

Student Feedback on Online Summer Courses

October 8, 2015

Santa Clara University Office of Assessment Report

Introduction

In the summer of 2015, approximately 700 undergraduate students were enrolled in online summer courses at SCU. The Office of Assessment developed a survey that was sent to students after completion of the summer sessions asking for feedback on different components of the online course they took and their motivations for taking online courses. Many of the items were taken or adapted from The Blended Learning Student Survey by Long Island University and The Blended Learning Toolkit, a project of the University of Central Florida (UCF) and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) with funding from the Next Generation Learning Challenges (NGLC)). Responses were received from 147 students. This report summarizes the survey results.

Affiliation of students

While SCU summer school is open to students from other institutions, 97% of the students who took an online class were full-time SCU students. The majority of students (61%) were taking only one online class at SCU this summer, 27% were taking two, and 12% were taking three or more online classes. Most students (71%) who took an online class had never taken one for credit before; 14% of students had taken one, 8% of students had taken three, 2% of students had taken three, and 5% of students had taken four or more online classes for credit in the past. Of the students who took the survey, 27% were rising sophomores, 27% were rising juniors, and 46% were rising seniors.

Quantitative results: Students' experiences with online learning

We asked students about their interactions with others in the online environment, ways in which the course components facilitated learning, and their overall perceptions of the course. Students were asked to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with statements within each of these themes on a five-point scale. They had the opportunity to check "N/A" if a certain component (e.g., online testing) was not included in their course. The results show that students generally responded very positively about the components of the course. They also reveal that a number of students felt more could be done to improve communication or interaction in the course, effectiveness of online lectures, and online testing (when used).

Student perceptions of online courses (in percents)

	Strongly Disagree/ Disagree	Neither Disagree nor Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Interaction/Communication				
I was able to share ideas with other students on a regular basis	11%	14%	40%	35%
Sharing and discussion in the online environment worked well	9%	9%	44%	38%
The course offered ample opportunities for interaction and communication from student to student	9%	15%	47%	29%
The course offered ample opportunities for interaction and communication from student to instructor	6%	18%	39%	37%
The course offered ample opportunities for interaction and communication from instructor to student	7%	15%	38%	40%
The technology used in this class allowed me to participate at least as fully as I would have done in a classroom-only class	13%	18%	39%	30%
Learning				
I clearly understood the components and structure of the course	6%	9%	48%	37%
Online learning modules helped me understand the course material	7%	11%	45%	37%
Online testing was a good way to evaluate my understanding of the material	12%	26%	40%	22%
Watching recorded lectures helped my understanding of the material in this course	12%	22%	40%	26%
General satisfaction				
I would take another online course at SCU in the future	9%	14%	35%	42%
I would recommend taking online courses to a friend	8%	13%	36%	43%
Overall, I am satisfied with this online course	9%	8%	39%	44%
The time I spent online would have been better spent in a face-to-face class	29%	35%	20%	16%

Students were also asked about the helpfulness of certain elements of their online course for their learning. Their responses reinforce some of the data presented above and the importance of the ability to work at one’s own pace in the online experience.

Student perceptions of helpfulness of elements of online course (in percents)

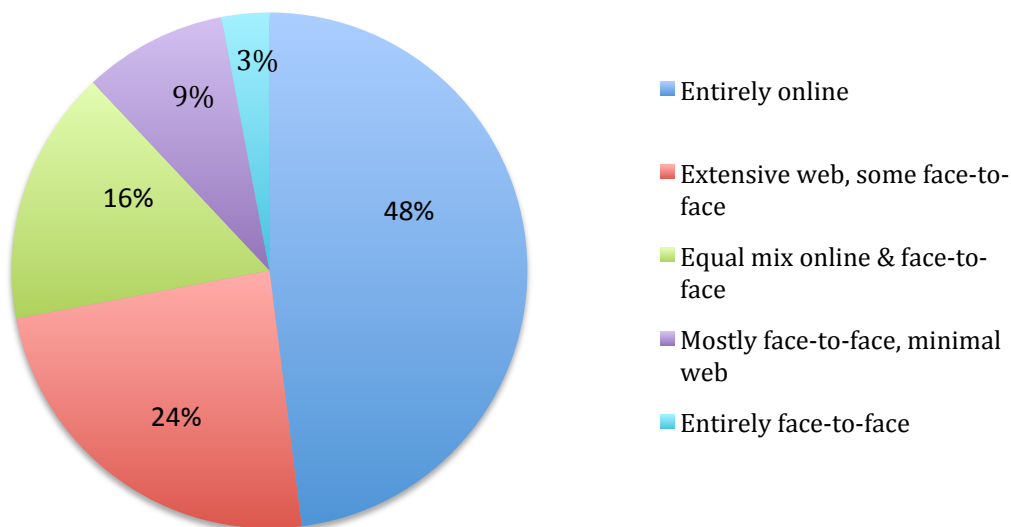
	Not at all helpful/ slightly helpful	Moderately helpful	Very helpful	Extremely helpful
Interaction/Communication				
Online interaction with students (e.g., discussion board, chats, e-mails)	22%	30%	29%	19%
Online interaction with faculty (e.g., discussion board, chats, e-mails)	16%	22%	33%	29%
Learning				
Online material (e.g., demonstrations, videos and simulations, links to relevant websites)	8%	18%	37%	37%
Ability to review online presentations multiple times	6%	17%	25%	52%
Online examinations	19%	22%	32%	27%
Flexibility				
Ability to work at my own pace	6%	20%	25%	49%
Flexibility of being able to complete assignments any place/ any time	7%	10%	26%	57%

