suggested.

Keywords: online, hybrid, traditional, business, undergraduate

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INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 will forever be remembered for one thing: the COVID-19 pandemic. The toll this pandemic took on the number of lives around the world is staggering. The overall effects to students in higher education is yet to be determined, but administrators are “eager to get into the minds of their current and would be students, to try to understand how the pandemic has altered their expectations about their educations” (Lederman, 2021). One effect to students was the forced implementation of online classes to replace the traditional face-to-face (FTF) classes in which many students had been enrolled during the spring semester of 2020 (Third Way, 2021). This online mode of instruction continued into the fall semester of 2020 and beyond for many universities and colleges, and it is thought that the result of this decision is a decline in nationwide enrollments of about 4% at colleges and universities (Third Way, 2021).

This change in instruction method for one small university located in the southeastern United States occurred one Friday afternoon in March 2020 with a formal notice from the president to the university community. The order was given to switch instruction to an online format, and all were instructed to work from home until further notice. An email from the Dean of the College of Business also moved all advising sessions and faculty interactions to an online format. This university returned to FTF instruction for the spring 2021 semester.

Current Students

The majority of undergraduate students today, including in this small university, are in the group now labeled “Generation Z”. According to the Pew Research Center (Dimock, 2019), “Anyone born between 1981 and 1996 (ages 23 to 38 in 2019) is considered a Millennial, and anyone born from 1997 onward is part of a new generation.” This group was initially regarded as the “i-generation”; however, because the generation prior to the Millennials was referred to as Generation X (born from 1965-1980), the phrase “Generation Z” “stuck” and was found in online searches, writings, and dictionaries (Dimock, 2019).

Twenge (2017) indicates that Generation Z constitutes approximately 24% of the population of the United States. A major characteristic is that they are totally influenced by technology and everything digital. They are the only generation raised with total technological influence and do not know how to function without the internet; therefore, they have social and relationship skills that are underdeveloped, resulting in more isolation than previous generations. This generation has a short attention span and can easily become bored with monotony and repetition; consequently, they desire education that is “individualized, immediate, exciting, engaging, technologically advanced, and visually based” (Chicca, 2018). These characteristics of Generation Z would make one assume that they would prefer predominately an online education.

Since Generation Z relies on technology, faculty (many of whom are Baby Boomers...1946-64 or Generation X...1965-80) need to use technology to “enhance and supplement...and augment teaching” (Mocek, 2017). Mocek (2017) suggests using electronic learning and internet guided activities to engage these students.

They will learn by viewing digital images and not solely by reading text.

Therefore, educators may want to embed visually based content along with their traditional teaching materials.... digital storytelling with pictures or videos, or the use of emojis to gather feedback may be attractive options to consider that capture the attention of this group of students.(Mocek, 2017).

Keep in mind that these suggestions from Mocek (2017) were pre-pandemic. However, during the pandemic, these types of online materials such as online textbook resources (McGraw-Hill Connect) or digital meeting tools (Zoom or Microsoft Teams) became essential, but did the students prefer using them compared to face-to-face interaction with professors?

Daniels and Feather (2002) found that students with no online course experience were less confident that they could do well in an online course. They perceived that there would not be ample opportunity for interaction with classmates, that there might be an increased workload for an online course, and that an online course would not cover the same depth or breadth of material as a traditional course (Dobbs et al., 2009). It may be fair to assume that pre-pandemic results may indicate a preference for FTF instruction.

Fish (2016) indicates that as students experience more online courses, their perceptions of the online environment changes compared to the FTF environment. Given the nature of forced participation in online classes during the pandemic and the characteristics of Generation Z above, it may be fair to assume that more students may prefer online instruction than before the pandemic.

Definitions

Prior to the pandemic, in the spring semester 2019, a survey instrument was created to determine which mode of instruction business students preferred: Traditional (FTF), Hybrid, or Online. These terms are commonplace in academia. However, to avoid any confusion, the authors define Traditional instruction to mean face-to-face instruction where all class meetings are conducted in person and in a brick-and-mortar classroom. Hybrid instruction is defined as classes meeting 50% of the time in person and in a brick-and-mortar classroom and 50% online, either synchronous or asynchronous, using some type of learning management system such as Blackboard. Online instruction is defined as the class meeting 100% online, either synchronous or asynchronous, through distance learning. Synchronous classes usually have an element of time constraint involved, so that the instructor and student are online during the same period (Tanner et al., 2009). Asynchronous learning differs from synchronous in that there are no time nor place boundaries imposed on the student (Tanner et al., 2009).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this exploratory study is threefold. First, we want to examine student pre-pandemic instruction preferences. Second, we want to examine student post-pandemic instruction preferences. Third, we wish to examine any differences in findings.

