Health Care Management Student Perceptions of Online Courses Compared to Traditional Classroom Courses

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Abstract

This paper presents survey data from health care management students on their comparative opinions of online courses and traditional classroom courses in their college careers. The goals of the study were to identify how students perceived contribution to learning, impact on grades, workload differences, comparison of stress, ability to know the instructor and interaction with other students between their online course experiences and traditional classroom courses. Analysis provides an assessment of associations between demographic information and the student opinions.

Introduction

Purpose:

The purpose of this study was to identify how health care management students, including non-traditional students, perceived their online and traditional classes with respect to their ability to learn and interact with the university environment.

Design:

An online survey using the university's web-based system, a variation of Blackboard, to deliver an instrument developed to measure opinion on a 5 point Likert-type scale was made available to all declared health care management (HCM) undergraduate students. Participation was anonymous and voluntary. The survey contains an embedded consent form, a total of 14 questions, and was designed to find a student's perception of the differences between online and traditional classes, specifically questioning the perceived impact on grades, workload differences, comparison of stress, ability to know the instructor, and interaction with other students.

Review of the Literature:

The literature contains numerous reports of research related to college education and the format of delivery, whether in a traditional seated classroom setting or via distance learning in an online mode. However, little is found that speaks to the impact on students and their perceptions of differences between the two formats. Neuhauser, 2002, reported on a study of learning style and effectiveness of online and face-to-face instruction using two sections of a course. The results showed no significant differences in test scores, assignments, participation grades and final grades. In essence, this study showed that equivalent activities can be equally effective for online and face-to-face learners. Student satisfaction with technology-enhanced learning using online course was the focus of a study by Bloom and Hough (2003). By using a survey of nursing and health science students, it was found that satisfaction was generally high and there were few differences among students. It was further determined that faculty expertise in creating, selecting and using technology is a major factor influencing student satisfaction. Student perceptions of tools of online education were measured by Landry, et al, (2006).

Basing their research on the tenet that web-enhanced instruction is not intended to replace instruction in the traditional classroom setting, the research applied the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) to a web-enhanced instruction tool, Blackboard, and their results suggest that students perceived elements oriented toward course content were more useful than elements that provide course support and communication. Concerning language instruction, Stepp-Greany, (2002), found that students valued the important role of instructors in comparison to technologies. There was a difference in support for various elements of technological support for language learning. The experience of practitioners with various technology enhanced teaching tools was explored by Naidu, et al, (2002). Information and communication technology influences teaching practice and students' perceptions of learning. Anderson, et al, (2001), studied assessing teaching presence in a computer conferencing context. Teaching presence was defined as having three categories – design and organization, facilitating discourse, and direct instruction. The essential finding was that teachers have greater difficulty adapting to online teaching due to the traditional measures of teaching presence in a traditional course and trying to replicate a teaching presence in a technology that is inherently leaner in nature.

The experience of faculty in the program of education may have an influence on their ability to adapt to online courses. Teaching presence is developed within the context that teachers develop a presence in the courses and any change, such as from a seated format to an online format, would make older teachers have to adapt more to achieve a commensurate teaching presence in an online course. Effective teaching with technology in higher education (Bates & Poole, 2003) is a collaborative review of education at the collegiate level from experts in open and distance education and effective classroom teaching. The result is a view toward what best serves the students. Latchman, et al., (1999) began their research with "there is no doubt that nothing will replace synchronous learning with face to face interaction." The research attempts to demonstrate that technology via the Internet can be used to supplement classroom education and can be an alternative to the classroom for those students unable to be physically in the classroom at the time of the scheduled class meeting. The results indicated enhanced learning occurred for both student situations.

Bloom and Hough, (2003) provided descriptive results of a study to determine student satisfaction with technology enhanced learning using a survey of nursing and health science students. Satisfaction was generally high on the part of students with little variation between student categories. This was attributed to faculty expertise in the creation, selection and use of technology. The literature provides insight into a variety of areas relating to traditional college classes and online instructional methods. One area that is thinly supported by the literature is the students' perceptions of the comparative methods of teaching and how they feel the two methods impact their lives as students. Our research adds to the literature by studying health care management students in an undergraduate program. This study is based upon the perceptions of students and addresses several additional areas such as the ability to interact with other students and teachers.

Findings:

Analysis showed that the majority of HCM students surveyed (N=151) were between the ages of 20 and 39 years of age, African American, female, with 6 to 10 online classes on record from more than 26 classes taken in their college career. More than fifty seven percent of the students worked 30 hours or more per week with only 12.7% of the students not working at all. Forty three point seven percent (43.7%) said their grades were much better online and 53.6% believed the learning online was a better or much better experience. While the workload was perceived to be about the same (44.4%) stress was evaluated as better or much better (57.3%) online. Thirty nine point one percent (39.1%) and 41% of the students felt that getting to know the instructor and other students in the courses was the same online as traditional, but 38% and 33% respectively felt that online classes were worse or much worse at making that connection. Table 1 provides the types of descriptive information collected from the sample.

Table 1 Respondent Demographic Variables

Race	African American 1	Asian 2	Hispanic 3	Middle Eastern 4	Caucasian 5
Gender	Male 1	Female 2	Transgender 3		
Age	20-29 1	30-39 2	40-49 3	50-59 4	60-69 5
Marital Status	Married 1	Never Married 2	Previously Married 3		
Hours you work for pay per week	0 1	1-10 2	11-20 3	21-30 4	31+ 5
Credit hours earned	< 100 1	101-150 2	151-200 3	201-250 4	>250 5
In your college career, how many classes were traditional with scheduled seated meetings?	0 1	1-5 1	6-10 3	11-15 4	16+ 5
In your college career, how many classes had an on-line component?	0 1	1-5 1	6-10 3	11-15 4	16+ 5

Table 2 represents the survey questions asked of each respondent.

