The Consideration of Students’ Ideas to Improve Online Courses in Higher Education

by

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Abstract

Online courses have become a necessity for colleges and universities over the past few decades. Students typically appreciate that these courses allow them to accommodate their schedules. However, the quality of online college courses is debated. Many online students miss the level of interaction found in traditional courses and report feeling disconnected from their professors and peers. Additionally, students are more likely to drop online courses than traditional, face-to-face courses. Understanding how students view online courses can help colleges to improve the way their courses are taught. This study looked at college students’ experiences with online courses, including students who had dropped online courses. Students who had dropped online courses were asked how their instructors could have improved the courses they dropped. Data was collected from 120 responses to an online survey. Demographic information, such as gender, race, major, and first-generation status, were collected, as well as qualitative data on students’ experiences with online courses. Most students had enrolled in online courses. Of the students who had enrolled in an online course, 26.1% had dropped an online course. First-generation students were somewhat more likely to enroll in and drop online courses than non-first-generation students. Students reported struggles with self-motivation and communication relating to online courses. Students who had dropped online courses repeatedly described feeling overwhelmed, and recommended that instructors provide clear expectations, study guides, greater clarification, and interaction in online courses.
The Consideration of Students’ Ideas to Improve Online Courses in Higher Education

Over the past two decades, online college courses have become increasingly popular. Many students decide to take online classes so that they can better accommodate their schedules. Online learning is the only option for some students, such as those who work full time or live in rural areas. Daymont and Blau (2011) found that 98.2% of online students chose an online course format for flexibility (p. 167). Horspool and Lange (2012) found that nearly half of online students (47%) chose online courses to lower commute time (p. 78). Students may not be able to participate in traditional courses if they need a flexible schedule or do not have a college nearby but are unable to move. Therefore, online coursework has become a necessity for schools and a hot topic in the world of education.

Online courses do offer flexibility, but they come with drawbacks as well as benefits. Studies show that online students can struggle with self-motivation and a lack of interaction (Jae Hoon, Dannels, & Watkins, 2008; Keramidas, 2012; O’Neill & Sai, 2014). O’Neill and Sai (2014) mention that it is well known that online students frequently drop out of their courses. Furthermore, they reason that students who dropped out of their online courses before receiving a final grade may be distorting results of studies comparing the outcomes of traditional and online courses.

The purpose of this exploratory study was to consider students’ experiences with online college courses—particularly the improvements that students who had dropped online courses recommended. Students who have experienced online courses firsthand are the most capable of providing institutions with insight on exactly how these courses can be made more engaging and meaningful. College faculty members and instructors can use this study’s findings to improve online course offerings and possibly lower the high drop rate in online courses.
Background

Multiple studies have determined that flexibility is a key reason why students choose to enroll in online courses. Daymont and Blau (2011) surveyed students from traditional and online sections of a management course during the first three weeks of the semester. They found that 98.2% of online students cited flexibility or convenience as their reason for choosing online courses. Students who preferred the online format also tended to prefer a flexible schedule, have schedule constraints, and believe that online courses offered greater flexibility. Students who preferred a structured schedule tended to not prefer online courses. Similarly, surveys by Dobbs, Waid, and del Carmen (2009) and Horspool and Lange (2012) also found that flexibility was a major factor in why students chose to enroll in online courses. Reducing commute time and accommodating demands at work are other recurring reasons for choosing to enroll in online courses. (Horspool and Lange, 2012).

Institutions also can benefit from offering online courses. Lei and Gupta (2010) write that from an institutional standpoint, online distance learning courses are beneficial because they can meet a much broader audience than traditional courses. Additionally, they prevent overcrowded classrooms, increase flexibility in course scheduling, and significantly reduce costs. Austin (2010) describes the development of online learning at Mid Michigan Community College (MMCC), a small, rural community college, and how it benefitted the school. MMCC online program led to more dual-enrolled high schoolers for the college. Many out-of-state students also enrolled in MMCC’s online courses, which is crucial for a school in a state whose population has been declining (Austin, 2010).

Comparisons between student performance in online and traditional course formats have yielded various results. Brown (2012) found that there was not much difference between the
grades of online students and traditional students in data from spring of 2007 to spring of 2010. Traditional undergraduate and graduate students' averages were .37 points and 1.32 points higher than their online peers, respectively. Horspool and Lange (2012) also found that there was not a significant difference between students' grades in either format. And, after extensive research review, Bell and Federman (2013) concluded that e-learning was found to be as effective or more effective than classroom learning in most cases. However, they also found wide variability, with some studies suggesting that e-learning was much less effective than classroom instruction. The authors point out that this could be because the quality of teaching in a class is more important than the form of instruction. Keramidas (2012) did find a slight grading difference between traditional and online sections of a special education course. The total possible grade for this class was 450. In the online section, the average total grade was 405.50, compared to an average total grade 412.73 in the face-to-face section.

