

What Online College Students Say About Online Instructors and What do Online Faculty Members Say About Online Instruction: A Comparison of Attitudes

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Abstract

The past decade has witnessed an explosion in online learning opportunities for post-secondary students throughout the United States. Park University has developed a Faculty Online Observation (FOO) model to allow for an annual observation of online adjunct faculty with a focus on five major areas of facilitation. To test the effectiveness and support of the Faculty Online Observation system a survey related to the observation areas was provided to online faculty members and online students. The results determined a number of areas of agreement between the group, as well as statistically significant non-agreement. The findings will provide valuable information for training and future professional development needs of online instructors, and processes of teaching based on perspectives of instructors, course developers, students, and discipline managers.

Introduction

The past decade has witnessed an explosion in online learning opportunities for post-secondary students throughout the United States. This boon of availability and convenience for students (and instructors) has been coupled with the bane of administrative and procedural concerns for higher learning institutions. To ensure that quality instruction occurs in online learning modes, online observation mechanisms and

policies are needed for particular institutions and the educational research realm. To determine a current position on this objective, a survey asked online college students to indicate the level of agreement or importance that they placed on a number of specific areas related to the online classroom, more specifically, areas concerning the facilitation and responsiveness of online instructors. Likewise, online instructors were asked to indicate their level of agreement and level of importance on a number of items within specific areas related to the observation and evaluation of the online classroom.

Based upon policies and observation processes established by faculty administrators, the research sought the opinions of students and faculty about their online learning classrooms and instructor facilitation. Students were generally supportive of online learning; however, they were not in total agreement with priorities placed on various portions of the online classroom. That is, there were certain areas that were considered critical and very important by these students. Faculty members also have items which they deemed very important. Agreement among these groups (administrators, students, faculty) was hypothesized to be the same items of equal importance; however, the responses to the survey indicated that there are points of agreement among course administrators, faculty, and students and points of disagreement on course priorities. The points of disagreement will be important areas for future discussion, training, and policy decisions concerning course facilitation and measures of observation and evaluation.

Literature Review

The rapid and continued growth of distance learning has established an important role in educational programs worldwide. Distance education has a long and storied history with

the first distance education offerings emerging over one hundred years ago in the form of correspondence courses and low-tech media (Holmberg, 1977; Matthews, 1999). While not online or steeped in technology, early distance education sought to provide opportunities for diverse and dispersed populations. Over the past decade, most colleges and universities in the United States have experienced a dramatic increase in the growth and popularity of online degree programs. According to research conducted by the Sloan Consortium, distance learning is growing rapidly with 83% of higher education institutions offering some form of distance learning (Allen & Seaman, 2008). The online learning process continues to improve the linkage of pedagogy, technology, and learner needs in an effort to satisfy the growing demands of varied students in the online classroom (Kim, Bonk, & Zeng, 2005).

Previous academic research has studied online learning and has examined the opinions of university faculty and administrators (Berg, 2001; Graham et al, 2000; Mandernach, et al., 2005). To meet the demand of students within its established campus center system, Park University relied heavily on an adjunct faculty pool. As the online course offerings grew, many of these adjuncts taught online courses as needed. Recognizing a need to properly assess the facilitation of online instructors, the Park University College for Distance Learning created a proprietary instrument called the Online Instructor Evaluation System (OIES). The OIES developed out of a comprehensive review of the literature on benchmarks and best practices of online pedagogy (for more detailed information on these standards, see; Berg, 2001, Graham et al., 2000; Finch & Montambeau, 2000; Mandernach, et al., 2005; Reeves, 1997; Tobin, 2004; Avery, et al, 2006). The first incarnation of the OIES was piloted in Fall, 2004. The OIES was

utilized as the sole online adjunct instructor evaluation mechanism at the institution from 2004 through 2008. The OIES strengths were its robust evaluation/mentoring process which paired an online evaluator with an online adjunct for an entire term. It became evident that although it was very complete and functional, the OIES was very labor and manpower intensive. Not having limitless resources and personnel, Park University's College for Distance Learning sought a more streamlined process which still adhered to institutional needs and research guidelines.

