
Comparing Attitudes of Online Instructors and Online College Students: Quantitative Results for Training, Evaluation and Administration

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Abstract

The past decade has witnessed an explosion in online learning opportunities for post-secondary students throughout the United States. The 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 FOO, a survey related to the observation areas was administered to online faculty and students. The results determined a number of areas of agreement and non-agreement between the groups. The findings will provide valuable information for future training and 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 surveyed concerned 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, and faculty) was hypothesized to be the same items of equal importance; however, the responses to the survey indicated that there were points of agreement among course administrators, faculty, and students and points of statistically significant 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). Early distance education sought to provide opportunities for diverse and dispersed populations and did not utilize technology options until the recent past. 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). Additionally, institutions have created courses with efficient completion timeframes, or accelerated courses/programs that can be taken by students without interrupting their careers and social obligations. The rapid growth of online accelerated courses has deepened the need for research focused on the quality of these courses. 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). Such opinion based research is valuable and even instrumental when building a systematic, scalable, replicable and efficient online program. As the link between students and the institution, faculty performance and needs must be understood by the institution and the larger educational arena.

To meet the demand of students within its established campus center system, the university relied heavily on an adjunct faculty pool teaching in the face-to-face (f2f) classroom. As the online course offerings grew, many of these adjuncts received training and taught online courses, as needed. Additionally, online instructors were recruited from across the nation and trained by university personnel. Recognizing a need to properly assess the facilitation of online instructors, the institution's division of 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 time intensive. Not having limitless resources and personnel, The university sought a more streamlined process which still adhered to institutional needs and research guidelines.

Park University required that adjunct faculty be formally observed on an annual basis. This rigorous and required observation was seen very favorably by the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools regional accreditors. To do this, the university distance learning division 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 the University, it was first utilized with adjunct faculty members in Fall 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, university (2004) online policies, best practices in online learning such as the "Quality Matters" course development rubric 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 then the guide for the subsequent instructor- student -survey questions. The following, 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 United States Department of Defense Principles of Good Practice for Distance Education Programs (n.d.).

Like similar institutions in the United States, the university has created and has fostered a thriving online learning program. What was needed was statistical research to reinforce and validate the administrative policies and mechanisms implemented by the university. The university successfully fostered a strong online program for degree completion students and implemented a structured 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, the researchers sampled the perceptions of college students pertaining to online

instructor course facilitation and their perceptions of instructors' participation in the online learning process. Second, the responses of these students were statistically compared to faculty responses on the same questions. The study was driven by the same categories and requirements of the Faculty Online Observation (FOO) used by the university. While providing valuable information to the university, the research study will also contribute to the existing educational research in best online practices.

Building Community in the Online Classroom

Current research supports the importance of the online learning community in assisting students in performing well and learning course material (Vesley, Bloom, Sherlock, 2007). Similar perceptions were shared by Yuen (2003) and Woods & Ebersole (2003) in asserting that learning communities assist students in achieving more through the collaborative efforts of the group. Since the development of Rovai's Classroom Community Scale (2002), some researchers have employed it in their research in online community. Rovai's Classroom Community Scale was utilized by a number of researchers (Ouzts, 2006; Shea, 2006) to measure student perception of teaching presence in the online classroom. These researchers found a positive relationship between faculty perceptions and student perceptions of teaching presence.

It is important that instructors be "seen" in the online classroom and perceived to be present by the online student (Mandernach, et al, 2006). Instructors in the traditional, face-to-face classroom are able to project their physical presence through verbal and non-verbal interaction. In comparison, online instructors must actively participate in the course or risk the perception of being invisible or absent (Picciano, 2002). For administrative purposes, instructors must be in compliance with online course policies, university online policy and procedures, and online course standards. All of the university online courses are developed by certified content area experts with the assistance of an instructional design team. Individual section instructors may add material, but cannot grossly alter the existing course content. Therefore, individual section instructors are observed for any augmentations they might add to course discussions in a manner that complements the course objectives both relevantly and constructively. Instructors are encouraged to utilize several of the online platform organizational features available, including document sharing, additional lectures, course announcements, discussion threads, and/or webliography to enhance the course delivery and online learning experience. Even though the course content is developed separately, it is the responsibility of the instructor to create an open and inviting climate for communication. The instructor must set the tone for interactions via course tools such as the instructor's office discussion thread, course introductions, and grade book comments