Several issues with online courses have been found. Jae Hoon, Dannels, and Watkins (2008) aimed to learn the challenges and benefits of taking online research methods courses according to doctoral students through an interview-based qualitative study. Students acknowledged that taking online courses required self-regulation and self-discipline. Survey and interview takers believed that only some classes were suited to be taken online. The online discussion board was generally seen as a poor substitute for in-class discussion, and almost all students had complaints about having to communicate with instructors over email as opposed to face-to-face discussion. Horspool and Lange (2012) and Walker and Kelly (2007) both reported that students struggled with a lack of interaction in online courses. Likewise, all students in the online section studied by Keramidas (2012) reported that they had struggled with time management and remembering to complete online assignments. Lei and Gupta (2010) write that
students in online courses have no face-to-face interaction with instructors and peers, little accountability, and high dropout rates. It can be more difficult for students in online courses to understand instruction. They miss out on immediate feedback from instructors, and the lack of face-to-face communication can lead to increased student anxiety. The authors cite the fact that not everyone has access to a computer with internet or technological skills as another major drawback. Students may have to pay additional costs for online distance learning courses. For instance, textbooks are required in most cases, as well as software and computer programs. Brown (2012), Lei and Gupta (2010), and O’Neill and Sai (2014) all mention that online courses generally have disproportionate drop rates. O’Neill and Sai (2014) also point out that studies comparing the outcomes of face-to-face courses to those of online courses are missing information from students who drop online courses. Moore (2005) believes that we are in need of a move towards new models of online education and that organizing online courses as if they were traditional courses holds online courses back.

Some students avoid online courses in favor of traditional, face-to-face courses. O’Neill and Sai (2014) aimed to answer the question of why “digital-native” students would choose to avoid online courses. The most frequent response on their survey (chosen by 58% of respondents) was that students believed they would learn more by taking a face-to-face course, closely followed by the 52% of students who cited their dislike for online courses in general. Recurring themes in responses to the open-ended question on why students chose their course format included the more effective communication of face-to-face courses, wanting to hear the professor lecture, being better motivated, and getting more for their money. Similarly, Daymont and Blau (2011) reported that the most common reason for choosing to enroll in traditional sections of a course was a preference for face-to-face interaction in the classroom.
Reviewing literature on this topic shows that online coursework is a necessity in some students’ pursuits of higher education. Although the format enables students to work on their own time, it has several flaws. Online courses lack the interactivity of face-to-face courses. Some students avoid enrolling in online courses for this reason, and students who do enroll in them frequently report a lack of communication and involvement. Students also drop online courses more often than traditional courses. However, there is a lack of research on the perceptions and ideas of students who drop online courses. This study considered online coursework from the perspectives of students, including students who have dropped online courses, and considers what could have improved their experiences.

Methods

This study was conducted using an online Google Forms survey. Responses were accepted from March 28, 2019, to April 7, 2019. The survey was distributed to professors within the behavioral sciences department at Tyler Junior College along with an email describing the purpose of the study, its methodology, and the benefits of participation. The professors were encouraged to send the survey links to their classes and were allowed to offer extra credit for participation. The research was approved by the Institutional Research Board of Tyler Junior College. However, the informed consent form that was submitted to the IRB was not sent to the department professors. The survey did contain a shortened version of the informed consent form, which included a statement of data confidentiality, a statement of the right of the participant to withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequences, contact information, and an offer to answer any questions the participant may have. Participants were told that “The completion and return of the survey implies consent to participate in the research.”
Respondents were first asked if they were 18 years of age or older. They were then asked for their student ID numbers, the name of the professor who sent them the link to the survey, which course of theirs they were taking, and whether or not the course was online.

Students were asked demographic questions on their sex, race, if one or both of their parents had completed college, their parents’ highest education levels, if they were majoring in general studies, and, if not, what their major was.

Students were then asked if they had ever enrolled in an online course at Tyler Junior College and if they had ever dropped an online course at Tyler Junior College.

Students who had not enrolled in an online course at were also given two short-answer questions: One asking why they had not enrolled in an online course, and another asking what would motivate them to enroll in an online course.

Students who had enrolled in an online course were given a short-answer question asking why they chose to do so.

