



STUDENT LEARNING PREFERENCES: TRADITIONAL VERSUS ONLINE COURSE DELIVERY

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Abstract

College enrollment has continued to decline; therefore, understanding student preferences is key for institutes of higher learning to continue to attract new students. Digital transformation and understanding student learning preferences between traditional face-to-face courses and online course delivery has become increasingly vital for business education. As institutions of higher learning prepare graduates for a rapidly evolving marketplace, identifying the pedagogical conditions that optimize engagement, retention, and skill development is essential. This study investigates student preferences between traditional face-to-face instruction and online learning modalities within undergraduate business programs. All students that participated in this study have experience with online learning, due to the COVID 19 pandemic. This study was able to measure student preferences between traditional face-to-face courses and online courses. Undergraduate students in the School of Business at Hampton University were surveyed to determine their preferred method of instruction. The sample size for the study was N = 78. Results indicated that though students believed they would earn a better grade in an online course, they preferred the traditional face-to-face course delivery method. Moreover, the results further indicated that there is also a trending interest towards a hybrid model of instruction. Findings suggest that a hybrid instructional model, which includes the strengths of the traditional face-to-face classroom along with the flexibility of online learning, offers an effective approach for business education. Integration of the hybrid instructional model provides the skills necessary for future business leaders.

Keywords

In-person Instruction, Online Education, Hybrid Learning, Course Modality, Online Learning, Face-to-Face Learning

Introduction

An ongoing debate exists over traditional versus online learning. While traditional learning involves face-to-face instruction in a physical classroom, online learning involves instruction delivered over the internet through various digital platforms and tools. Proponents of traditional learning argue that it provides a more immersive and interactive learning experience, where students can engage with their peers and instructors in real-time, ask questions, receive immediate feedback, and participate in group activities (Forde C et al., 2024). They also believe that traditional learning fosters a sense of community and socialization, which is important for students' personal and social development. Supporters of online learning argue that it offers greater flexibility, convenience, and accessibility for students who may have other commitments or live in remote areas (Xiong, Y et al., 2024). They also point out that online learning provides access to a wider range of educational resources, such as online libraries and databases, as well as the ability to learn at their own pace. Both traditional and online learning have their own advantages and disadvantages, as the debate between the two continues. However, it's worth noting that many educational institutions have adopted a

blended approach that combines both traditional and online learning to offer a more comprehensive and flexible learning experience. In this study, the Hampton University Management Department revisits a previous study on online learning to better understand the current climate and perceptions of online learning. The remainder of this paper discusses the Management department's experience with online learning and student experience with the current online learning options available to them.

Literature Review

According to Simon, Jackson and Maxwell, 2013, "traditional classroom teaching focuses on a number of elements where learning is conducted in a synchronous environment. The instructor and the students must be in the same place at the same time in order to derive motivation and instruction from the teacher as well as from the other students." This has been a customary teaching method used for many years because "sharing one's own ideas and responding to others' reactions improves critical thinking and deepens understanding" (Chickering & Gamson, 1987, p.76). This type of environment lends itself to personalized instruction. Teaching online focuses on a number of elements that can be synchronous, asynchronous, or a mixture of the two, which is known as a hybrid approach (Larson & Sung, 2009).

Various technologies such as multimedia, video streaming, virtual classroom, collaboration and e-mail are employed to provide a comprehensive learning experience. As this type of education has evolved studies have explored issues of differences in learning between traditional and non-traditional students and the demand for the virtual learning environment. Online learning has experienced continued growth over the past 15 years which has been driven by several factors such as advancements in technology, increased internet accessibility, the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on traditional education, and the demand for flexible learning options (Akpen, C. N., et al. (2024).

Rapid advancements in technology have enabled the development of sophisticated online learning platforms, interactive multimedia content, and communication tools. These advancements have made online learning more engaging and effective, attracting more learners to embrace digital education. The increasing availability of high-speed internet in both urban and rural areas is now expanding the reach of online learning (Gelles-Watnick, R. (2024). Students from remote locations and underserved communities can now access educational resources that were previously inaccessible. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic led to widespread disruptions in traditional education systems worldwide. Educational institutions were forced to pivot quickly to online learning to ensure continuity in education. This abrupt shift accelerated the adoption of online learning across all education levels because online learning offers students the flexibility to learn at their own pace and on their schedule (Xintong Han, et al. (2025). This aspect has been particularly appealing to working professionals, parents, and individuals with other commitments who seek to enhance their skills or pursue higher education while managing their busy lives.