Park University and the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools regional accreditors required that adjunct faculty be formally observed on an annual basis. To do this, the College for Distance Learning developed an observation method that emulated the face to face traditional classroom instructor observation used by academic departments. Termed the Faculty Online Observation (FOO) and proprietary to Park University, it was first utilized with adjunct faculty members in the Fall term of 2008.

The FOO was created by a team of full time faculty members with extensive experience and success in online learning modes. Guided by traditional face to face classroom instruction criteria, Park University (2004) online policies, best practices in online learning such as Quality Matters from MarylandOnline (2008) and assessment of instruction and facilitation (Dunnick & Mulvenon, 2009), the new online observation mechanism strove to capture information pertaining directly to online instruction modes. The criteria of the FOO were the guide for the subsequent survey questions and similar sections emerged: building community in the online classroom; assessment, grading and feedback; course climate and online classroom environment; and online instructor

response times. These categories modeled the oft-cited work by Chickering and Ehrmann (1996) and the WICHE/WCET (1997) “Good Practices in Distance Education”. Also utilized was US Department of Defense Principles of Good Practice for Distance Education Programs (n.d.).

Park University has successfully fostered a strong online program for degree completion students and has implemented a proper online instructor evaluation/observation process. Needed was solid data on the perceptions of online students and faculty. Thus, the present study had a two-fold purpose: First, sample the perceptions of college students pertaining to online instructor course facilitation and the instructors’ participation in the online learning process. Second, the responses of student respondents were statistically compared to faculty respondents on the same questions. The study was driven by the same categories and requirements of the Faculty Online Observation (FOO) used by the university.

Park University’s face to face learning modes are representative of many American small commuter and resident student colleges. Additionally, it includes a substantial distance learning program with campus centers and online course offerings. Park University was founded as a small, private liberal-arts college in 1875. In 1996, Park University looked to the Internet to better meet the needs of military students seeking undergraduate degree completion at military bases around the United States. Today, Park University embodies 42 nation-wide campus centers in 21 states. Thirty-seven of the campus centers are on military bases. From the beginning, the focus of the Park initiative was student service – making all services that would be available face-to-face also available online. Currently, Park University offers over 250 online degree credit courses, 12 online bachelor’s degree completion programs (<http://www.park.edu/online/degrees.aspx>) and six complete graduate programs (<http://www.park.edu/grad/degreesonline.aspx>). Like similar online institutions in the United States, Park University has created and has fostered a thriving online learning program. What is needed is statistical research to reinforce the

administrative policies and mechanisms implemented by Park University. The research study will also contribute to the existing educational research on best online practices.

Method

Participants: The respondents consisted of two sample groups: 1,214 online undergraduate students that had taken at least one course online at Park University between March 2009 and May 2010; and, 268 currently-teaching, online faculty members. All responses were collected utilizing Survey Share. Student responses were collected from February 16 to March 17, 2010. Faculty responses were collected from April 22 to May 8, 2010. Students and faculty members were defined as taking and teaching courses in 16 unique categories / disciplines. The participants responded anonymously and the data were stored in the hosted online survey service. Descriptive data analyses (such as frequencies, mean comparisons) were conducted using the data analysis tools provided in Survey Share and SPSS. Two sets of analyses were performed: first, the frequencies of each of the groups (online adjunct faculty and online students) were achieved to provide an overview of those items that were ranked highest in importance by the groups concerning the FOO items listed in five categories (below). The second portion of the analysis statistically compared the responses of the faculty respondents to the student respondents to assess if there were statistically significant differences between these groups on specific FOO items.