Discussion Facilitation and Instruction

The discussion board is the focal point of the online course classroom. As directed by the university distance learning online instructor participation policy and for the purpose of this particular research study, instructors were required to substantively interact in the course discussion thread a minimum of four (4) days per week as recommended by best practices (UMUC, 2005) and other researchers (Ragan, 2010, Cranny, et al, 2011; Aragon, 2003, Shea, Li, Swan, & Pickett, 2005; Swan & Shih, 2005). The perception of faculty presence has been cited by many research studies as one of the most important determinants of student satisfaction with online learning. Online discussion boards allow for the asynchronous communication between students and instructor and also between other students. Students are able to work together to explore a topic and to discover the skills and objectives necessary for a successful learning experience (Lauron, 2008). The instructor's active guidance is also necessary for this student success. Cranney, et al (2011) found the majority of instructors felt that it was appropriate to have instructor course participation requirements. Those in disagreement were mostly concerned about "when" they were required to participate in online discussion, not "if" (Mandernach, et. al., 2006). To further foster student participation and success, instructor discussion postings must be professional, clear, precise, and supportive of student learning. Instructors should use discussion postings to augment course content and provide examples to facilitate the understanding and application of course concepts. Finally, instructors are expected to encourage students' continued interaction and critical thinking through both questions and comments.

Assessment, Grading, and Feedback

Online course timeframes (terms) at the university are eight weeks. This is a somewhat common length for accelerated online, undergraduate courses. With an accelerated format, it is very important that instructors

establish and adhere to deadlines for grading and feedback so that students can make timely adjustments and improvements during the term. As noted by Robles and Braathen (2002), “online assessment must be used to measure both learning objectives and application of knowledge” (p. 30). Research has found that, while very beneficial, faculty members found interacting with and providing feedback to students in online classes to be more time consuming than in face-to-face classes (Chabon, et al, 2001; Jennings & McCuller, 2004; Herrmann & Popyack, 2003; Smith, et al, 2002). While the content of the basic assessments is determined by the course developer, effective learning occurs through student and instructor active engagement with course material. It is necessary for instructors to utilize course assignment grading rubrics and apply these properly when grading. It is equally important that instructors provide helpful, individualized, constructive feedback on all course assessments to highlight student strengths and to provide suggestions for improvement, as applicable.

Course Climate and Online Classroom Environment

Both best practices and the MarylandOnline (2008) “Quality Matters” course development rubric serve as a valuable professional development resource and address instructor behavior related to professionalism, grammar, respect, and fairness. So, too, does the university Faculty Online Observation (FOO) include a section focused on the atmosphere that the instructor maintains in the online course. Instructor presence, both in quantity and quality, is very important. Online learning modes result in a physical, geographic separation of instructor and individual learners. When an instructor is absent or provides limited interaction in the online classroom, students feel isolated in their learning. Students are then forced to navigate the curriculum alone or to bond with classmates who are not content experts or the monetarily compensated instructors for the course. The FOO evaluators have recognized that ample clarification, addressing students by name, and thorough, timely, follow-up to questions and concerns are beneficial in establishing student/instructor respect and trust in the classroom (Dennis, et al, 2011). Dykman and Davis (2008) attest similarly that consistent interaction, steady participation, and timely reinforcement are the keys to keeping online students involved and active. The absence of a physical classroom challenges the online teacher to provide a climate that supports learning. 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.

The analysis statistically compared the faculty responses to the student responses to assess if there were statistically significant differences between these groups on specific FOO items. The hypothesis that guided the research stated that a statistically significant difference does not exist in the importance that instructors place on various aspects of the online course related to 1) building community in the online classroom, 2) discussion facilitation, 3) assessment and grading, 4) course climate and online learning environment and 5) online instructor response times.