Assumptions and Limitations

The surveys were provided to students during Traditional class periods. It is assumed that respondents answered each survey question independently and honestly. It was also assumed that students understood the definitions identified earlier and that clarification was provided to try to prevent misunderstandings.

This study was limited in that it was only administered to students at one university and in one academic program during two separate semesters. The surveys were provided to students in Traditional classes only and not to students participating in Online only classes.

METHOD

A survey instrument, void of personal identifiers, was created specifically for this and future research studies. The survey instrument consists of four distinct sections: (a) an informed consent, (b) a section to gauge student preferences for individual instruction styles, (c) a section to gauge student learning styles and preferred timeframes for instruction, and (d) a demographic section. This study and survey were approved by the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). It was conducted at the business school of a small liberal arts university in the southeastern United States.

Participants

Participants were from a convenience sample of students enrolled across four areas of business study: (a) Accounting, (b) Financial Services, (c) Marketing/Management, and (d) Health Care Management. The survey was first administered during the spring 2019 semester, well before the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic. After providing their informed consent, participants were asked to complete the survey identified previously. Of particular interest to this study was the first section in which participants were asked to list their preferences for three course modes of instruction (Traditional, Hybrid, or Online) using a scale of 1 to 3 with 1 being the most preferred and 3 being the least preferred.

This same survey was administered again to a convenience sample of business students in the same university and areas of study during the spring semester of 2021. Students in this semester were back on campus for traditional instruction (post-pandemic) and had finished at least one and one-half semesters of forced online instructions because of the pandemic.

RESULTS

Demographics for this data are listed in tables I and II (Appendix). The total number of responses used from the spring 2019 semester survey was 246, and the total number of responses used from the spring 2021 semester was 103. In the spring semesters of 2019 (60%) and 2021 (54%), respondents were primarily female and classified as juniors, in their third year of study. In the spring 2019 semester, most respondents were health care management students (40%) followed closely by management/marketing students (32%), while students in spring 2021 semester were primarily management/marketing majors (45%) followed by accounting (23%) and health care management students (23%).

Figure 1 (Appendix) compares student preferences for Traditional classroom instruction for spring 2019 and spring 2021. Approximately 45% of the students ranked Traditional as a top preference before the COVID-19 virus. This percentage increased to 54% toward the end of the virus. The percentage stayed the same for Traditional in regard to a ranking of 2. This result may be explained by the fact that Online classes were not a "good fit" for many students, especially considering all classes were forced online. After the COVID-19 experience, many students were more appreciative of traditional face-to-face instruction due to the many

complexities of online instruction. Also, those who ranked Traditional as the least preferred decreased to 21% from 30%. Giving Traditional the top ranking increased by 9% while giving Traditional the lowest ranking decreased by 9%.

The Hybrid instruction format was examined by the student preferences and is presented in Figure 2 (Appendix). The change in student preference toward Hybrid class format basically stayed the same between the two samples. There was a slight increase from 42% to 46% in the top preference for Hybrid. The preference for Hybrid decreased by 3% for a second ranking category and had only a slight decrease of 1% for the lowest ranking choice. Overall, there was very little change in the preference of students with regard to the Hybrid format.

Student preferences for Online teaching is presented in Figure 3 (Appendix). Before the COVID-19 virus, 23% of the students surveyed gave Online teaching the highest preference. However, in the spring of 2021, the top preference for Online teaching decreased from 23% to 15%. There was a slight increase in the percentage of students ranking Online teaching as second. However, there was an increase of 5% with regard to ranking Online teaching in third place. Overall, the majority of the students in both samples placed Online teaching in last place. A possible explanation for these results could be that students who re-entered the classroom in spring 2021 disliked the online format. A limitation of this study and another possible explanation of these results is that the online students were not surveyed in spring 2021.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

It was hypothesized that pre-pandemic undergraduate business students would indicate a preference for Traditional FTF instruction. Of the 246 students surveyed in spring 2019, 45% indicated Traditional instruction as their preferred class format while slightly fewer students (42%) indicated Hybrid instruction as their second preferred method, and 23% indicated a preference for Online instruction. Students clearly did prefer the Traditional instructional method, although a similar number of students were open to the integration of an online element of instruction to their classes. However, only one-fourth (23%) indicated the Online learning format as their preferred method of instruction.

