

On-Campus versus Hybrid Courses in a Master of Public Administration Program

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ABSTRACT

Online and hybrid (online plus on-campus) learning has increased significantly in the twenty-first century. One Midwestern university started offering more hybrid courses in 2005 in its Master in Public Administration program. The author conducted student surveys to assess the preferences of adult learners for the different modes of instruction, their perceptions of each process, and their perceptions of each mode's learning outcomes. Analysis of survey responses indicates that the majority of adult learners value the flexibility of online learning while still desiring on-campus sessions for interaction with other students and the professor, which students believe improves learning outcomes. Significantly, students believe that the combination of on-campus and online classes adds overall value to aspects of their learning experience.

KEYWORDS

Online learning, hybrid learning, student perceptions

“A ‘tipping point’ has been reached for the dominance of blended learning in higher education and the roots of this moment are technological, financial and pedagogical” (Rudestam & Schoenholtz-Read, 2010, p. 4). The increase in online and hybrid (online plus on-campus) courses in Master of Public Administration (MPA) programs has been significant in the 21st century, and various assessments report a variety of positive and negative outcomes (Allen, Bourhis, Burrell, & Mabry, 2002; Barth, 2004; Bernard et al., 2004; Hannay & Newvine, 2006; Means, Toyama, Murphy, & Baki, 2013). There is limited research, however, comparing student preferences and perceptions concerning learning out-

comes for adult learners in such online and hybrid settings.

This study explores adult learners' preferences and perceptions about both learning outcomes and the processes used in online and hybrid approaches in one course provided by a Midwestern university. This university's MPA program had been fully on-campus, and students entered the program with that understanding. The MPA program began offering online and hybrid options just prior to this research. Students were surveyed over a two-year period to assess their preferences and perceptions concerning on-campus, online, and hybrid approaches to learning.

The following questions guided this study:

1. Are the perceived educational outcomes different between distance learning (i.e., online) and traditional learning (i.e., on-campus)?
2. What are students' perceptions of the overall quality of learning in distance learning versus traditional learning?
3. What conditions influence the effectiveness of online teaching?
4. What learning modes do adult learners prefer, and why do they favor that style of learning?

This research, like other similar efforts, found that adult learners like the flexibility of online classes. It also found that many students believe that the combined online and on-campus hybrid experience enhanced learning outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Distance Learning Advantages and Disadvantages

Means et al. (2013) write that "online learning is one of the fastest growing trends in educational uses of technology" (p. 2). The authors note that the popularity of online learning derives from its flexibility in instruction, timing, and location. They analyzed the effectiveness of fully online versus hybrid (or blended) learning, defining the latter as at least 25% but not 100% online. The authors concluded that hybrid learning is an enhancement of the traditional face-to-face, on-campus learning format. They found that online learning produced stronger learning outcomes than fully on-campus modes and that hybrid formats produced even stronger learning outcomes.

In 2013, MIT president L. Rafael Reif stated, "I am convinced that digital learning is the most important innovation in education since the printing press" (p. 54). He notes that digital (or online) learning has opened possibilities for billions of people who previously had no access to higher learning, and he describes three advantages of digital learning. First, digital technologies are

good at teaching content. Reif refers to a 2011 study that tested students taught either online or in traditional on-campus lectures, in which the online students did twice as well as their peers in traditional settings. Second, digital learning allows for flexibility. Students can engage anytime and anywhere. Third, digital learning enables providers to access and analyze information being generated about how people learn best. This could lead to improving teaching methods and strategies.

Yet Reif (2013) also recognized that certain elements of education are transmitted best face-to-face, including

the judgment, confidence, humility and skill in negotiation that come from hands-on problem solving and teamwork; the perseverance, analytical skill and initiative that grow from conducting frontline lab research; the skill in writing and public speaking that comes from exploring ideas with mentors and peers; the ethics and values that emerge through being apprenticed to a master in your field and living as a member of a campus community. (p. 55)

Whether or not digital learning really opens the possibilities for billions of people, as expressed by Reif, is yet to be proven.