Table 2: Survey Questions

Please circle the number on the right side of the page that best describes what you think about the following questions.	Much worse	Somewhat worse	About the same	Somewhat better	Much better
1. In your opinion, how did online courses contribute to your learning compared to traditional classroom courses?	1	2	3	4	5
2. In your opinion, how were your grades in online courses compared to traditional classroom courses?	1	2	3	4	5
3. In your opinion, how was the workload in online courses compared to traditional classroom courses?	1	2	3	4	5
4. In your opinion, how did the stress of online courses compare to traditional classroom courses?	1	2	3	4	5
5. In your opinion, how well did you get to know the instructor in online courses compared to traditional seated courses?	1	2	3	4	5
6. In your opinion, how well did you interact with other students in online courses compared to traditional seated courses?	1	2	3	4	5

Table 3 contains the correlation coefficients which were found to be statistically significant at the 0.01 level of significance.

Table 3: Correlated Variables and Pearson Product Moment Coefficients at 0.01 Level

Variable	Variable	Correlation
Instructor	Students	.738**
Grades	Learning	.659**
Instructor	Learning	. 622**
Learning	Workload	.599**
Learning	Students	.581**
Stress	Workload	.549**
Grades	Students	.543**
Instructor	Workload	.542**
Grades	Workload	.541**
Grades	Stress	.536**
Learning	Stress	.481**
Grades	Instructor	.480**
Instructor	Stress	.463**
Stress	Students	.395**
Age	Instructor	.258**
Gender	Stress	.239**
Age	Hours Worked	.236**
Grades	# of Seated	-.224**
# of Seated	Students	-.223**
Learning	# of Seated	-.219**

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 4 contains the correlation coefficients which were found to be statistically significant at the 0.05 level of significance.

Table 4: Correlated Variables and Pearson Product Moment Coefficients at 0.05 Level

Variable	Variable	Correlation
# of Online	Students	.199*
Credit Hours	# of Online	.197*
Credit Hours	Learning	-.190*
Credit Hours	Hours Worked	.186*
Marital	Workload	-.183*
Grades	Marital	-.182*
Race	Students	-.182*
Gender	Instructor	.177*
Instructor	# of Seated	-.173*
Grades	Race	-.172*
Gender	Students	.167*
# of Online	# of Seated	.164*
Marital	Students	-.162*
Hours Worked	# of Online	.161*
Age	# of Seated	-.156*

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

The tables list these important findings in descending order of the magnitude of the associations. At the 0.01 level of significance, these include positive changes in knowing one's instructors which increased with increases in interaction with other students. The next strongest relationship indicated that grades increased as the perception of learning increased for online courses. Another relationship exists between students' knowing their instructors and their learning. Additionally, as learning improved, so did workload and interacting with other students. As stress was seen to improve, so was students' workload reported as better for online versus seated courses.The variables for grades and interacting with students moved positively better for online course compared to traditional seated courses. Knowing the instructor improved as workload improved or more probably, vice versa. With an improvement in workload, grades were reported as better in the online format. Also, as grades improved, so did the stress and knowledge of instructors. Improvements in learning and knowing the instructors both moved positively with perceived better stress in online compared to seated courses. Better grades were associated with better knowledge of the instructors in online courses compared to seated formats. Stress was better as interaction with students was reported as better. As age increased, knowledge of instructors was better.

The number of seated courses that were taken was negatively related to grades, interaction with other students and the reported quality of learning. This means that for the respondents of this survey, grades, student interaction and level of learning in online courses compared to seated courses decreased as the number of seated courses increased.At the 0.05 significance level, there were fifteen associations found. These include increases in the number of online courses related to improved interactions with students, higher credit hours, higher number of seated courses and more hours worked. Having more credit hours was found to be related to better learning and more hours worked each week. Marital status was negatively related to three variables. These included workload, grades and interaction with students. This is interpreted as previously married students reported a worse workload, lower grades and less interaction with other students compared to those never married students who had better results compared to those now married who had the highest perceived results for these variables.Race was negatively associated with interaction with other students and grades. The response options for race went from African American at the beginning with a value of one to Caucasian with the value of five. Interpreting the results for these extreme values would indicate that African American students felt their grades and interaction with other students were better in online courses than white students when compared to seated courses.

Gender was positively associated with knowing the instructors and interacting with other students. Again, for this demographic variable, the response options were one for male, two for female and three for transgender. Effectively, based on the frequency of responses, females reported better knowledge of their instructors and better interaction with other students than did the male respondents.Finally, the number of seated courses was significantly related at the 0.05 level of significance to students' knowledge of their instructors, their age and, unsurprisingly, to the number of online courses taken. The only remaining relationship at the 0.05 level was the number of hours worked outside school to the number of online courses the students had taken.

Practical Applications:

Teaching online has grown significantly in the last several years and while studies have shown success in acquisition of theoretical knowledge, little has been studied about students' perceptions of their ability to work cooperatively, understand diverse points of view and customs, and interact positively with students and their instructors to complete an assignment. Additionally academicians question whether students in an online environment benefit from the experience of the individual instructor.

Originality/Value & Contribution:

Guiding course design by understanding the need for flexibility and convenience for the student must be weighted by the need to reinforce group cooperation, team building skills, and cultural competence in the health care field where these skills are essential. The results can have value to other health care management undergraduate programs where the demographics of students match those in this study.

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IRB Approval