Methods

The respondents consisted of two sample groups: 1,208 online undergraduate students that had taken at least one course online at Park University and 267 currently teaching, online faculty members. The instructor and student perceptions of 1) building community in the online classroom, 2) discussion facilitation, 3) assessment and grading, 4) course climate and online learning environment and 5) online instructor response times in online courses were measured by the research survey. All responses were distributed and collected utilizing the online survey tool Survey Share. Students and faculty members self-identified as taking or 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 and mean comparisons) were conducted using the data analysis tools provided in Survey Share and Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) computer software. The analysis focused on statistically comparing the responses of two sets of respondents: online adjunct faculty and online students, to provide an overview of those items that were ranked highest in importance by the groups concerning the FOO items listed in the five research question areas.

Participants indicated their agreement with a five-point Likert 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 indicated more positive perceptions toward online course communication and collaboration while higher total scale scores indicated less positive perceptions. Positive perceptions of online course communication and collaboration were defined as the willingness of individuals to be engaged in online communication and positive collaboration were 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.

Findings

Fifty-five percent of the faculty members reported teaching more than 16 courses online and 68% were 46 years of age or older. Unlike traditional college students, 83% of the student respondents were 26 years of age or older (50% were age 36 or older). Sixty-eight percent of the faculty respondents had taught 16 or more online classes and 46% of the students had taken 16 or more college courses in the traditional classroom. Of the samples, 47% of the faculty respondents were female and 56% of students were female.

Table 1 reports the characteristics of the sample. About half of the student (56%) and faculty (47%) respondents were female. Ninety percent of the faculty respondents were part-time adjunct instructors compared to 45% of the student respondents were part-time students. Fifty-five percent of the instructors have taught more than 15 courses online for Park University compared to only 24% of students reporting completion of more than 15 online courses. Cross tabulations were conducted to determine the importance perceived by respondents on specific functions related to the online classroom. Results are shown in Tables 2 through 5.

Table 1 – Demographic Breakdown of Respondents

	Faculty (%)	Students (%)
Sex		
Male	141 (52.8)	529 (43.8)
Female	126 (47.2)	679 (56.2)
Age		
Under 45	85(31.9)	982 (81.1)
46-plus	182(68.1)	230 (18.9)
Status		
Full-Time	28 (10.5)	662 (54.9)
Part-Time	239(89.5)	544 (45.1)
Courses Taught – Taken		
15 or Less		
16 or More	84 (32.0)	902 (76.4)
	179 (68.0)	278 (23.6)

Comparative Findings by Category

Building Community in the Classroom: Online learning requires an open and nurturing environment to counteract the physical separation of instructors and students. One way to foster such an environment is through timely communication. In the research responses, both students and instructors placed a high importance on the responding to student e-mails in a timely manner (11a). 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). 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 in the current research ranked online discussion involvement most important followed by facilitation activities that promote community-building.

Grade book items and discussion threads are considered by the institutional administration to be critical items of observation. Students placed a significantly higher importance on a number of specific areas: the

importance of creating an open and inviting climate of communication (11b); the importance of course introductions (12b); instructor communication in discussion threads (12d), and the importance of grade book comments (12e). Faculty placed significantly higher importance on the use of e-mail communication (12f), accommodations to student online learning concerns (13a), being aware and accommodating of student disabilities (13b), recognizing the importance of maintaining a positive atmosphere in the online course (18a), instructor-modeling of proper online classroom behavior (18b), and communicating clearly in writing (18c). 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.

Table 2 Comparison of Faculty and Student Responses to the Importance of Instructor Participation in Course Discussion, Facilitation, and Instruction