Wise (2010) describes education as being slow to adapt to the new global economy but as having reached "the tipping point," in Gladwell's (2000) parlance. This point is where the momentum for change becomes unstoppable and the world changes. The power of technology is moving education in the direction of online learning and hybrid settings. Using the analogy of steamships' supplanting sailing vessels, Christensen and Horn (2013) believe that traditional college programs are on their hybrid voyage across the ocean, moving to a new form of learning for students. Hybrid learning has become a prevalent delivery method in higher education and workplace settings (Bonk et al., 2006).

Curricular design of online courses that includes academic as well as social-engagement aspects enhances online learning (Chaves, 2009). Some studies have found that hybrid courses are as effective as traditional ones (Mangan, 2012; Young, 2008). Mangan's (2012) study consisted of measuring learning outcomes among 605 students in public universities randomly selected to participate in hybrid or traditional courses. Mangan found that the learning outcomes were the same for both formats. Another study randomly assigned students in six universities to hybrid and traditional course formats and found that the learning outcomes were essentially the same (Bowen, Chingos, Lack, & Nygren, 2013). Students in the hybrid formats performed slightly better in three areas but not significantly better.

One advantage of the online mode for adult learners is that it avoids the intensive three-hour-per-week or all-day Saturday format that can be difficult for students after a long day or week at work (Ebdon, 1999). On the other hand, student discussions happening over several days in an online format (instead of in one on-site session) can create a learning curve for even experienced faculty in deciding when and how to be involved in the discussions (Ebdon, 1999). Patricia Bellanca, director of the hybrid and online campus graduate program in journalism at Harvard University's Division of Continuing Education, offers that the best programs combine the advantages of online and traditional instruction (McCann, n.d.). Other articles question the value of moving to hybrid courses from the traditional classroom setting. Fox (2010) argues that face-to-face conversations in the classroom, between instructor and student and between students themselves, are fundamental to the learning process; notably, Fox believes that such interaction facilitates communication skill that are critical for one's successful future.

Barth (2004) writes that that online learning has a place in public administration programs because mature and motivated students can

learn well in this format. But since good students do well in both traditional and online courses, integrating online components into traditional classroom courses provides the best format for receiving the benefits of both styles of learning. Barth suggests that such hybrid courses may provide the best methods for learning the theory, process, and art of public administration. The process and art components—in which human interaction helps to transmit the very meaning and significance of the subject—can be learned from both the instructor and fellow students in the classroom; while the theory and science of public administration can be conveyed in online modules.

Several studies address the road to success for an online course compared to one offered in the traditional classroom setting. Tomer (2015) suggests that for students to excel in online classes, they get technical (have a reliable computer and Internet connection), have the right attitude (exercise self-discipline), think before they speak—or type (craft thoughtful responses)—and establish a home classroom (designate time and eliminate distractions). “The Top 10 Rules for Developing Your First Online Course” provides instructive aid in the development of an online course (Orlando, 2014). And “7 Assessment Challenges of Moving Your Course Online (and a Dozen+ Solutions)” provides similar constructive advice (Moore, 2013).

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

A 2015 study evaluated student perceptions of online and on-campus courses in a Midwestern university that offers three alternatives in a Master of Public Policy and Administration (MPPA) program: one fully on-campus, one fully online, and one hybrid of eight courses on-campus and four online (Nollenberger, 2015). The MPPA at this university consists mainly of adult midcareer learners, similar to the Midwestern university used in the current research (described below). The data for this study were collected using a 21-question survey, which was developed through analysis of other surveys concerning online, hybrid, and traditional course

TABLE 1.
MPA Student Demographics

Male	44.1%
Female	55.9%
< 30 years old	34.0%
30–50 years old	56.3%
> 50 years old	9.7%
Employed full-time	77.9%
Employed part-time	9.7%
Unemployed	4.8%
Full-time student	5.5%
Retired	2.1%

models (Barth, 2004; Ebdon, 1999; Hannay & Newvine, 2006). The 2015 study and the present study used the same survey questions.