Students who had enrolled in an online course but had not dropped an online course were asked how many hours they were enrolled in when they last took an online course, how many of those hours were online, and how many hours per week they typically worked. They were also given a short-answer question asking if they had come into any problems while taking online courses.

Students who had dropped an online course were asked how many hours they were enrolled in when they last dropped an online course, how many of those hours were online, and how many hours per week they typically worked. They were also given two short-answer questions: One asking why they chose to drop an online course, and another asking how their instructor could have improved this course.
Results

Quantitative Results

A total of 139 students responded to the survey. However, 19 responses were deleted as four respondents were minors and 15 gave contradictory answers. Of the 120 remaining respondents, 101 were female (84.2%), 19 were male (15.8%), 54 were Caucasian/white non-Hispanic (45%), 40 were Hispanic/Latino (33.3%), 23 were African-American (19.2%), and three were Asian (2.5%). Additionally, 71 were first generation college students (59.2%), while 49 responded that one or both of their parents had completed college (40.8%).

![Figure 1. First-generation survey respondents compared to non-first-generation survey respondents.](image)

When asked for their mother’s highest education level/degree, 25 (20.8%) of students answered some high school or less, 31 (25.8%) answered high school, 23 (19.2%) answered some college, two (1.7%) answered technical training/trade/certification, 17 (14.2%) answered associate degree, 13 (10.8%) answered bachelor’s degree, and nine (7.9%) answered master’s degree. When asked for their father’s highest education level/degree, 27 (22.5%) of students answered some high school or less, 31 (25.8%) answered high school, 24 (20%) answered some
college, six (5%) answered technical training/trade/certification, six (5%) answered associate degree, 16 (13.3%) answered bachelor’s degree, eight (6.7%) answered master’s degree, and two (1.7%) answered doctorate degree.

A total of 26 respondents were majoring in general studies. Among the 94 respondents who had declared a major, the most popular majors were nursing (15), psychology (13), and social work (9), as displayed in Table 1.

**Figure 2.** Survey respondents majoring in general studies compared to survey respondents with declared majors.

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ASL Skills</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal Justice</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dental Assistant</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dental Hygiene</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>2</td>
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</table>
Most respondents received a link from a traditional course (88, 73.3%). Most respondents had enrolled in an online course at Tyler Junior College (92, 76.7%); 28 had not (23.3%). Of students who had enrolled in an online course at Tyler Junior College, 24 had dropped an online course (26.1%), and 68 had not (73.9%).
Figure 3. Amount of survey respondents who had enrolled in online courses and amount of survey respondents who had dropped online courses.

Among first-generation college students, 56 respondents had enrolled in an online course (78.9%), and 15 had not (21.1%). Among non-first-generation college students, 36 respondents had enrolled in an online course (73.5%) and 13 had not (26.5%).

Figure 4. Amount of survey respondents who had enrolled in online courses and amount of survey respondents who had dropped online courses among first-generation and non-first-generation students.

There was not a major difference in drop rates between first-generation and not first-generation students; 15 first-generation students had dropped an online course (26.8% of first-
generation students who had enrolled in online courses), and nine non-first-generation students had dropped an online course (25% of non-first-generation students who had enrolled in online courses).

A total of 74 students who had declared a major had enrolled in an online course at Tyler Junior College (78.7%), and 20 had not (21.3%). A total of 18 general studies majors had enrolled in an online course at Tyler Junior College (69.2%), and eight had not (30.8%). Among general studies majors who had enrolled in an online course, five had dropped an online course (27.8%), and 13 had not (72.2%). Among students who had declared a major and enrolled in an online course, 19 had dropped and online course (25.7%), and 55 had not (74.3%).

