

5-2009

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Recommended Citation

Miller, Sheila M.; Lauver, Kristy J.; and Drum, Dawna M., "Is This What I Signed Up For? Undergraduate and MBA Perspectives of On-line Classes" (2009). *MWAIS 2009 Proceedings*. 15.

<http://aisel.aisnet.org/mwais2009/15>

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ABSTRACT

This study will be comparing the student perspective of online classes and on-campus classes from three different student groups, undergraduate, MBA on-campus and MBA consortium students, in an attempt to answer the question “When given the option, why do students choose an online class versus an on-campus class and do these reasons coincide with perceptions of course effectiveness?” As universities expand their class offerings in hopes to entice more students to their campuses, they need to understand what students are looking for; understanding students’ perceptions of the value of online and on-campus classes will help guide universities as they continue to expand into online class offerings as well as understand each type of student.

Keywords: Online education, undergraduate perspective, MBA perspective

INTRODUCTION

This study seeks to expand on research in the area of online education, by evaluating student perspectives of online versus on-campus classes. Current research in the area of online education shows an increasing number of students taking online classes as well as an increasing number of academic institutions that are offering online classes. In 2007 there were over 170 accredited U.S. online colleges and universities that offer online Bachelor’s, Master’s and Doctoral degrees in numerous fields (Columbaro, 2009). This study will be comparing the student perspective of online classes and on-campus classes from three different student groups, undergraduate, MBA on-campus and MBA consortium students in an attempt to answer the question “When given the option, why do students choose an online class versus an on-campus class and do these reasons coincide with perceptions of course effectiveness?” As universities expand their class offerings in hopes to entice more students, they need to understand what students are looking for; understanding students’ perceptions of the value of online and on-campus classes will help guide universities as they continue to expand into online class offerings. Students’ comfort with and perceptions of online learning are valuable to institutions and faculty as they develop more online courses and programs; but the ultimate success of an online course and program is up to the students (Young, 2006).

In order to understand why students take specific classes, we first explore the broader question addressed in the literature of why students go to college. Students have indicated they attend college because they are very career driven and are taking their first step in the direction of their careers. Yet other students see college as a time of further growth by interacting with faculty and gaining confidence through reassurance and rapport built with faculty (Miller, 2006). A second question then is: What motivates students to pursue online educations? Online classes often provide students the opportunity to obtain a degree that otherwise would not be possible based on geographical distance to an institution and professionals often seek programs that allow time and location flexibility (Guernsey, 1998). Do undergraduates and graduate students view online classes the same? Within the MBA program, why do some students still select an on-campus program? One comparison from online programs indicates that the learning process changes in online programs, “replacing the single view of the instructor, with the various student views” (Fortune, 2006)

This current research specifically focuses on online classes covering different topics such as student/faculty interaction, student perception of quality, student behaviors in online classes, and student engagement, to name a few. Research done in 2001 indicates that student attitudes toward a topic are a significant predictor in their satisfaction with the delivery medium of

their online education. In the same study class structure and instructor behavior and interaction were also significant predictors to the success of the student in the online class (Arbaugh, 2001). Another study indicated that student course satisfaction was impacted by areas such as interaction among students, quality and timely interaction with faculty; and that these are as important in both online classes as they are in on-campus classes (Young, 2006). Findings from the research found that 85% of students that responded to the survey feel strongly that online courses should be very structured. In the area of interaction between the instructor and students, 90% of the respondents indicated that the interaction is essential in online learning (Young, 2006).

Yet, all of these studies have been specifically focused on students taking their entire degree program on-line. So, the question then arises, what if students have not chosen specifically to be an on-line student? Do students still prefer having an online option? When students sign-up for on-campus classes at a university, is the opportunity to take a class online as appealing at both the graduate and undergraduate level? Do overall perceptions of on-line versus on-campus classes' change between graduate and undergraduate students? These are some of the questions that this study seeks to explore.

VARIATIONS TO INVESTIGATE

The expected findings include:

Undergraduates and MBA students enrolled in an on-campus program will have the perception of on-campus classes being more valuable than online classes, but the justifications will be different.