The 2015 study concluded that MPPA students in the Midwestern university selected their course mode of instruction based on their learning style, desire for a home atmosphere, travel-time considerations, and personal flexibility. On-campus students expressed higher positive responses to collaboration, interaction, and communication with their fellow students and the professor. Those who prefer to speak up in class chose the on-campus courses if their personal schedule allowed, while those more comfortable posting on a discussion board chose an online course. The study noted that on-campus courses better met the learning

needs of students than the online courses did; students also deemed the quality of learning to be higher in the on-campus courses.

The 2015 study also noted a limitation: the MPPA program examined did not include any hybrid courses, and so the study lacked data about this format. The current research described below remedies this gap, providing insights into learning outcomes of hybrid courses.

THE CURRENT RESEARCH: METHODS AND RESULTS

The current study surveyed students in a Midwestern university MPA program who were enrolled in one of the 12 courses that had at least one online class session between Fall 2012 and Fall 2014. This MPA program consists

mainly of adult learners who have full-time employment and are pursuing their master's degree for career enhancement. Each course traditionally has consisted of five all-day Saturday class meetings during the semester. Of the 12 courses included in this survey, 6 had one online class session and four on-campus classes, 3 had two online classes and three on-campus ones, 2 had three online classes and two on-campus meetings, and 1 course was fully online. This university initiated hybrid courses in 2012. Students who enrolled in the MPA program in Fall 2012 did so with the understanding that courses would be on campus. The addition of some online classes was new to the course formats. This study was undertaken to assess student response to the new formats. The Institutional Review Board of the university approved the survey. (The Appendix describes the research design and process in detail.)

Table 1 shows the demographics of the MPA student survey respondents.

The largest percentage of respondents were age 30 to 50, which reflects the orientation of the MPA program toward adult learners. Almost all MPA students surveyed were employed full-time or part-time, and a few were unemployed

or retired. Only 5.5% of those surveyed were full-time students.

Tables 2 through 5 (which follow) present detailed survey results.

Preferences for Online versus On-Campus Classes

Table 2 shows respondents' preferences for online versus on-campus classes.

Most students (54%) preferred the classroom setting. Less than half of students preferred the home atmosphere and said that the online class did not fit their style of learning. Student preferences were closer to equally split on whether travel time was a significant factor for them, yet a large majority (79%) also said that the flexible schedule of online classes was a strong factor in their favoring online classes. A regression analysis of survey responses according to student employment status revealed a correlation of .003 significance on the question of flexibility; students employed full-time preferred the flexible schedule of online classes while full-time students did not significantly value this as a factor.

Student responses about the flexible schedule of online classes included the following comments:

TABLE 2.
MPA Student Preferences for Online versus On-Campus Classes

	Agree	Neither	Disagree
I would prefer to be in a home atmosphere (ability to listen to music and take breaks at my discretion) rather than a classroom.	31%	15%	54%
Travel time is a significant factor in my desire for online classes.	47%	15%	38%
The online type of class fits my style of learning.	38%	17%	45%
The flexible schedule for online classes is a factor that I value.	79%	7%	14%

TABLE 3.
MPA Student Perceptions of the Process for Online versus On-Campus Classes

	Agree	Neither	Disagree
The online class was responsive to my learning needs.	68%	15%	17%
The questions posted to respond to in the online class were clear and understandable.	94%	5%	1%
There was good communication with my fellow students on the materials addressed in the material readings in the online class.	87%	7%	6%
The online class setting promoted group collaboration on the readings and case studies assigned for the class.	72%	13%	15%
There was adequate interaction with the professor in the online discussions.	83%	8%	9%
I would prefer more interactive technology for the online class other than just posting on the D2L website.	60%	24%	16%
The postings on the D2L website by students were done on a timely basis over the seven days that the discussion was available.	79%	7%	14%
I feel more comfortable posting on the online discussion board than speaking up in class.	32%	26%	42%