Over two-thirds of the faculty members reported teaching over 16 courses online and over two-thirds (68%) were 46 years of age or older. Unlike traditional college students, 84 percent of the student respondents were 26 years of age or older (50 percent were age 36 or older). Nearly three-fourths of the faculty respondents had taught 16 or more face-to-face classes and nearly 50 percent of the students had taken 16 or more college courses in the traditional classroom. Of the samples, 47.2% of the faculty respondents, were female, and 56.2% of the students were female.

Instrument and Procedures: The questionnaire consisted of 68 items, the first five of which collected demographic and individual teaching/student involvement information. The remaining items were related to opinions related to five categories of course facilitation and online learning. These included:

- building community in the classroom;
- discussion facilitation and instruction;
- assessments, grading, and feedback;
- course climate and online classroom environment; and,
- online instructor response time.

Participants indicated their agreement with a five-point Likert-type response format with values ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5). Participants also indicated their level of importance concerning various items from 1 (very important or strongly agree) to 5 (not important or strongly disagree). Lower total scale scores (mean responses) on this scale indicate more positive perceptions toward online course communication and collaboration, while higher total scale scores indicate less positive perceptions. Positive perceptions of online course communication and collaboration can be defined as the willingness of individuals to be engaged in online communication and positive collaboration can be defined as the willingness of individuals to be engaged in online communication and collaboration. Finally, students and faculty were asked about their preferences concerning required response times for various course-related activities on a scale from 12 hours to one week.

Results

Table 1 presents the mean ratings and standard deviations given to 39 content items of the instrument by faculty and student participants. Items on which the two groups differed significantly in their responses (p [is less than] .01) are indicated with an asterisk *. The following items made the greatest contribution between faculty and students concerning building community in the classroom. Students placed a significantly higher importance on (Item 11b) importance of creating an open and inviting climate of communication, (12b) the importance of course introductions, and

(12e) the importance of grade book comments. Faculty placed significantly higher importance on (12f) e-mail communication and (13b) being aware of student disabilities. As found by Swan (2003) and others (Hiltz, Zhang & Turoff, 2002; Tripp, 2002; Richardson & Swan, 2001), student learning is related to the quantity and quality of postings in online discussions and to the value that instructors place on them.

Students placed a significantly higher importance than instructors on every item related to discussion, facilitation, and instruction. Students placed a significantly higher importance on the items concerning (15a) individualized feedback from instructors to threaded discussions; (15b) feedback for input to weekly homework assignments, (15c) individualized instructor feedback on term papers, (15d) individual feedback on core assessments, (15e & 15f) feedback from instructors on auto-graded quizzes and mid-terms (although both groups placed somewhat less importance on this area, faculty reflected significantly less importance than students), and (15g) feedback from the instructor on discussion board submissions. According to Achtemeier, et al. (2003), feedback provided to instructors, as well as to designers, can improve instructional processes. The survey findings suggest that there is a possible disconnect in this area and revisions might be considered.

Online instructors are an incredibly important component of online student success. The instructor and student perceptions of rapport and interaction in online courses were measured by the research survey. Properly, instructors and students generally agreed upon the importance of instructor discussion facilitation in online courses. There was survey-item agreement in these areas and these results align with existing research that

also emphasizes these components (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996; Edelstein & Edward, 2002; Graham et al., 2001; Mandernach & Gonzales, 2006; WICHE/WCET, 1997). As these survey items did not result in statistically significant differences when subjected to a t-test measure, they are noted, but not scrutinized in the additional research discussion.

Table 1		
Online adjunct faculty		
(1) strongly agree to (5) strongly disagree, N=268		
Building Community in the Classroom		
	mean (\bar{x})	s.d.(s)
11a. Importance that instructor responds to e-mails	1.06	(.368)
11b. Importance that online instructor creates an open and inviting climate for communications	1.96	(1.204)
12a. Importance that instructor communicates in online instructor office	1.61	(1.057)
12b. Importance that instructor communicates in course introductions	2.05	(1.243)
12c. Importance that instructor communicates via online announcements	1.41	(.835)
12d. Importance that instructor communicates in discussion threads	1.63	(.992)
12e. Importance that instructor communicates in grade book comments	1.50	(.829)*
12f. Importance that instructor communicates in emails	1.22	(.508)*
13a. Importance that instructor be accommodating/responsive to new online learning concerns	1.45	(.722)
13b. Important that instructor be accommodating/responsive to student disabilities	1.44	(.705)*
13c. Important that instructor be accommodating/responsive to student internet connectivity problems	1.84	(.925)
13d. Importance that instructor be accommodating/responsive to unique adult learner problems	1.59	(.785)
21g. Importance that instructor is courteous and clear in their writing	1.41	(.656)*
Discussion, Facilitation, and Instruction		

