Students’ Perception of Virtual Learning: An Empirical Study of Hampton University Students

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Much can be said about and written about the year, 2020. Still, its story would be difficult to tell and reconstruct. All of us faced multiple unforeseen challenges in our lives starting in March 2020. Academia was no different. We suddenly had to switch from an age-old practice of face-to-face classroom interaction with our students to a virtual environment. This new academic environment was entrusted amid economic and health emergency. To be fair, virtual classrooms were not totally new or untested in 2020. However, it was a minor part of the education delivery system until that time. Many of us in academia were users of some virtual elements, but not all aspects. However, the pandemic forced us to learn new tools for course delivery and assessment of our entire course content with limited time to train.

As faculty members, we are aware of many of complexities and obstacles brought about by these new tools in a virtual environment, but it was probably more challenging to our students. Students were removed from their familiar surroundings. They lost face-to-face contacts with their instructors and friends. Beside this, they had to negotiate a variety of technological, health, family, and academic issues. There are several new research studies showing that students at all level show loss of interest, higher anxiety, and a lack of learning in this new virtual environment. With these findings as background, it is important to know what Hampton University students think of their interactions in this new educational experience, a topic of research in some of the classes I taught in Fall 2020.

This article is based upon classroom studies conducted by Hampton University students enrolled in two business courses, an undergraduate and a graduate course, during the Fall 2020 semester. Data collection and analysis were not at a peer-reviewed level of research work; however, the studies provided a window into the students’ mind-set. The following results are based upon six different studies from these two classes. Sample sizes of these studies varied from 60 to 273. All charts are normalized (percentages) due to several different sample sizes. Sometimes, two groups of students asked similar survey questions; those samples are combined for this presentation. The students’ research findings are grouped into the following three (3) areas:

1. Environmental Conditions
2. Overall Satisfaction with Virtual Education
3. Other Issues with Virtual Education
Environmental Conditions

Over the six students’ projects, most of them collected some data on students’ experiences, home environment, technical difficulties, and the like. Relevant questions on these elements are included in this section.

As indicated before, online courses have been offered for several years. Like many universities, Hampton University also allows on-campus students to take a limited number of online courses. However, these studies indicated that very few students had prior experience with online classes. A combined sample of many different studies showed that only one fifth of the students had ever taken online college courses before the COVID-19 pandemic required a transition to virtual learning. This question gives a window into how novel was the idea of online courses for our current students, despite the availability of online courses before the transition to remote instruction.

As taking courses virtually was a new experience for many, so was the experience of attending their college classes from home. When asked ‘do they have a designated space to attend virtual classes,’ only one fifth indicated that such a space was available to them, while the remaining students had “shared space(s)” at home. Most students had multiple family members who were also at home and who were engaged in virtual education or virtual work from home and were sharing the same space.

As for the Quality of WiFi Connection, a significant portion of students reported being very satisfied, while a smaller proportion reported being unsatisfied with their connection quality. Technology Issues depicted a similar trend, with the majority of students expressing satisfaction with their technical setup, although a few indicated dissatisfaction.
Because of “sharing space,” and technical issues associated with computing/networking equipment, there was a high level of dissatisfaction with the virtual learning environment. More than 50% of students reported experiencing technical problems despite having “satisfactory” Wi-Fi connectivity. These technical problems included microphone glitches, dropped connections, poor video quality, and speakers malfunction, among others. This means that many students faced a number of technology related, non-academic issues at home that, in turn, affected their learning.

Being in the home environment was not encouraging for college work or study for one more important reason: distractions. Over 60% of students reported that “there were many distractions at home” including, required household chores and background noise. This was understandably a problem in creating a conducive environment for learning for our students. Approximately 90% of the students indicated that it was difficult to study in their home environment.

There was one positive aspect of the home environment. Students overwhelmingly reported that they appreciated the “flexibility” that virtual learning provided in their schedules. Perhaps, virtual classes eliminated the time needed to get ready to go to class, the time needed to eat before class, and/or the time to walk from class to class. Whatever the reason, students liked the extra, available time. Although they appreciated the extra time, the students reported dissatisfaction with their own productivity level at home. However, their dissatisfaction with their productivity at home was not as extreme as their dissatisfaction with the distractions that affected studying at home.