When teaching online, it can be especially important to schedule in opportunities for students to provide feedback on the course materials. Students were asked whether they had such opportunities to give the instructor feedback. Twenty-five percent said that they were not given that opportunity, 46% said that they had one or two opportunities to give feedback, and 29% said they were given a number of opportunities to give feedback.

Preferences for online/hybrid formats

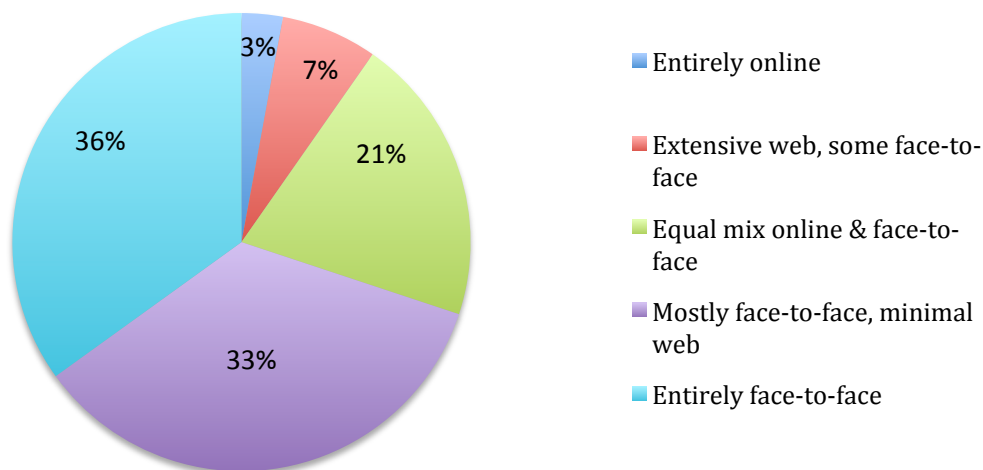
We wanted to learn more about students’ preferences for online/hybrid courses or face-to-face courses in general. Students were asked first which class format they preferred for courses taken during the summer. As the chart below indicates most prefer entirely online or a predominantly online course with some face-to-face contact.

Preference for class format in summer



Students responded differently when asked about which class format they preferred for courses taken during the regular school year, showing a much stronger preference for entirely or predominantly face-to-face courses.

Preference for class format in regular school year



Students were also asked about their interest in taking a class during the regular academic year that blended online learning with face-to-face instruction (meeting, for example one day a week face-to-face and the other day online). Just over a third (38%) of students said they would be very interested in this, 34% said that they would be somewhat interested, 15% were not very interested or not interested at all, and 13% stated that they were unsure.

Open-ended Results

Open-ended questions were included in the survey providing students the opportunity to expand upon their experiences. Student responses to the open-ended questions were examined and the results are presented in the following sections.

Why students take online courses

One of the open-ended questions asked students *why* they chose to take an online class. Over half (n=92) of the students stated that a key reason was to fulfill a requirement either for their major or the university core. A number of students (n=17) said that taking an online class would allow them to graduate either on time or early. Similarly, 23 students took an online class to accommodate or increase the flexibility of their class schedule during the school year. The time flexibility of online classes and students' ability to take a class while away from campus or working were important factors for 22 students. The professor or the class material itself was of specific interest to 13 students. Additional reasons for taking an online class included strengthening transfer applications and improving GPA.

What was especially effective?

The students were also asked what was particularly effective in the online class. Of the students who responded, there were 15 comments praising the professors and their management of the class, with one student commenting that their professor "was very attentive and responded to our questions almost immediately." Another remarked, "Instructor was amazing and she organized the class very effectively." The availability of the professor and the professor's ability to engage with students was something many identified as one of the most effective elements, citing: "teacher feedback," "availability of the professor," "teacher got everyone to participate."