15a. Importance of individualized feedback from instructor or input to threaded discussions	2.07	1.048)*
15b. Importance of individualized feedback from instructor for input to homework (weekly) assignments	1.80	(.836)*
15c. Importance of individualized feedback from instructor for input to term papers	1.91	(1.111)*
15d. Importance of individualized feedback from instructor for input to core (final) assessments	1.82	(.926)*
15e. Importance of individualized feedback from instructor for input to auto-graded quizzes	2.56	(1.377)*
15f. Importance of individualized feedback from instructor for input to auto-grade mid-terms	2.40	(1.246)*
15g. Importance of individualized feedback from instructor in the grade book	2.01	(1.112)*
20i. Importance that instructor posts follow-up questions in the weekly discussion (critical thinking)	2.02	(1.097)
20j. Importance that instructor posts new ideas based upon student posting (critical thinking)	2.34	(1.25)*
21c. Importance that instructor posts in the discussion thread several days of the week	1.83	(1.104)
Assessment, Grading, and Feedback		
17a. Agreement that online instructor should grade all assignments in a timely manner for adjustments and improvements to their coursework	1.63	(.975)*
20l. Importance that instructor provides grade book comments to all graded discussions	2.42	(1.28)*
20m. Importance that instructor provides grade book comments to all graded written assignments	2.02	(1.17)*
21a. Importance that instructor provides grade book feedback comments	2.00	(1.21)*
21c. Importance that instructor posts in the discussion thread several days of the week	1.83	(1.104)
Course Climate and Online Classroom Environment		
18c. Importance that instructor communicates clearly in writing throughout the course (grammar, spelling, expression)	1.28	(.536)
21f. Importance that instructor post current course announcements about course information or deadlines	1.82	(1.175)*

Online Instructor Response Time		
20a. Importance that instructor responds to student questions in instructor office thread within 48 hours	2.21	(1.32)*
20b. Importance that instructor responds to emails within 48 hours	2.21	(1.41)*
20e. Importance that instructor is active in discussion board at beginning of week	2.39	(1.32)*
20f. Importance that instructor is active in discussion board on weekends	2.71	(1.37)*
20g. Importance that instructor is active in discussion board throughout the week	2.05	(1.18)
20i. Importance that instructor posts follow-up questions in the weekly discussion (critical thinking)	2.02	(1.097)
20j. Importance that instructor posts new ideas based upon student posting (critical thinking)	2.34	(1.25)*
21b. Importance that instructor grades assignments in a timely manner	1.95	(1.218)*
21d. Importance that instructor responds to email questions promptly	1.82	(1.160)*
21e. Importance that instructor responds to questions in instructor office thread promptly	1.61	(.837)

Table 2		
Online students		
(1) strongly agree to (5) strongly disagree, N=1,214		
Building Community in the Classroom		
	mean (\bar{x})	s.d.(s)
11a. Importance that instructor responds to e-mails	1.04	(.252)
11b. Importance that online instructor creates an open and inviting climate for communications	1.26	(.675)
12a. Importance that instructor communicates in online instructor office	2.06	(1.17)
12b. Importance that instructor communicates in course introductions	1.86	(1.01)
12c. Importance that instructor communicates via online announcements	1.43	(.673)
12d. Importance that instructor communicates in discussion threads	1.66	(.901)
12e. Importance that instructor communicates in grade book	1.28	(.829)