After students were placed into the Online learning environments in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was theorized that most students would prefer Online instruction. The majority of the 103 students surveyed post-pandemic (54%) indicated a preference for the Traditional method of instruction, and 46% preferred the Hybrid format as their second preferred methodology. Interestingly, only 15% of students indicated a preference for Online instruction. This is a dramatic 8% reduction from the pre-pandemic findings. Lederman (2021) found that “students expressed reservations about the quality of the virtual instruction they received during the pandemic.” Perhaps those same reservations are indicated in our results.

Based upon the findings of this study, students clearly did not prefer Online instruction methods, although they may tolerate an online component to compliment the Traditional FTF instruction such as in the Hybrid instruction format. Students, both pre and post-pandemic, indicated that they preferred the complete Online teaching format least after Traditional FTF and Hybrid instruction. Unfortunately, although close, none of the findings of this study were statistically significant.

Recommendations for Future Research

Although a nationwide study would be very interesting, it is highly unlikely that such a survey would be performed. Therefore, it is suggested that a similar survey be provided to undergraduate business students of public and private colleges and universities within small geographic regions to compare student preference for the three course presentation types addressed here, namely Traditional, Hybrid, and Online. It would also be interesting to reproduce this survey across all disciplines and emphases in the school addressed in this study for a comparative analysis.

Additionally, a qualitative study is encouraged to dig deeper into the reasons for the student responses to the survey questions. Perhaps these expanded student responses will enlighten researchers to the underlying causes for the results encountered.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, universities across the nation are attempting to return to pre-pandemic “normal” now that the virus is somewhat contained since approximately half of Americans ages 12 and older have been fully vaccinated (CNBC, June 9, 2021). Therefore, many colleges and universities are returning to Traditional FTF classes. Some colleges and universities, such as the one analyzed in this paper, are limiting the number of Online classes in which students can enroll. The trend is to get students back on campus; therefore, only in extenuating circumstances may traditional students take an online class, with the exception of a handful of business classes.

Given the push back to Traditional FTF instruction and our findings of student instruction preference, some suggestions from Abby Schukei (January 2021) for optimizing the experience that the Generation Z students will have upon returning to the traditional classroom environment are:

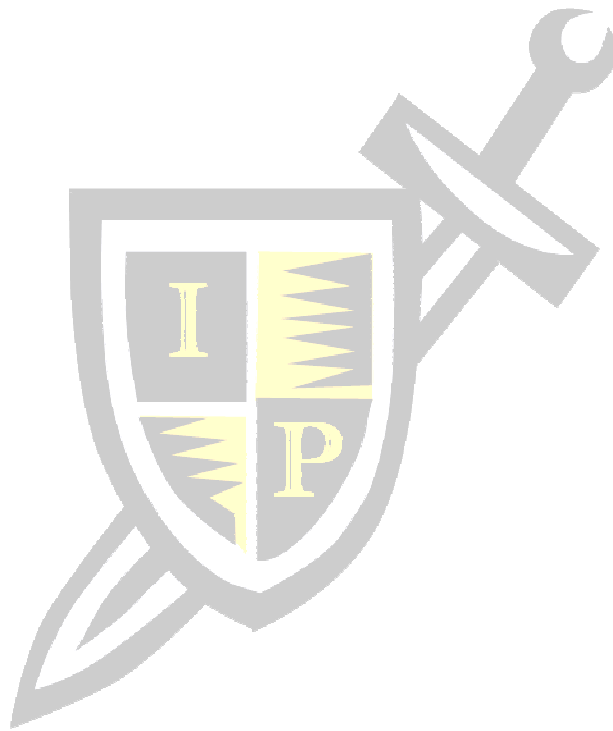
1. Use visuals
2. Keep slideshow presentations short
3. Students need variety. Try delivering your instruction in different formats.
4. Consider flipping your classroom for self-paced learning.
5. Create an active learning environment
6. Incorporate soft skills when you can.
7. Keep video instruction to less than six minutes.

Hopefully, by following these simple suggestions, students returning to campus will enjoy the traditional classroom experience, no longer feel isolated and become engaged because according to Svanum and Bigatti (2009), “....academic course engagement influences college success”.

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APPENDIX

Table I Spring 2019 DEMOGRAPHICS			
Description	Gender	Classification	Emphasis
Male	40%		
Female	60%		
Freshman		9%	
Sophomore		24%	
Junior		36%	
Senior		31%	
Accounting			17%
Financial Services			11%
Health Care Management			40%
Management/Marketing			32%

Table II Spring 2021 DEMOGRAPHICS			
Description	Gender	Classification	Emphasis
Male	46%		
Female	54%		
Freshman		7%	
Sophomore		31%	
Junior		35%	
Senior		26%	
Accounting			23%
Financial Services			09%
Health Care Management			23%
Management/Marketing			45%

Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