Building Community in the Classroom	Chi-square	Significance	mean(\bar{x}) faculty/ student	s.d.(s) mean	t	Significance level
11a. Importance that instructor responds to e-mails	1.22		1.06 / 1.08	.272 /(.359)	-1.-09	**
11b. Importance that online instructor creates an open and inviting climate for communications	5.43	*	1.15 / 1.09	.417 / (.294)	5.874	**
12a. Importance that instructor communicates in online instructor office	8.73	*	2.11 / 1.89	(1.057)	7.553	**
12b. Importance that instructor communicates in course introductions	11.64	**	1.88 / 1.61	(1.243)	16.502	***
12c. Importance that instructor communicates via online announcements	4.025	*	1.41 / 1.37	(.835)	.658	.417
12d. Importance that instructor communicates in discussion threads	36.59	***	1.65 / 1.30	(.992)	41.574	***
12e. Importance that instructor communicates in grade book comments	28.23	***	1.27 / 1.54	(.829)*	41.574	***
12f. Importance that instructor communicates in emails	3.42		1.29 / 1.23	(.508)*	2.980	.085
13a. Importance that instructor be accommodating/responsive to new online learning concerns	10.47	***	1.54 / 1.34	(.722)	16.094	***
13b. Important that instructor be accommodating/responsive to student disabilities	10.52	***	1.77 / 1.51	(.705)*	19.349	***
13c. Important that instructor be accommodating/responsive to student internet connectivity problems	8.06	*	1.63 / 2.14	(.925)	68.654	***
13d. Importance that instructor be accommodating/responsive to unique adult learner problems	19.43	***	1.81 / 1.74	(.785)	1.474	.225
21g. Importance that instructor is courteous and clear in their writing	24.36	***	1.25 / 1.28	(.656)*		
18a. Importance of instructor maintaining a positive atmosphere in the online course	19.04	***	1.13/ 1.28	.439	-4.48	***
18b. Importance of instructor models proper online classroom behavior	21.57	***	1.46 / 1.31	.473	4.68	***

18c. Importance of instructor communicates clearly in writing	20.338	***	1.16 / 1.31	.453	-4.62	***
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*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Discussion Facilitation and Instruction: Students placed a significantly higher importance than instructors on items related to discussion facilitation and instruction. Instructors placed a significantly higher importance on posting (and receiving responses-to) new ideas and questions to evoke critical thinking. 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 students, whether the instructor comments are in discussion threads or grade book entries. While students were more inclined to place an importance on instructor activity at the beginning of the week (20e), adjunct faculty placed slightly higher importance on course activity during the week (20f) and on weekends (20g). Instructors placed a significantly higher importance of posting (and receiving responses-to) new ideas and questions to evoke critical thinking (20i). Additionally, three-fourths (75 %) of online-instructors compared to only half (54%) of students considered the threaded discussion as “very important” for communicating in the online classroom (12d).

Online instructors are an extremely important component of online student success. 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). Instructors placed a significantly higher importance on posting (and receiving responses-to) new ideas and questions to evoke critical thinking (20j). Online faculty placed a significantly higher importance on posting in the discussion thread than did students (20i).

Table 3 - Comparison of Faculty and Student Responses to the Importance of Instructor Participation in Course Discussion, Facilitation, and Instruction

Discussion, Facilitation, and Instruction	Chi-square	Significance	mean(x̄) faculty/student	s.d.(s)mean	t	Significance level
15a. Importance of individualized feedback from instructor or input to threaded discussions	.132		2.73 / 1.73	1.048	.016	.899
12d. Importance that instructor communicates in discussion threads	36.59	***	1.65 / 1.30	.992	41.57	***
21c. Importance that instructor posts in the discussion thread several days of the week	30.00	***	1.43 / 1.57	1.104	20.070	***
20i. Importance that instructor posts follow-up questions in the weekly discussion (critical thinking)	43.32	***	1.63 / 1.77	1.097	22.47	***
21c. Importance that instructor posts in the discussion thread several days of the week	10.37	*	1.43 / 1.57	1.104	17.87	***
20j. Importance that instructor posts new ideas based upon student posting (critical thinking)	27.63	***	1.52 / 1.72	1.25	23.82	***
20e. Importance that instructor is active in discussion board at beginning of week	.23	.994	1.62 / 1.62	1.32	.068	.795
20f. Importance that instructor is active in discussion board on weekends	7.68	.104	1.75 / 1.78	1.37	.63	.429
20g. Importance that instructor is active in discussion board throughout the week	8.18	.085	1.55 / 1.59	1.18	1.74	.188

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Assessment, Grading, and Feedback: Grading is very important for online students' perceived and measured progress in their course, degree and career success. According to Achtemeier, et al. (2003), feedback provided to instructors, as well as to designers, can improve instructional processes. Thus, it was unexpected for students to express less emphasis in selected categories than faculty respondents. Faculty respondents placed a significantly higher importance on the survey items concerning individualized feedback from instructors to threaded discussions (15a); feedback for input to weekly homework assignments (15b); individualized instructor feedback on term papers (15c); and, individual feedback on core assessments (15d). Both groups placed somewhat less importance on the feedback on quizzes and mid-terms with faculty reflecting significantly less importance than students.