Online Versus Traditional Course Delivery

Some studies have found that there is no significant difference in the effectiveness of online learning and face-to-face learning, (Bright & Volger. 2024). Others have found that face-to-face learning is more effective (Photopoulos, 2022). However, many studies have found that online learning can be an effective way to learn. Past research has shown that online learners did not show any major differences between traditional learners and learners in an online environment Spiceland and Hawkins (2002). Another study performed by Larson and Sung confirmed these findings in (2009) and in 2018, Soffer and Nachmias concur that online learning can be a suitable alternative to face-to-face courses.

Blended Learning

Blended learning, also referred to as hybrid learning, combines online education with traditional education (Finlay, et al., 2022). This method of course delivery was designed to provide an environment where the learners can study regardless of time and place restrictions according to their learning speed. Learners who have difficulty in establishing communication in the classroom environment may find it easier to communicate through an electronic platform. McCampbell (2001) emphasizes that blended learning is a suitable approach for incorporating online applications into an existent course program for the first time. Ayu (2022) concurs emphasizing the importance of providing an equilibrium between face-to-face education and online environments and the use of various instructional tools, allowing students to incorporate modern communication and collaboration techniques while providing access to an increasing body of knowledge electronically.

Since the hybrid classroom incorporates characteristics of both the traditional and online classroom settings, learning can occur synchronously or asynchronously. Teachers can determine what aspects of the course are best suited to online material and delivery and online material can be viewed as an extension of the classroom as necessary. Students receiving a blended learning experience receive face-to-face interaction with faculty and students while being exposed to web-based learning instructional materials simultaneously. Many programs are taking an interest in blended courses because this approach aims to leverage elements of both online and face-to-face instruction to enhance the learning experience. It is important to note that with overcoming the “faceless classroom” Swan (2001) and embracing that the “faceless teacher” Kaur (2020) is becoming the new normal, therefore it is important to understand that adapting to student-centered teaching, managing time and techniques, and establishing the learning community are all challenges that plague the online learning environment. To ensure the satisfaction of students in online environments, instructors need to be sure to pay great attention to these obstacles.

Blended learning has become more widely used since the COVID-19 pandemic. With the shift to remote learning, many educational institutions have adopted a blended learning approach that combines both online and in-person instruction (Hart, et al., 2025). Blended learning allows for greater flexibility and customization in the delivery of educational content, as well as the ability to adapt to changing circumstances such as school closures or restrictions on in-person gatherings.

Prior to the pandemic, blended learning was gaining popularity to enhance student learning outcomes and engagement. However, the pandemic has accelerated the adoption of blended learning, with many schools and universities using online learning platforms and tools to supplement in-person instruction (Hart et al., 2025). Blended learning has also allowed educators to provide more individualized attention and support to students, as well as greater opportunities for collaboration and interaction with peers. However, preparation will be key to provide a meaningful and engaging course. This means that professors will need to be able to use technology effectively, include the use of computers, tablets, and smartphones to deliver instruction, assess student learning, and communicate with students and parents (Meng, et al., 2024). Professors will also need to be familiar with both teaching methods and be able to adapt their teaching to the needs of their students.

Methodology and Results

This quantitative study examines the student preference in undergraduate course delivery between online and face-to-face. Students from the Hampton University School of Business from various majors participated in a survey distributed via Survey Monkey to determine their course delivery preference, in addition to other factors that contributed to their preference between online and face-to-face delivery of courses.

To explore the preference of the preferred modality of students in the Hampton University School of Business, a study was conducted. Students were provided with the opportunity to respond to a survey distributed by the instructors in various courses taught in the School of Business. Seventy-eight students responded to the survey (N=78). Table 1 provides the results of the responses of the students to the survey.

Questions	Reply	Responses	Responses %
Q1. I am comfortable learning new technologies.	Yes	78	100.00%
	No	0	0.00%
Q2. I am comfortable using online discussion forums, submission features, and navigation tools.	TRUE	77	98.72%
	FALSE	1	1.28%
Q3. Do you prefer online or in person courses?	Online	30	38.46%
	In person	48	61.54%
Q4. How much time do you feel is the minimum amount of time necessary to be successful in an online class?	2 Hours per week	11	14.10%
	5 Hours per week	55	70.51%
	10 Hours per week	12	15.38%
	More than 10 hours per week	0	0.00%
Q5. How much time do you feel is the minimum amount of time necessary to be successful in an in person class?	2 Hours per week	24	30.77%
	5 Hours per week	32	41.03%
	10 Hours per week	15	19.23%
	More than 10 hours per week	7	8.97%

Q6. Do you think you will earn a better grade in an online course compared to an in person course?	Yes	63	80.77%
	No	15	19.23%
Q7. I am a student who can problem-solve and work independently.	Yes	77	98.72%
	No	1	1.28%

Note. Students enrolled in School of Business courses were asked to take a survey on the last day of class. This table shows the average response for each question in the survey.