The survey’s answer choices for hours enrolled and hours worked contained several errors. Students who dropped online courses did not have the option to say that they had worked $>30 - 35$ hours or $>40 - 45$ hours per week. Students whose typical workweek fell into those ranges were forced to give an incorrect answer. An answer choice for students who had enrolled in but had not dropped an online course was listed as $>10 - 1$ instead of $>10 - 15$. We cannot assume that respondents understood what that option was supposed to say, so results to that question may be unreliable. Students who had enrolled in but had not dropped an online course were unable to report working no hours, unlike students who had dropped an online course. They were able to select that they had typically worked $<10 - 10$ hours per week. However, including an option for no hours worked would have led to more specific results which could be compared to students who had dropped online courses. Finally, students who had enrolled in but had not dropped an online course had the option to answer that they had been enrolled in $13 - 15$ hours and the option to answer $15 - 18$ hours. This means that students who typically worked for 15 hours per week may have been divided into two different categories.
When students who had taken but not dropped an online course were asked how many hours they were enrolled in when they last took an online course, four (5.9%) answered 3 or less, 11 (16.2%) answered 4 – 6, seven (10.3%) answered 7 – 9, 16 (23.9%) answered 10 – 12, 23 (33.8%) answered 13 – 15, five (7.4%) answered 15 – 18, one (1.5%) answered 19 – 21, and one (1.5%) answered more than 21. Furthermore, 40 (58.8%) reported that less than half of their hours were online, nine (13.2%) reported that half of their hours were online, six (8.8%) reported that greater than half of their hours were online, and 13 (19.2%) reported that all of their hours were online. When these students were asked how many hours per week they typically worked when they last took an online course, 17 (25%) answered < 10 – 10, 18 (26.5%) reported > 10 – 1, five (7.4%) answered > 15 – 20, eight (11.8%) answered > 20 – 25, four (5.9%) answered > 25 – 30, two (2.9%) answered > 30 – 35, four (5.9%) answered > 40 – 45, and two (2.9%) answered > 45 – 50.

When students who had dropped an online course were asked how many hours they were enrolled in when they last dropped an online course, two (8.3%) answered < 3 – 3, two (8.3%) answered > 3 – 6, nine (37.5%) answered > 9 – 12, seven (29.3%) answered > 12 – 15, two (8.3%) answered > 15 – 18, one (4.2%) answered > 18 – 21, and one (4.2%) answered 22+. Furthermore, 11 (45.8%) reported that less than half of their hours were online, three (12.5%) reported that half of their hours were online, five (20.8%) reported that greater than half of their hours were online, and five (20.8%) reported that all of their hours were online. When these students were asked how many hours per week they typically worked when they last took an online course, four (16.7%) answered none, two (8.3%) answered < 10 – 10, two (8.3%) reported > 10 – 1, four (16.7%) answered > 15 – 20, one (4.2%) answered > 20 – 25, one (4.2%) answered > 25 – 30, and eight (33.3%) answered > 45 – 50.
Qualitative Results

Qualitative data was collected through students’ responses to open-ended questions related to their experiences with online coursework.

Students who had not enrolled in online courses frequently expressed a preference for the traditional classroom setting and the interaction it offers. Several explained that they would miss being able to get an immediate response from their professor if they took an online course. A lack of motivation and self-discipline was another recurring theme. Several students who had not enrolled in online courses said that they would consider it if they knew they would be able to communicate efficiently and clearly understand the material.

Work schedule requirements, family responsibilities, and the need for flexibility were the most frequent reasons given for choosing to enroll in online courses. One respondent explained, “I am a mother and I work full time. Online courses offer the flexibility that I need to successfully earn my degree while also supporting my family.” Several students said that they enrolled in online courses during summer, winter, or 12-week semesters. A few respondents wrote that they chose to take online courses because it was the only course type available during these semesters. Others expressed that they were on vacation or living at home during the summer and would not have been able to attend traditional courses. Students also reported taking online courses because face-to-face sections of the course were full or because major-specific courses were only offered online. Some students had a preference for online courses compared to traditional courses. One said that in traditional classrooms, “sometimes some students are distractions … trying to concentrate is very frustrating.”

Most respondents who had taken, but not dropped, an online course did not report any problems with their online coursework (36, or 39.1%). Recurring issues that were reported
include technological problems, a lack of communication with professors, and struggles with motivation and self-discipline. According to one respondent, “Some professors just throw the assignments at you and never email or communicate with you.” Other complaints included issues with proctored tests and online group work.

An overarching theme in respondents’ reasons for dropping online courses was a sense of being overwhelmed. Several reported that they were making a poor grade in the course or that the time they put into it was lowering their grades in other courses. Multiple students said that their professors had given them unclear instructions for assignments. One explained:

I dropped all of my courses that I took online because most all of my professors did not give clear instructions of the course. I did not know if I was to take my tests online or in person, I didn’t not know what kind of homework was due when or details of homework assignments. It was very unorganized.

Several respondents said that they dropped online courses during short semesters. One student expressed, “Both of my online courses were minimesters, and I was overwhelmed with the amount of new workload.”

The topic of self-motivation and self-discipline came up when students discussed why they dropped online courses. One student wrote that she was unable to remember to log onto the course daily, and another reported issues with procrastination.

Over half of the respondents who had dropped an online course (14, or 58.3%) did not provide any suggestions for course improvements. However, clearer expectations from professors was one recurring request from students who had dropped an online course. Other
repeated ideas were study guides and greater clarification on subjects. One student said, "I would have liked to get an email before online classes started stating what was expected from said class."