- Undergraduates are hypothesized to choose an online class over an on-campus class out of convenience, but to choose an on-campus class to have higher retention of the information.
- Graduate students are hypothesized to choose an on-campus class for higher interaction and rapport with faculty and colleagues.

Overall perceptions of online classes are hypothesized to be more favorable for full-time online students, than for on-campus students just taking a few classes online.

The initial literature search provided limited prior research on this topic. Most past research involving perspectives of online classes focused on full-time, on-line MBA level classes. As an introductory phase for this research, exploratory focus groups were held with students at both the undergraduate and MBA level asking their perspectives of online classes. Areas of concern for both groups were the retention of information based on the very different learning environment between online and on-campus classes. Due to the varying environments, students' ability to build a rapport with faculty and fellow classmates, retention on the information and the amount of effort put into the class were areas of varying concern between the focus groups. "Adult students primarily choose online degrees to obtain credentialing for promotions and employment, as well as to cultivate lifelong learning while overcoming such potential barriers as full-time work responsibilities and remote geographic location." (Columbaro, 2009) "Undergraduate students have a better opinion than do faculty of online courses, students are not without their concerns." (Wilkes, 2006) Although past literature has noted students desire for interaction with faculty (Young, 2006) very little online and on campus research has looked at varying students perspectives in association with their level of education and original choice of education format (online vs on-campus). It is the intent of this study to explore these relationships.

METHODOLOGY

The survey was developed using an online web survey tool available to faculty and students. Questions are asked in two forms, open-ended as well as a five point Likert Scale of significance (not at all-great extent).

Sample/Procedure

The survey was distributed to undergraduate College of Business students, MBA on-campus students and the MBA consortium students at a Midwestern University. At this university, all core undergraduate classes are offered on-campus as well as on-line. The MBA program offers a blended education of both on-campus and online classes in addition to a complete online degree offered by a consortium of colleges of business.

Permission was granted by the College of Business and the MBA Office to contact students via email, with the survey being completely anonymous and completely voluntary. Due to the invasiveness of email, no follow-up/reminder emails were sent. 400 responses were received out of a sample population of approximately 2000 undergraduates and 500 MBA students.

Survey

Topical areas covered by the survey included open-ended questions asking why students selected an online class or chose to remain completely on-campus classes; as well as asked about their experience with online classes, and the favorability of a topic of study to be taught as an online course. For students that have taken online classes the remainder of the questions are broken into headings covering differences and similarities between online and on-campus classes, retention, small group interaction, student interaction and interaction with faculty. The comparison on similarities and differences covers questions on personal and peer participation, timeliness and effort on assignments, time flexibility to students’ schedules and class structure and retention. The section on interaction is broken down into three areas; small group interaction, student interaction and interaction with faculty.

Analyses

In preliminary analyses T-tests were used to test the hypothesized differences between undergraduate and MBA student perceptions of online classes.

Further T-tests were run to test the hypothesized differences between on-campus students (undergrad & MBA) and the online Consortium MBA students; as well as the hypothesized differences between the on-campus MBA students and the online Consortium MBA students.

Initial Findings

Areas of significance between the undergraduate students and MBA students (on-campus & online) were in the areas of time necessary to complete class work, participation and group interaction. Each of these areas was more favorable within the MBA students than the undergraduate students.

Mean Scores	Undergraduate Students	MBA Students
Time	3.15	3.57
Participation	2.70	3.17
Group Interaction	2.52	2.96

Reasons for taking an online class varied between the undergraduate students and the MBA students. The most significant variation between undergraduates and MBA students included that undergraduates believe that courses are easier online and less time consuming. Both undergraduate and graduates students choose online classes for the flexibility of online classes and when on-campus classes do not fit into their schedule.

IMPACT

This project is intended to expand insight into student perspectives of online classes. Through exploring the perspectives of both undergraduate and MBA students toward on-line classes, this study has the potential to further research in on-line education by revealing differences in learning preferences that may exist at varying levels of education. The results of this research will add to the literature surrounding the reasons that students choose one course delivery method over another, as well as helping to focus attention on areas that will appeal to the appropriate students.

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