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# **Students' Experiences with Different Course Delivery Modalities: On Campus, Online, and Satellite**

Mark C. Rehfuss, Andrea Kirk-Jenkins, Tammi Milliken

## **Abstract**

In an effort to adapt to the technological advances of this century, the training of human services professionals has grown from traditional classrooms and satellite programs to online education. Many human services programs are under pressure from their universities and students to expand into online education. This study examined 252 students' experiences and perceptions of their Bachelors of Science program as it transitioned to offering courses online in addition to on campus and satellite sites. Students' narrative responses reflected 4 themes: convenience, interactions, learning preference, and technology. These themes and their implications for educators and students are discussed.

## **Introduction**

The training of human service professionals has always been about engaging individuals to help others on the front lines of professional service. This education has developed gradually from certificate programs to associate degree programs and to bachelor and doctorate degree programs, but historically this has always been accomplished in face-to-face formats replicating the context for providing services to individuals (Neukrug, 2014). As education as a whole has become more aware of meeting the educational needs of diverse students, the methods used to provide education have changed and begun to embrace online instruction (Allen & Seaman, 2011). The rapid growth in online programs has been in response to the demands of students unable to attend traditional programs face-to-face (Chandras & Chandras, 2010).

Up to this point, the field of human services has not engaged in research to explore the use and effects of online education with students. However, several of the fields closely related to human services, including counseling and social work, have begun to engage in this inquiry. Within the past several years, counselor education has embraced this trend and both courses and entire accredited programs are now offered online with success (Burt, Gonzalez, Swank, Ascher, & Cunningham, 2011; Flamez et al., 2008; Layne & Hohenshil, 2005; Reicherzer, Dixon-Saxon, & Trippany, 2009). Likewise, social work has expressed a need to embrace new technologies that facilitate online education and indicated that these approaches are here to stay as technology has become the driving force behind education overall (Blackmon, 2013; Moore, 2005).

As technology has grown more accessible, the provision of and demand for online education has grown and continues to expand (Coogan, 2009; Kiernan, 2003). Approaches to online education have moved from being only asynchronous text

or video-based toward synchronous and asynchronous approaches that foster interactivity and learning (Allen & Seamen, 2010). According to the Sloan Consortium Survey of Online learning (2011) one third of all students in higher education are taking at least one online course and these numbers are continuing to grow.

In response to the needs of students at a distance and with new access to enhanced technology, the Bachelors of Science program in Human Services (HMSV) at the university initiated offering its full program of 14 courses online in the spring of 2012. Previously, courses had only been offered on the main campus or through video conferencing via satellite broadcast at remote campuses across the country. Each of the 14 courses of the curriculum in the HMSV program is now offered on campus and online every semester. This type of rapid expansion in online course delivery creates multiple challenges for faculty and students. The learning curve for faculty can be steep as transitioning from classroom to online involves not only adapting course content and delivery but also learning new technologies and an overall shift in pedagogy (Kreber & Kanuka, 2006; Keengwe & Kidd, 2010; Smith, 2005; Zhao, Alexander, & Perreault, 2003). Concerns about student learning and the efficacy of online education are often raised; however, research continues to demonstrate the equality of online and traditional education (Hauck, 2006). In some instances, online learners demonstrate higher levels of self-efficacy and motivation enabling them to engage in their learning and to attempt difficult tasks (Rovai & Downey, 2010).

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the needs and experiences of students during the transition, as well as the challenges and benefits of the newer online education, this study explored students' experiences with on campus, satellite, and online courses within the program. Students who participated in the study were all pursuing their BS in Human Services and identified as having taken the majority of their classes either live, online, via satellite, or using a combination of formats. The study used Inductive Thematic Analysis to identify qualitative themes in the students' responses to an open-ended questionnaire (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Grbich, 2007).

## **Method**

### **Research Team**

The research team consisted of two associate professors and a doctoral student who is studying counselor education at a metropolitan state university. The two professors teach in the human services program, one only on campus and the other only online. The doctoral student has taught two human services courses both in a classroom on the traditional campus. Both faculty and the doctoral student approached the study with preconceptions of student experiences due to hearing complaints from local and distance students about the creation of and transition to the online program. The traditional campus faculty member was hesitant about the online courses and student success with them, while the online instructor had

developed online programs previously and was certain of the benefits to students over the long term. The doctoral student was unsure of the online program as well, but considered that online was going to continue to become more important in higher education training and that it could be positive for some students.