Table 4 - Comparison of Faculty and Student Responses to the Importance Attached to Assessment, Grading, and Feedback to Communication and Graded Assignments

Assessment, Grading, and Feedback	Chi-square	Significance	mean(x̄) faculty/ student	s.d.(s)mean	t	Significance level
12e. Importance of providing or receiving Gradebook comments	28.23	***	1.27 / 1.54	.620	.4157	***
17a. Agreement that online instructor should grade all assignments in a timely manner for adjustments and improvements to their coursework	1.13		1.15 / 1.28	1.053	22.08	***
17c. Importance of helpful, individualized constructive feedback on all graded assignments	8.21	**	1.82 / 1.38	.852	-8.94	***
20k. Importance that instructor provides grade book comments to all auto-graded quizzes	40.14	***	2.78/ 2.40	1.25	4.48	.***
20l. Importance that instructor provides grade book comments to all graded discussions	36.15	***	1.69 / 1.64	(1.28)*	1.74	.188
20m. Importance that instructor provides grade book comments to all graded written assignments	1.46		1.50 / 1.46	(1.17)*	1.46	.227
21a. Importance that instructor provides grade book feedback comments	39.60	***	1.52 / 1.37	(1.21)*	20.07	***
15b. Importance of individualized feedback from instructor for input to homework (weekly) assignments	3.29		1.34 / 1.44	(.836)*	5.60	**
15c. Importance of individualized feedback from instructor for input to term papers	8.06	*	1.30 / 1.47	(1.111)*	15.05	***
15d. Importance of individualized feedback from instructor for input to core (final) assessments	19.43	***	1.39 / 1.66	(.926)*	31.13	.***
15e. Importance of individualized feedback from instructor for input to auto-graded quizzes	24.36	***	2.19 / 2.88	(1.377)*	72.39	***
15f.Importance of individualized feedback from instructor for input to auto-grade mid-terms	36.11	***	2.06 / 2.77	(1.246)*	85.17	***
15g.Importance of individualized feedback from instructor in the grade book	36.11	***	1.75 / 1.99	(1.112)*	15.41	***

20j. Importance that instructor posts new ideas based upon student posting (critical thinking)	27.63	***	1.52 / 1.72	(1.25)*	23.82	***
20m. Importance that instructor provides Gradebook comments to all graded written assignments	10.32	.***	1.58/ 1.47	.498.	3.29	***
20n. Importance that instructor uses or explains assignment grading rubrics	5.39	.02	1.85/ 1.90	.312	-2.42	**

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Both students and online adjunct faculty placed a lower priority on receiving or giving grade book comments for discussion board items (20l), with only 40% of respondents placing this as a “very important” priority. Similarly, only 40% of students and faculty placed a high importance of instructor comments to mid-terms and less than 20% of instructors providing comments in the grade book for auto-graded quizzes as “highly important.” Though the level of importance was somewhat low (40%), students placed a significantly higher importance than faculty respondents on providing grade book comments to all graded discussions (20l) and other written assignments (20m).

Thirty-six percent of instructors and students reported that it is “very important” to provide/receive grade book comments from their instructors in the course in the discussion threads (20l). Likewise, 52% of both students and faculty considered comments to all graded assignments as a “very important” priority (20m). The importance of an instructor’s active engagement in a course is well established. Best practices in higher education find that instructors who actively engage their students promote advanced understanding over classes that allow students to be passive consumers of information (Halpern, 1999; McKeachie & Svinicki, 2005).