Another explained:

I feel like the instructor could have provided more ways to study for her exams. They didn’t let us review our quizzes with correct answers, so it was a bit frustrating to get ready for the exams without the correct answers. Also they never really specified on how to study for the test besides telling us to read the book.

And a third stated:

I think there should be a review sheet for each major test that we take. I think that we should have more time to take the tests. Everyone learns at a different pace. Some people process what they’ve read and learned slowly than others. We really don’t have time to think about the answer before we chose an answer because we only get 50 minutes for a 50 question test. It’s almost as if we’re being rushed. The information that we study which is 4 chapters is very broad. The test questions comes from a test bank. We take quizzes weekly and that helps out some because they give us a sense of what were studying and it makes us go back and reread something that we might have read but didn’t have a clear understanding of it. That’s not a bad thing. That reinforces us to go back and study a little bit harder which is cool with me.
Another notable suggestion came from a survey participant who recommended that professors “find a new outline for the class to follow.” According to this student, “All the assignments were essays disguised as discussions that didn’t help on the test at all.”

**Discussion**

As the number of online courses at colleges and universities continues to increase, institutions must consider ways to improve these courses. Online students themselves are the most authentic sources for explanations of the online course drop rate that is described by Brown (2012), Lei and Gupta (2010), and O'Neill and Sai (2014). This study aimed to help improve online coursework by gaining insight on college students’ experiences with online courses.

Several findings of this study were consistent with the findings of previous studies. As found by Daymont and Blau (2011), Dobbs, Waid, and del Carmen (2009), and Horspool and Lange (2012), many students who had enrolled in online courses reported choosing to do so because of online coursework’s flexibility. On the other hand, students who had not enrolled in online courses wrote that they preferred a traditional classroom setting, as found by Daymont and Blau (2011) and O’Neill and Sai (2014). Institutions should keep the reasons why students choose to enroll in or avoid online courses in mind. Instead of trying to catch the attention of students who have a strong preference for face-to-face courses by replicating traditional classroom experiences, schools should focus on maintaining features like flexibility that already motivate students to choose the online course format.

It is also important for schools to understand why some students struggle with online courses. Jae Hoon, Dannels, and Watkins (2008), Keramidas (2012) both stated that online courses required high levels of self-discipline, a finding which was echoed in the results of this
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study. Furthermore, as found by Horspool and Lange (2012) and Walker and Kelly (2007), multiple respondents in this study reported a lack of communication and interaction in their online courses. Institutions should keep complaints such as these in mind as they work to improve online coursework. In correspondence with these complaints, several of the suggestions given by students who had dropped online courses were related to communication and clarity.

One survey respondent who had dropped an online course recommended that colleges find a new structure for online courses and complained about “essays disguised as discussions that didn’t help on the test at all.” Jae Hoon, Dannels, and Watkins (2008) also found that online students viewed discussion boards as inadequate replacements for tradition classroom discussion. According to Moore (2005), institutions must pioneer truly new ways of teaching online instead of attempting to use traditional classroom methods in an online format. Discussion boards are one example of instructors’ attempts to replicate the benefits of a traditional classroom within an online course for their students, but it would seem that the students themselves are dissatisfied with the format of discussion boards. Perhaps trying to recreate a classroom structure online in this way prevents schools from developing more effective structures that are unique to online courses. Moore (2005) argues that “Web-based education provides a unique opportunity to shift from teacher or education-centered to learner-centeredness” (p. 18). However, it is impossible to shift to “learner-centeredness” without considering the experiences of the learners themselves.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This exploratory study considered college students’ experiences with online coursework and suggestions from students who had dropped online courses. Previous literature on the topic found that students choose to enroll in online courses because of the courses’ flexibility and avoid online courses because they prefer a traditional format. This study’s results reinforced
those findings, as well as previous findings on online students’ struggles with the lack of interaction in the online course format. Survey respondents who had dropped online courses reported feeling “overwhelmed” and requested that courses include more communication, clearer expectations, and tools such as study guides. Schools must consider what their students are looking for in online coursework and should view online courses as more than imitations of traditional courses.

As this study was limited to students enrolled in behavioral sciences courses, future research should sample a broader range of students. This was a descriptive exploratory study. Future research could use statistical analysis. Future research could also compare student satisfaction and outcomes among different online course structures. Furthermore, future studies could consider if the 5.4% difference found in online course enrollment between first-generation students and non-first-generation students statistically significant by researching the differences between these groups’ relationships with online courses.
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References