One hundred percent of all of the students replied that they were comfortable learning new technologies. Hampton University requires all students successfully complete a computer literacy course. In addition, students are required to use Canvas, the University online platform to access course information and the electronic gradebook.

Almost sixty-two percent of the students surveyed preferred face-to-face courses. Though almost 81% of the students stated they felt they would earn a better grade in an online course face-to-face courses were still the preference of the majority of the students. Almost 39%, which is a significant number of students, preferred online courses; however, over 61 percent preferred face-to-face courses.

The majority of students, over 70% believed the minimum amount of time required for success in an online class was five hours per week. Fourteen percent believed two hours per week would be enough time to be successful in the course. However, 15% of the students believed 10 hours per week would be required for success.

Students felt the minimum time required for a face-to-face course differed significantly from an online course. Almost 30 percent of students felt only two hours per week were required to be successful in a face-to-face. Forty-one percent of the student believed five hours per week were required for success. Almost 20% believed that ten hours per week is required, while almost 9% believed more than ten hours are required for success. No student believed more than ten hours per week would be required for success in an online course.

Conclusions & Future Studies

The majority of students (61.5%) still preferred in-person instruction, with only 38.5% indicating a preference for online courses. Although 80.8% of students believed they would earn better grades in an online course, most preferred in-person. Over 70% believed that at least five hours per week were needed to be successful in an online class, compared to just 41% who thought the same for in-person courses. Almost all students (98.7%) considered themselves independent problem-solvers, indicating strong self-efficacy and confidence in managing their own learning. Taken together, students appear well equipped for digital learning but still prefer the human and collaborative elements of a traditional education environment.

The pedagogy and pace of in-person instruction are more deliberate and intense than online courses. This can cause the perception that a better grade can be earned in an online course than an in-person course. Though 80.8% of students believed they would earn better grades in an online course, even most preferred in-person; however, the majority of students (61.5%) still preferred in-person instruction, with only 38.5% indicating a preference for online courses. Moreover, all participants indicated that they were comfortable learning new technologies, and nearly all (98.7%) reported confidence in using online discussion forums, submission features, and navigation tools. Notwithstanding, the online course experience, according to the students and to the associated literature underpinnings, required less work or attention per week than in-person settings, as the percentages in questions 4 and 5 depict. It can be argued that online courses require a major investment in both time and resources at the start of the course; however, the learning curve picks up momentum as the semester moves forward, unlike in an in-person instructional environment that constantly requires students to adapt more frequently to the changing pedagogy or approach of the instructor.

Online course experiences have more of a standardized approach to learning, especially when it comes to utilizing and employing new technologies, which again have an initial steep s-curve to commence, but as the semester moves forward, the ease with which students use said technologies becomes less and less arduous or challenging. Again, nearly all students (98.7%) reported confidence in using online discussion forums, submission features, and navigation tools. Albeit, these integrated perspectives above further indicate that a hybrid learning environment may lead to better and improved complimentary learning outcomes than just using one approach or another different approach – (i.e., online or in-class, but rather a mixture of these two approaches, which would be a hybrid approach.)

Another interesting pattern emerging from these survey results is the following observation: with 80.8% of students believing they would earn better grades in an online course, even though most preferred in-person and with over 70% believing that at least five hours per week were needed to be successful in an online class, compared to just 41% who thought the same for in-person courses; and with nearly all (98.7%) reported confidence in using online discussion forums, submission features, and navigation tools.

All these ‘resilient’ indicators subsequently fully and further support the notion by the students that they consider themselves independent problem-solvers. This indicates strong self-reliance, self-efficacy, and confidence in managing their own learning, which the online course experience may espouse continuously. But again, the students still felt that this emerging notion needed to be tempered by a heavier workload when attending in person and hence requiring additional time and resources. This outlook altogether indicates that a hybrid learning experience is the preferred approach moving forward. Likewise, this emerging trend in a hybrid learning experience is the subject of a subsequent research project currently underway at Hampton University’s School of Business.

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