## **Survey**

The primary researchers developed the questionnaire used in this study. Once developed, the survey was distributed to the other full time human services faculty at the researchers' university for review and feedback. Suggested edits were incorporated. The third author then piloted the questionnaire on students in a live human services class she was teaching. No further edits were recommended. The final questionnaire addressed demographics including current student status (freshman, sophomore, junior, or senior) and age. Additionally, participants were asked to specify the modality used to take their human services courses during the fall and spring semesters and during the summer semester. Their options included the following: courses taken primarily on main campus, courses taken primarily via satellite, or courses taken primarily online. Finally, the questionnaire asked students to specify the teaching modality they most preferred and to explain the benefits of that format over the others. A copy of the survey can be found in the audit trail. The audit trail consists of all documents pertaining to the study including but not limited to: email correspondence between the researchers, copies of the survey development, as well as various rounds of coding and field notes.

## **Procedures**

After approval by the university's Institutional Review Board, participants were contacted through the college of education's email list serve. All registered human service undergraduate majors were contacted about participating in the study via an email that described the study and requested participation. Students who were interested were able to click a link and were taken to the questionnaire, which opened with an informed consent page that needed to be agreed to prior to starting the questionnaire. All information collected on the Survey Monkey instrument was de-identified.

The survey was distributed through the college email list serve for all declared human services majors. A total of 657 emails were sent and 252 students participated for a response rate of 38%. Responses from those that participated varied by question and by student. Many students simply included a few words or one sentence while others responded with full paragraphs to the open-ended questions.

## **Data Analysis**

The study used Inductive Thematic Analysis to identify qualitative themes in the students' responses to the questionnaire (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Grbich, 2007; Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012; Saldana, 2009). After the students completed the qualitative portion of the study, all of their responses were exported

into a Word document. Two members of the research team were responsible for initial coding with each member initially coding all responses independently. Horizontalization was the process by which these initial horizons of meaning are identified and reflected upon by the researcher until emerging as codes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Initial codes were simple, using basic terms to describe content of the student responses such as, technology, challenge, frustration, enjoyment, etc. Once all of the responses were coded individually, the team met to reach consensus on the coding of all responses. This involved detailed discussion and reflection of identified codes and the creation of an agreed upon consensus codebook. This was a process of refinement with some terms overlapping with others and agreement of the researchers on a final term to use for the code. For example, the phrases quickly, sped up, and saved time were grouped under the code efficiency, which would fall under the theme of convenience. Both members then recoded all of the data using the consensus codebook for verification that all content fell within the new agreed upon codes. The entire research team met again to review the final consensus codebook and discuss possible implications for various codes and their location under the major themes that had emerged through this process. Through this discussion, the codes were clustered and collapsed under the major themes, keeping the research questions in mind. At this point with all codes assigned to a theme, the frequency of occurrence of each theme was counted to clarify the weight of each theme. A copy of the final codebook can be found in the audit trail (Saldana, 2009), and the final themes are presented in the results with examples for verification by the reader.

## Results

Demographically, of the 252 students who responded, the age range of the sample consisted of the following: under 20 years old (4.3%), between 20 and 30 (48.1%), between 31 and 40 (17.4%), and over 41 years old (30.2%). Pertaining to academic standing, 55% reported senior status, 36% reported junior status, 8% identified as sophomores and 1% as freshmen. During the fall and spring semesters, 53% of students reported taking courses solely on the main campus or at satellite sites while 25% reported taking classes solely online. An additional 22% reported a combination of modalities. During the summer term, 40% reported taking courses solely on the main campus or at satellite sites while 38% reported taking classes solely online. The remaining 21% reported a combination of modalities.

After the coding of participants' responses was completed, four main themes were identified from the data: convenience, interactions, learning style, and technology. The four themes are presented in the order of frequency with the number of occurrences included to clarify the power of each. There was evidence of overlapping of themes throughout the coding process, which is supported by the participants' quotes. The quotes also provide for member checking by the reader (Creswell, 2009).

## **Convenience**

Convenience was the most frequently mentioned theme throughout the study, having been included in 231 participants' responses. This theme most often referred to the value of online courses while balancing family responsibilities. However, online programming was also perceived as convenient with regard to minimizing travel and offering flexibility even if the student had not taken an online course. Many students reported that they enjoyed "working at their own pace" with online courses. One participant commented, "Online classes make it very convenient for me. I can be where I need to be, without missing important assignments or other commitments." An additional student stated:

I like to take my classes online. I like this format because it is very convenient for me. I have to work and when I have to go to school on a Saturday or Friday it is very inconvenient. Online allows me to go at my own speed. I don't feel pressured.

Pertaining to family as a factor contributing to the convenience of online courses, a participant reported, "I am able to get the work required for the course done in the evenings and sometimes during breaks at work and can still be home with my family." Another indicated that as a military spouse:

Online is beneficial for me especially if my family has to PCS (permanent change of station). Online classes allow me the option to pursue my degree even in the event I have to relocate. It takes the stress out of worrying whether or not I will complete my degree before my husband is given military orders to relocate the family.