In addition, there were 28 comments noting that the lectures and other class materials provided by the professor were valuable, and 23 that mentioned the organization of the class and website. One student noted, "I liked having all the materials and assignments, etc. gathered in one place. I could look at the module for the week and know everything that was expected of me with no surprises. I did not have to shuffle between different papers/websites/my memory in order to complete assignments." And for one student, "Recorded lectures worked well because I could multi-task, and then when really important bits came up, I could replay them."

The flexibility of online courses and the opportunity for students to work at their own pace and schedule was mentioned in 30 comments. One student noted, “I like to learn at a rapid pace and this let me go through the materials quickly.” Another appreciated the timing of assignments over weekends since it allowed more time to work on them.

The discussion and communication among peers was a particularly effective element (receiving 34 mentions). One observed, “The discussions were effective because I don’t participate as much in a classroom setting.” Another pointed to the benefits of peer-to-peer learning through discussion, “The discussion forums and being able to read other students’ work to gain a better understanding of the material.” Many found discussion forums “mimicked a face-to-face discussion very well” and appreciated discussion boards for review and preparation for assignments.

What was less effective?

When asked what was less effective in their online course, the most common response was limited communication with both the professor and other classmates, with 42 comments mentioning this as a weakness in the online class. One student pointed out that “online discussions were hard to participate in fully because most students would wait until the last minute to post.” Another commented, “I would have liked to put a name to a face, but since it was fully online I never had the opportunity to meet my classmates.” And another student wrote, “Despite the frequent discussions, there was no real sense of community either among the students or between the instructor and the students.” Several students mentioned the challenges of coordinating a group project online.

In addition, there were a number of comments (n=14) about the difficulty in getting clarity for assignment instructions and deadlines. For example, one noted, “The due dates were a bit sporadic and things were not posted far enough in advance for me to complete them ahead of time as I would have preferred.” And several others noted the challenges in following up on questions they had about assignments in a timely way, “I’d often have to wait awhile to get clarification about assignments from the professor.”

Finally, 26 comments addressed lectures or other class materials provided by the professor or the methods of testing. One student commented, “The professor didn’t give as many audio lectures as I thought she would. It was a very self-taught class.” Or, “no online lectures, not much communication with professor until after assignment is turned in.” A couple of students asked for longer lectures and others for fewer readings. While one student wrote “there was not enough testing,” another wrote that “the testing does not really test students’ ability.”

Would students have preferred to take their course as a face-to-face course?

Students were also asked if they would have preferred to take their class in a face-to-face setting, rather than online. The majority of students (n=81) stated that they preferred the online format. Of these students, 14 mentioned that this was particularly true in the

summer because of the flexibility offered by online classes. However, there were many students (40) who responded that they would have preferred taking it as a face-to-face class. Of these, 14 felt they would have had better communication among themselves, their classmates, and their professor. One student mentioned that in a face-to-face class “there is more space to explain complex analysis, and everybody is on the same page.” Finally, 10 students said it didn’t matter to them whether the course was online or face-to-face.

Conclusion

Of the students who responded to the survey, most reported being satisfied with their experiences in their online courses. Additionally, the survey results affirm that summer courses fill a valuable role in affording many students more flexibility and opportunity in achieving their goals toward completing their academic programs and the Core curriculum.

The faculty member’s work and preparation involved in transforming a face-to-face course into an effective online course is clearly an essential piece of the students’ positive experiences. Students expressed appreciation for a well-organized course that allowed them to find course materials easily and know what to anticipate in readings, assignments, exams, and participation throughout the five-week course time frame. Opportunities for timely communication with faculty are especially important to clarify questions about assignments or readings, and for students to receive feedback on their work. Students also appreciate learning with and from peers through discussion forums and opportunities for peer feedback, although in some classes, this was less successfully implemented. This area, as well as the effectiveness of some of the online lectures and testing, seem to be the biggest areas for SCU to target development and improvement opportunities.

Student comments help us see that the faculty member plays an instrumental role in creating an environment that helps establish a sense of community and engaged learning, even in an online environment. As the University considers ways to further support faculty who have redesigned courses for online or hybrid teaching, one possibility might involve the creation of groups or networks of faculty teaching online courses. Such groups or networks may offer each other valuable ideas about how to manage the communication flow between themselves and students, how to design and manage discussion boards to elicit engaging discussions, and how to construct online course elements, including the overall course design and online lectures. The Academic Technology office and the Faculty Development program may be able to facilitate such faculty networks or groups, at the same time that both offices continue to offer support through programming and staff assistance (ITRS) in these areas as well.