“The flexibility was great.” “I liked the online class because I didn’t have to drive all the way to campus. However, I like the person-to-person interactions in on-campus classes and I feel like I learn significantly more on campus.” “Online classes are such a huge help since I have a commute.” “I have a long commute so the online portion was nice but I learn more and enjoy class more when there is face-to-face interaction.” “I prefer the hybrid, because it worked well with my family life and work schedule.” “I like a mix of in class and online. The online class offers me more time at home.” “I enjoy the hybrid courses due to flexibility in time and the commute.” “I believe a good mix is good because it breaks up the class nicely.”

Perceptions of the Process for Online versus On-Campus Classes

Table 3 shows respondents’ perceptions of the process for online versus on-campus classes.

In response to the statement “The online class was responsive to my learning needs,” 68% of respondents agreed and 17% disagreed. There were similarly high levels of agreement that online discussion board questions were clear and understandable (94%), there was good communication with fellow students (87%), the online format promoted group collaboration (72%), and there was adequate interaction with the professor in the discussions (83%). While 79% of students said that the postings on the discussion board website were done on a timely basis, 60% said they would prefer a more interactive technology. Regarding interaction with others, 32% of students felt more comfortable posting on the discussion board than speaking up in class while 42% did not. A regression analysis of survey responses according to age of the student revealed a correlation of .023 significance on the question of whether the online format promoted group collabor-

ation; students aged 30 to 50 felt there was more group collaboration than the other age groups did.

Comments made by survey respondents supported the survey results: “While I enjoy the convenience of online class, I really enjoy in-class discussion.” “Online class discussion allows for a deeper level of discussion since people can take time to think about, research and edit their contributions. In class, the only option is to speak off the cuff. However, the direct interaction between professor and classmates has benefits as well, which is why I think a mix of online and in class is both a convenient and effective instruction model.” “I prefer a hybrid course. I think the networking and face-to-face conversations are of greater value than the online [format] alone.” “I prefer a hybrid because I value the professor’s expertise and

lectures and we get less of that online—unless technology improved to have a virtual lecture.” “The on-campus/online version provides the best of both worlds. Having a complete online format takes out the human interactions that would harm student learning in the classroom.” “I really like the option to have 1 or 2 online classes. I would rather feel comfortable posting online than having to get up in class to present. That is just me. I would rather come to class to learn. I learn better that way.” “I like being able to get to know other students, network and build relationships.”

Perceptions of Outcomes of Online versus On-Campus Classes

Table 4 shows respondents’ perceptions of the outcomes of online versus on-campus classes, in addition to thoughts on other elements.

TABLE 4.
MPA Student Perceptions of Outcomes of Online versus On-Campus Classes

	More	Same	Less
How would you compare the quality of learning in the online class compared to the traditional in-class setting?	11%	53%	36%
Did you spend more or less time in total (readings, commute, responses online) for the online class than an on-campus alternative?	15%	49%	36%

	Yes	No	Unsure
Should the professor provide a lecture that is captured and posted on the D2L website for student observation?	49%	19%	32%

	Clear	Not clear	
Is the communication about the expectations of the online class clear?	93%	7%	

	Increase	Decrease	Neither
Does the online class increase, decrease, or neither increase or decrease the motivation to read and analyze the materials assigned?	34%	15%	51%

TABLE 5.
MPA Student Preferences for Type of Course

	All online	Hybrid	All on-campus
Which of the following do you favor?	1%	72%	27%

Regarding the quality of learning in online classes, 53% of respondents thought it was the same as on-campus classes, 36% said it was less, and only 11% said it was more. Concerning the amount of time needed to do the work in online classes, 49% students said they spent the same amount of time as in on-campus classes, 36% said they spent less time, and only 15% said they spent more time. More students (49%) thought there should be a lecture by the professor posted on the website than those who thought there should not be an online lecture (19%). The online lecture would be a presentation similar to a regular class-period presentation. A regression analysis of survey responses according to number of online classes revealed a correlation of .000 significance on the question of amount of time spent; a larger percentage of students in the one fully online course felt that they spent more time than in an on-campus setting. Since there was just one course of this type and eight respondents, the results are neither comprehensive nor conclusive.