## **Interactions**

The second largest theme discussed by 85 students was the importance of interactions, which were operationalized as the students' relations or exchanges with both their professors and their peers. Multiple interactions were discussed such as "face to face," the importance of establishing relationships, as well as interactions through technology via Adobe Connect meetings or email. The bulk of responses specified live teaching as the modality that optimized learning through interactions. One participant stated, "Live teaching is the most beneficial. It allows for collaboration and a deeper understanding as well as relationship building." Another person commented, "Learning within a group setting on campus is more beneficial because you are able to interact with other students and the instructor in a more personal way."

However, some participants enjoyed the interactions they had online. One participant stated, "Online you can work at your own pace and there is still an interaction with the professor via Adobe Connect meetings." Another student reported:

The benefits of taking an online course is that you can do it on your time and take the amount of time you need during the week to complete the assignments. I also like the Adobe Connect meetings so you also get a chance to have a visual understanding and interaction.

Multiple participants made the connection of not only the importance of interactions for learning the course content, but also tying it to the helping profession. For example, one participant stated “The interaction with the class [live on main campus] and the students provide more learning than you can receive from a book, especially when specializing in a field to work with people.” Another student stated, “We are human services majors who are going to be hands on with people day by day. The most effective way is to teach in person.” Some participants shared their beliefs that the lack of interactions is an issue. For example, a student stated, “Satellite classes offer students a better opportunity to interact with peers and the instructor. Online courses seem designed to isolate the student, are more labor intensive, and offer less opportunity to connect with the instructor.” One student stated, “The personal interactions and discussions in class really help. There are certain sections that cannot be grasped online.” Another student reported:

The only benefit of an online course is when I have an additional job so I am able to do my school work around that schedule. Other than that, I really dislike online courses. The work load is immense, the interaction with others is almost nonexistent, and it’s far too difficult to keep exams and assignment due dates organized when taking multiple classes with everything on one little computer screen.

### **Learning Preference**

A third theme identified from the participants’ responses was learning preference, which was referenced 29 times. Learning preference was operationalized in terms of the participants’ descriptions of how they prefer to learn or how they feel they best learn. Some students described learning best in a classroom setting while others favored the online setting.

Supporting the online setting, participants discussed working at their own pace and on their own as vital to their learning styles. One participant stated, “I take classes both online and on the main campus. I prefer online because I can focus better when I’m alone, plus I can work at my own pace.” Another participant stated, “I prefer online because it is more convenient and I can watch the videos and online lectures repeatedly as I need to. Also, I learn better on my own.”

Some students reported that having more course materials online is beneficial for their learning styles. “There are more materials for courses online. I personally learn more online [as] opposed to in a classroom. I need in classroom instruction on writing skills but I have a tutor helping, if and when her schedule permits it.” Another student commented “I learn more online, there are more materials

available to me online.” However, others reported learning best in a traditional classroom setting. One participant stated:

Satellite instruction has been the best way for me to maintain a 4.0 GPA. I learn a lot more listening to a lecture. I also feel like I am part of a class. It is easy to ask questions and add to the lecture as opposed to taking classes online. I enjoy the interpersonal connection with classmates and professors.

Another student reported, “Learning within a group setting on campus is more beneficial because you are able to interact with other students and the instructor in a more personal way.” Interaction was also mentioned in the following participant’s response related to how the student best learns: “I prefer live main campus courses because it was easier for me to get distracted with online and satellite courses. I learn best orally and visually. I also think that online and satellite courses are not as interactive.” A student commented, “I prefer live classes because it is easier to absorb the material in a live setting.” Not only was the ability to absorb information discussed but also the ability to retain information. “Live on main campus courses helps me retain information better.”

### **Technology**

While the theme of technology was reported less frequently, related statements were strong and consistent for some of the students. Technology was the main theme of eight students. Some issues that were brought up pertained to problems with technology that students experience as well as not always having access to technology, nor understanding the resources available. Students’ ability to connect due to network issues as well as system delays were sources of frustration. One participant stated, “I prefer the satellite classes because of where I live, but sometimes I have Internet issues and am unable to connect.” Another student discussed the difficulties experienced: “It is at times very difficult to communicate via web because of technical difficulties-typing is cool, but it can be aggravating and not feasible.” Regarding the delays, a participant reported:

I have taken courses that are all web-based and satellite. The web-based courses have a severe delay when you need to ask a question (it takes 60 seconds to post a question; and by then the instructor has changed the subject.); whereas the satellite questions don’t have a delay. It is all live.

Students also reported frustration related to the technology that was specific to the software used and were often confused about what was or was not available. “Online is ok, but having to use Adobe Connect is not preferred as it is not free to use as far as I know. The cost of school is already high enough.” Another participant discussed both the positive and the negative, “I took one online class this semester and one benefit was the course work was more on your own. But I found it harder because of the adobe software.”