comments		
12f. Importance that instructor communicates in emails	1.31	(.577)
13a. Importance that instructor be accommodating/responsive to new online learning concerns	1.53	(.759)
13b. Important that instructor be accommodating/responsive to student disabilities	1.75	(.914)
13c. Important that instructor be accommodating/responsive to student internet connectivity problems	1.62	(.856)
13d. Importance that instructor be accommodating/responsive to unique adult learner problems	1.81	(.894)
21g. Importance that instructor is courteous and clear in their writing	0.32	(.544)
15a. Importance of individualized feedback from instructor or input to threaded discussions	1.75	(.887)*
15b. Importance of individualized feedback from instructor for input to homework (weekly) assignments	1.36	(.552)*
15c. Importance of individualized feedback from instructor for input to term papers	1.33	(.615)*
15d. Importance of individualized feedback from instructor for input to core (final) assessments	2.16	(1.129)*
15e. Importance of individualized feedback from instructor for input to auto-graded quizzes	2.02	(1.07)*
15f. Importance of individualized feedback from instructor for input to auto-graded mid-terms	2.40	(1.25)*
20i. Importance that instructor posts follow-up questions in the weekly discussion (critical thinking)	2.25	(1.012)
20j. Importance that instructor posts new ideas based upon student posting (critical thinking)	2.06	(.919)
21c. Importance that instructor posts in the discussion thread several days of the week	1.89	(1.017)
Assessment, Grading, and Feedback		
17a. Agreement that online instructor should grade all assignments in a timely manner for adjustments and improvements to their coursework	1.17	(.419)
20l. Importance that instructor provides grade book comments to all graded discussions	1.97	(.968)
20m. Importance that instructor provides grade book comments to all graded written assignments	1.60	(.781)
21a. Importance that instructor provides grade book feedback comments	1.46	(.702)

Course Climate and Online Classroom Environment		
18c. Importance that instructor communicates clearly in writing throughout the course (grammar, spelling, expression)	1.39	(.642)
21f. Importance that instructor post current course announcements about course information or deadlines	1.35	(.594)
Online Instructor Response Time		
20a. Importance that instructor responds to student questions in instructor office thread within 48 hours	1.47	(.765)
20b. Importance that instructor responds to emails within 48 hours	1.32	(.674)
20e. Importance that instructor is active in discussion board at beginning of week	2.04	(1.048)
20f. Importance that instructor is active in discussion board on weekends	2.48	(1.124)
20g. Importance that instructor is active in discussion board throughout the week	1.87	(.940)
21b. Importance that instructor grades all assignments in a timely manner	1.37	(.692)
21d. Importance that instructor responds to email questions promptly	1.25	(.514)
21e. Importance that instructor responds to questions in instructor office thread promptly	1.61	(.801)

Comparative Findings by Category

Building Community in the Classroom: Grade book items and discussion threads are considered by the institutional administration to be critical items of observation. Seven of 10 (70%) students feel that it is “very important” to receive timely comments from their instructors in the course grade book and in the discussion threads. But, only 4 of 10 (40%) instructors considered either of these as a “very important“ priority. This is, potentially, a disconnect of concern. That is, the administration and students place a relatively high importance on this; but, online adjunct faculty respondents do not. Vesley,

et al. (2007) found that students rated instructor active participation and constant communication in grading and e-mails as most important. Similarly, faculty respondents ranked online discussion involvement most important followed by facilitation activities that promote community-building. Research from Tobin (2004), Graham et al. (2001) and the Department of Defense (n.d.) also reinforce the importance and necessity of instructor comments to student, whether the instructor comments are in discussion threads or grade book entries.