Concerning the question of whether there should be an online lecture for the online classes, a common theme emerged in student comments: "I miss getting the perspective of my professor when we have a hybrid course. I found most of the professors to have interesting lectures." "The professor's lectures are focused, provide practical examples and baseline information for the course—which help with the online discussion/interactions." "This allows for some 'interaction' by way of ensuring the students understand what the instructor considers the most important issues to understand."

"It would be helpful to those who are unable to attend class." "It would add one of the key advantages of an on campus class to on line."

Almost all students (93%) said that the expectation for the online class format was clearly communicated to the students. About half (51%) felt the class neither increased nor decreased their motivation to read and analyze the assigned materials, while about one third (34%) said the online class increased their motivation. One student commented on the usefulness of online versus on-campus components: "I think that some courses need to be entirely in person (example—Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis, Budgeting and Finance) but I really was thankful that some of the courses were hybrid."

Preferences for Type of Course

Table 5 shows respondents' preferences for type of course.

Concerning student preference for fully online, hybrid, or fully on-campus courses, 72% of respondents expressed a preference for the hybrid format, 27% would prefer all on-campus, and only 1% preferred all-online courses. Cross-tabulating type of course format with age of student, employment status, and gender showed no relationships of significance. The desire for hybrid courses among these MPA students was similar that found in other research, as noted earlier in this article. "I like the mix of online and in-class," said one student. "It's good to see the professor and classmates." Another said, "I have a long commute but I chose this university as I did not want to attend an all-online program. I believe there is great value in on-campus classes [for] at least some of the classes in a course."

A regression analysis was done of the survey responses according to number of classes in the course that were online. The three questions relating to time spent, motivation to read course materials, and type of format preferred were significantly related at .000 (time spent), .041 (motivation to read course materials), and .009 (type of format) to the number of online classes in the course. As the number of online classes increased from one to fully online, the percentage of students who felt they spent more time on the course increased. Similarly, the motivation to read materials also increased as the number of online classes increased. As the number of online sessions increased to three and five classes, student preference for hybrid courses and all-online courses decreased. That is consistent with the student comments, quoted above, that express a preference for some online classes but still highly value on-campus classes.

DISCUSSION

The flexible schedule for the online classes was clearly a significant reason that students favored that mode of learning. As shown in previous research, the flexibility of online classes is an important feature for adult learners in today's work and family life world (Hannay & Newvine, 2006; Reif, 2013).

Students' different learning styles affected the desire for online or on-campus classes: 32% of respondents felt more comfortable posting in the online class while 42% felt more comfortable speaking up in class. There was a slightly stronger feeling that an online lecture would enhance the online class experience. Fewer students (36%) reported that the quality of learning in online classes was less than in face-to-face instruction; 53% said the quality of learning was about the same. An online lecture is one tool that may help to improve the quality of online learning.

Students were divided on desiring a hybrid of online and on-campus courses or fully on-campus courses: 72% preferred the hybrid format, 27% preferred the on-campus format, and only 1% preferred a fully online format.

Hybrid courses in MPA programs can satisfy the needs of students to learn the theory, process, and art of public administration using a mix of face-to-face and online classes (Barth, 2004). But parts of MPA programs are best transmitted face-to-face (Reif, 2013). Students' comments reflected the need for some courses to be taught on campus while others could be hybrid courses or online courses. Interpersonal skills are best learned in the on-campus classes (Denhardt, 2004).