Course Climate and Online Classroom Environment: The importance placed by instructors and students concerning the course climate and online classroom revealed that both instructors and students consider this to be an important area, function, and consideration of online learning. It is important that the instructor maintains and is perceived to maintain a positive atmosphere in the reflection of proper online behavior. Instructors responses were significantly higher than students concerning the important of maintaining a positive atmosphere in the course, modeling proper online classroom behavior (respectful and fair), and communicating clearly in writing throughout the course. The importance of the instructor exhibiting proper online behavior (18b – 89.4% instructors; 71.6% students) and the subsequent positive effect on student behavior and success is well-documented and consistent with other research publications (Picciano, 2002; Richardson, & Swan, 2003).

Online Instructor Response Time: Students were nearly three times as likely as faculty respondents to place importance on instructor responses to quizzes (19a), threaded discussions (19b), and homework assignments (19c). It was more important to students than instructors to respond to instructor office questions and e-mails (20a) within 48 hours (20b). Conversely, the importance placed on instructor feedback to both auto-graded quizzes (20k) and mid-terms (20e) was relatively low. Students placed a significantly higher importance on instructors posting grades in a timely manner and responding to student e-mail questions in a timely manner (20a). There is a much different dynamic in online versus face-to-face classrooms, often directly related to the timeliness of communications, and students were found to place a significantly higher importance on this timeliness. 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 to students. The assessment of student participation in threaded discussions is a cornerstone for successful learning community development and the rubric utilized clarifies for the student how their work will be evaluated, as well as performance expectations (Edelstein & Edwards, 2002). Students placed a much higher importance on the instructor posting grades in a timely manner (21b – 73.5%) and responding to e-mail questions in a timely manner (21d – 77.9%).

Table 5 – Comparison of Faculty and Student Responses to the Importance Attached to Instructor

Response Time

Online Instructor Response Time	Chi-square	Significance	mean(x̄) faculty/ student	s.d.(s) mean	t	Significance level
14a Timeliness of response to Instructor Office	97.6	.000	2.38 / 1.93	.770	-9.05	**
14b Timeliness of response to Course Introductions	49.05	***	2.76 / 2.40	1.053	-5.28	***
14c Timeliness of response to Discussion Threads	1.030E	***	2.60 / 2.10	.852	-8.97	*
14d Timeliness of response to Drop-box Grade book Comments	1.752E	***	3.33 / 2.43	1.098	-11.31	***
14e Timeliness of response to E-Mails	1.363E	***	2.19 / 1.69	.684	-10.95	.453
20a. Importance that instructor responds to student questions in instructor office thread within 48 hours	11.58	*	1.39 / 1.32	(1.32)*	4.387	*
20b. Importance that instructor responds to emails within 48 hours	6.76		1.29 / 1.22	(1.41)*	6.381	**
21b. Importance that instructor grades assignments in a timely manner	21.875	***	1.40 / 1.27	(1.218)*	18.299	***
21d. Importance that instructor responds to email questions promptly	20.498	***	1.32 / 1.22	(1.160)*	11.948	***
21e. Importance that instructor responds to questions in instructor office thread promptly	3.80	***	1.45 / 1.45	(.837)	.036	.850
17a. Importance of timely grading on all assignments to allow for student adjustments	29.352	***	1.15 / 1.28	.418	1.063	**
19a. Timely response by instructor to quizzes	36.58	***	1.46 / 2.89	.978	1.309	***
19b. Timely response by instructor to threaded discussions	84.88	***	1.57 / 2.96	1.017	1.149	**
19c. Timely response by instructor to homework & weekly assignments	5.72E	***	1.67 / 3.35	1.101	23.63	***
19d. Timely response by instructor to term papers	4.675E	***	2.22 / 4.02	1.295	24.12	***
19e. Timely response by instructor to Mid-Term Examinations	5.724E	***	1.92 / 3.56	1.177	24.32	***
19f. Timely response by instructor to Final Examinations	5.072E	***	3.25 / 2.83	1.207	21.68	***

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Discussion

The survey focused on five major divisions of online classroom facilitation with responses from online faculty and online students. The data suggest, albeit validates, 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 Distance Learning faculty administrative teams.

The findings are most valuable, not just for the 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 survey research provide Park Distance Learning valuable information needed for scheduling, training, and rating current online adjunct faculty. The findings will further 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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