Discussion Facilitation and Instruction: Eight of 10 instructors felt instructor comments were “very important” in course discussion threads compared to only 5 of 10 (50%) of students holding this opinion. Conversely, 8 of 10 students (80%) felt grade book comments from instructors were “very important” compared to only 4 of 10 faculty respondents with the same perception. A number of researchers have based at least portions of their research on the importance of prompt and rubric-related feedback to student homework (Chickering & Ehrman, 1996; MarylandOnline, Inc, 2008) as well as assessment and measurement strategies designed to provide feedback to students (Thurmond et al., 2002; MacDonald & Twining, 2002; Shea et al., 2002; Hannon, et al., 2003)

Assessment, Grading, and Feedback: Both students and online adjunct faculty placed a lower priority on receiving or giving grade book comments for discussion board items, with only 4 of 10 respondents placing this as a “very important” priority. Likewise, the importance placed on instructor feedback to both auto-graded quizzes and mid-terms was relatively low. Only 4 of 10 students and faculty place a high importance of instructor

comments to mid-terms and less than 2 of 10 instructors place comments in the grade book for auto-graded quizzes as “highly important.” It is problematic that a number of institutions and federal education guidelines place emphasis on faculty responses to all graded assignments that are guided by a rubric (Park University, 2004; Department of Defense, n.d.). The current results indicate that this is not clearly prioritized by students or faculty members.

Course Climate and Online Classroom Environment: The importance placed on instructor feedback to both auto-graded quizzes and mid-terms (mentioned in the previous section) is reported as relatively low. This survey result is curious when analyzed with other research publications. Mann (2005) supports an emphasis on discussion in the course as an essential area. The author shares it to be a conversation that allows the individual participant to have a voice in the learning group and its workings--and ultimately responsibility to the other. Windowski (2004) found that increased instructor activity serves to create a positive classroom attitude. However, the survey results of both students and faculty indicate that students may feel that the comments provided for auto-graded examinations may be somewhat redundant and unnecessary – and not needed for a successful online experience.

Online Instructor Response Time: This item is especially indicative of both the student and faculty response of “strongly agree” to the importance of such timely grading, with nearly 9 of 10 students and 7 of 10 faculty members responding as such. Conversely, less than 7 of 10 students and only 5 of 10 faculty “strongly agreed” to the importance of providing helpful individualized feedback to student homework and assignments. This

finding agrees with research that has found that students in online courses reporting the highest level of prompt, high quality, and constructive feedback also reported the highest level of satisfaction and perceived learning (Shea, et al., 2002). Mandernach, et al. (2005) noted the importance of effective, insightful and relevant “quality“ comments versus a large “quantity” of irrelevant and unrelated faculty comments from faculty to students. The assessment of student participation in threaded discussions is a cornerstone for successful learning community development; and, the rubric utilized clarify for the student how their work will be evaluated, as well as performance expectations (Edelstein & Edwards, 2002). Just as timely student responses are required; timely faculty grading, to include helpful, rubric-related comments, are expected.

Discussion

The survey focused on five major divisions of online classroom facilitation with responses from online faculty and online students. The data suggest three conclusions. First, online college students generally expect prompt, robust grade book comments from their instructors. Students were skeptical and placed less importance on grade book comments for online discussion grades, a finding consistent with the existing research. Second, faculty placed the highest importance on instructor comments in discussion threads and the least importance on grade book comments for auto-graded quizzes. This finding also substantiates the existing distance education literature. Finally, neither students nor faculty placed a high importance on individualized grade book comments for midterm assignments and auto-graded quizzes, which were considered to be critical items

of online instruction and facilitation by the Park University College for Distance Learning faculty administrative teams.

The findings are most valuable, not just for Park University, but for the body of online learning. The Faculty Online Observation (FOO) is a valuable tool for observing the facilitation of courses by online adjunct faculty. The areas that are observed allow for a detailed view of facilitation, compartmentalized into five major factors and further compartmentalized into a number of more specific areas. The findings in the observation provide the College for Distance Learning valuable information needed for scheduling, training, and rating current online adjunct faculty. The findings will provide a new perspective on the perceptions of faculty and students that will be used for future training and observation of adjunct online faculty.

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