CONCLUSION

Students surveyed in this Midwestern university's MPA program have a strong desire for on-campus courses, but the majority of them desire the hybrid format. While flexibility of the format is a factor, other elements of hybrid courses prove significant: 42% felt more comfortable speaking up in class than posting online, but 32% felt more comfortable using the online discussion board (26% had no preference). The online format provides the opportunity for typically quiet students to engage in conversations, to all participants' benefit. Students commented that, in the online discussions, they liked hearing from their classmates who never speak up in class, hearing their perspectives.

Student assessment of the quality of learning in the different formats indicated that 53% felt it was the same for online, on-campus, and hybrid formats; 36% felt that online learning was less; and 11% felt that online learning was greater. Many expressed their desire for the on-campus format, to gain from the professor's expertise and face-to-face conversations with fellow students. Others thought that online format allowed for a deeper level of discussion, since students could take time to think and research before commenting. Given student desire for professor lectures that provide examples and baseline course information, posting such lectures (even short ones) could enhance the online format.

These are significant findings for on-campus master's programs that enroll nontraditional students (i.e., adult learners, part-time students,

etc.) and bears considering for future offerings. The Midwestern university MPA program in this research has already expanded its hybrid course offerings as a result. Students in the study expressed higher positive responses to collaboration, interaction, and communication with their fellow students and the professor. Those who preferred to speak up in class chose on-campus courses if their personal schedule allowed, while those more comfortable posting on a discussion board chose hybrid courses. Online courses met student learning needs, but other factors led students to prefer the hybrid format. The hybrid mode combined the best aspects of on-campus and online courses in terms of student learning outcomes, which is supported by literature reviewed earlier in this article (Means et al., 2013; McCann 2015; Reif 2013).

Other universities that offer courses to adult learners in many fields, including public administration, can learn from this study. If an institution's student population is mainly adult learners who are employed full-time, then the university or program should consider student desire for flexibility in the online class schedule as well as potential student preferences for various learning modes. The institution should also likely develop more interactive technology in its online classes. In short, the hybrid format is an increasingly popular mode of learning for universities to consider.

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APPENDIX

Research Design

INSTRUMENT

Study data were collected using a 21-question survey. The same survey was used as in previous research at another Midwestern university.

The first four survey questions addressed respondents' preferences for online versus on-campus classes: being in a home atmosphere, travel time, style of learning, and flexibility of schedule. The next eight questions addressed respondents' perceptions of the process of online versus on-campus classes: responsiveness to learning needs, clarity of questions, communication with fellow students, group collaboration, interaction with the professor, desire for more interactive technology, postings done on a timely basis, and comfort with posting online or speaking up in class. The next five questions addressed respondents' perceptions of the outcomes of online versus on-campus classes: quality of learning, total time spent for the class, need for an online professor lecture, communication about expectations, and student motivation to read and analyze materials. The type of course format preferred—all online, all on-campus, or hybrid—was another question asked of respondents. The final three questions accumulated demographic information on the respondents: gender, year of birth, and employment status. Respondents were given an opportunity to provide additional comments about online and on-campus alternatives.

In the analysis, for the first 12 questions in the first two sections of the survey, responses were narrowed down to three responses: Agree (strongly agree and somewhat agree), Neither (neither agree or disagree), and Disagree (somewhat disagree and strongly disagree). In the rest of the questions, responses were narrowed down to two or three categories as shown in Tables 4 and 5.

DATA COLLECTION

The MPA program surveyed consists primarily of adult learners. The program traditionally has offered fully on-campus courses and in recent years has adopted some hybrid-format courses (online plus on-campus) as well as one fully online course. The survey was administered in the classroom on the final class of the course, except for in the fully online course; in that case, the survey was administered via an e-mail to students, giving them a link to the survey on Qualtrics. A total of 149 students responded to the survey request, around an 85% response rate.

DATA ANALYSIS

The survey data were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software. Descriptive statistics for responses were accumulated from a database of answers to all questions from all respondent surveys. Cross-tabulations were also undertaken for some responses as described in the analysis of responses, in the article. Regression analyses were also performed to relate responses to demographic data and number of classes on-campus and online.