## **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

There are several limitations regarding the results of this study. First, the sample was selected from one university's HMSV program and represents only the experiences of those students who self-selected to participate. Future research should seek to expand the number of students assessed and integrate evaluation and assessment into evaluation of the program overall to determine effect upon all students. In addition, due to the type of survey used in Survey Monkey, a limited number of questions could be asked. Therefore, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status were not collected from participants to clarify if findings differed by these factors. These factors should be included in future studies as well other factors such as levels of comfort with technology and computers. The university is located in a metropolitan area and more rural universities or programs with differing student bodies may reflect different results. Future research should diversify sampling by using students from several universities, programs, and settings. Results, therefore, are not generalizable but only represent the first steps in understanding human services students' experiences and preferences when confronted with education offered in various modalities. In addition, the data was collected during a time of transitions within the program when online courses were first becoming available and still being developed. Therefore, current students' experiences engaging with a more stable online program may reflect differing views and evaluation, therefore, should expand to include students engaged in an established online program.

## **Discussion**

The results of this study clearly suggest that from a student's perspective, convenience in pursuing education is of utmost importance regardless of the modality. Online courses seem to appeal to students primarily because of convenience, even if their technological skills and acumen are poor. The value placed on convenience was reflected in several students opting for online classes despite preferring the face-to-face learning environment. One student stated, "I prefer to take classes via satellite since I am a distance learning student. However, out of pure convenience, this semester all of my classes are online." Another stated, "I'm not a big fan of online classes but that is the only option I have right now."

These findings are consistent with explorations of students' experiences in differing academic fields and point towards one of the reasons for online learning's growth (Chandras & Chandras, 2010; Burt et al, 2011; Blackmon, 2013; Tsokris, 2011). It is also evident from this study that some students obviously enjoyed the traditional classroom and will always prefer that modality of delivery. Many of these students pointed to their interactions with peers and faculty while online students in contrast highlighted their ability to self-pace through the materials.

Interactions with a faculty member and with peers are an important part of

learning, and online programs need to put extra effort into making this happen for students (Rovai & Downey, 2010). These results should encourage online programs to provide some consistent interactions for student in online courses so that connections are built. The current program initiated increasing the number of live Adobe Connect meetings required in a semester and also placed students into small groups for all discussion board postings in each course in response to this finding from the current study. This adjustment seeks to facilitate more faculty and peer interactions while still maintaining the convenience and flexibility of the online courses that students desire.

The findings also highlight the importance of matching learning preference to course format. Many of the traditional classroom students expressed that their learning preference fits best with traditional classroom lectures while online students indicated that their learning preference fits well with the online format that allows for self-initiative and the ability to pace themselves. It seems that students had the ability to highlight the strengths of each modality and maintain a positive perspective on their training even if it was not their preferred environment and style. Based on participants' feedback, an ideal program will offer courses in both a traditional face-to-face format as well as an online format to best address the multitude of needs of the students served.

In addition, a small group of students clearly felt that online learning and the technology involved in the modality created barriers for them and their learning. This is a great challenge with online programming in that it is difficult to assure that students have the skills, technology, and Internet access needed to be successful. Some of the challenges for these students also appeared to be a lack of knowledge about the tools and resources available to them to foster their online learning while some of it was simply the time and energy needed to learn how to use the tools effectively. For some students, technology can create a barrier to online learning that may prevent them from being successful. It is very important that universities and programs develop resources and have live technology support that can ease this transition for students. Options may include creating and integrating orientations to common tasks associated with online learning classes. Such training could provide the opportunity to safely practice the skills that students will need to navigate their online classrooms. This could take the form of online courses with practice modules or modules that are guided by an instructor in real time. The current program developed and launched several online training modules that students complete before taking their actual classes. This has helped to decrease the number of technology issues that students report.

Clearly, every learning setting has its own challenges, yet students appear to be adaptive to assure that they reach their goals in as convenient a fashion as possible. This study illustrated that even students who were unsure of their abilities to manage technology and who felt that the online format was incongruent with their learning preferences were taking and successfully completing courses in the online modality. The desires and motivations of the students to receive their education in a timely manner appeared to make them more adaptive and willing to strive

to overcome barriers. This resiliency and willingness to encounter challenges in pursuit of the end goal are characteristics of many online learners that may be overlooked by those that are uncertain of online education. It is interesting to note that during the creation and transition to online courses, the number of students in the traditional classroom program continued to grow slightly even as the online program increased rapidly, suggesting that the students adjusted to the online modality but also appreciated having both options.

As human services programs begin to embrace and use online courses, it is important to consider factors that influence students and their success. This study has shed light on the biggest benefit of online learning, convenience and flexibility, while highlighting its trials related to interactions, technology, and learning preferences. It is important to realize that all modalities of instruction can pose challenges to students, but when moving to online courses it is vital to consider students' needs and concerns in order to ensure the students' and the program's success.

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