**Overall Satisfaction with Virtual Education**

Overall, it would appear that adjustment to the virtual classroom was difficult for many of our students. In general, they perceived that their education suffered due to the virtual setting. These perceptions might be related to the lack of interaction with their instructors, the loss of peer-study groups, the lack of access to on-campus academic resources, a lack of peer-pressure, or the loss of dedicated space for study.
Most students found the transition from in-person instruction to the virtual classroom “unsatisfactory.” The swift and sudden transition was not well perceived by many students. The data also suggest that students believed that virtual settings did not allow them to meet the course objectives. Such a perception may be due to some students’ inability to adjust to the change, the necessary, but instantaneous nature of the change, or their overall dissatisfaction with the home study environment. However, this finding also requires some introspection on the part of faculty as well; maybe our delivery of course material was not as effective as in the face-to-face instructional environment.

Over two-thirds of the students reported that they had difficulty in understanding material in the virtual setting. It may be that students missed the opportunity to ask questions as in the face-to-face environment, or it might be that the instructor was less able to detect students’ general understanding based upon their body language, as they are able to do in the face-to-face classroom setting. These results regarding “difficulty understanding material in the virtual setting” are aligned with students’ perceptions that the virtual setting did not allow them to meet course objectives. However, the quality of virtual education is not viewed as poorly. There is a certain amount of conflict in the students’ thought processes as to how this virtual education should be assessed.

This conflict is further clarified in their responses to two survey questions: “effectiveness of virtual classroom” and the perceived “educational rigor in virtual courses.” Students’ responses to both of these items show less dissatisfaction as compared to the previously discussed elements, such as the “quality of virtual education,” “understanding of material,” or “meeting course objectives.”

seems that students found it hard to negotiate this new mode of education delivery. There is an element of self-assessment by students that the material in the virtual classroom seemed no different than in the in-person classroom, but they are not retaining the material as well. This could also be due to nature of the survey instrument and/or due to mixing of results from six different samples.

Other Issues Related to Virtual Education

Besides expected educational outcomes, students also faced other challenges such as obtaining internships (internships are required course work for all business students), finding jobs, and appearing in interviews. Like other educational institutions, virtual/working from home is/was a new environment for most of corporate America as well, and it took (and is still taking) a certain amount of time for employers to adjust to the changed work setting.

Several students reported withdrawal of internship offers in Summer 2020. Of the students who had internship offers, little more than one-fifth (21%) of them had companies withdraw the offers due to this pandemic. For the students who were expecting a repeat internship offer in the Summer of 2020 from the previous employers, approximately 50% of these students did not receive any such offer. It must be pointed out that it cannot be said with certainty that the pandemic was the actual cause of the loss of these opportunities, as there are no data available to compare these findings with data from previous years.

Several of the survey participants were seniors (or in 5th year of the MBA program) or 5th year MBA students. A sizeable percentage of students in the 5-year program secure jobs well in advance of graduation from their graduate program, based upon relationships established during their internships. In the sample, approximately half of the students had job offers prior to the pandemic’s arrival, but one fourth of those job offers were retracted. Again, there are no data available from previous years to compare this statistic, but a 25% withdrawal of job offers seems extreme.
The literature and popular media have suggested that face-to-face education is facing a big challenge from virtual education platforms. However, our students seem to disagree with that notion. Only one quarter of the students indicated that they would like to enroll in online classes in the future. Overwhelming, the majority (80%+) of our students indicated that they prefer face-to-face education more than online education. After this giant forced, virtual classroom experiment, the sun is going to shine on face-to-face education more than on virtual education, at least it seems so given the opinions of many of our students.

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Announcements

New Publication on Strengthening Academic Pathways at Community Colleges
Amid a pandemic, recession, and moment of racial reckoning, twenty community colleges have transformed their academic pathways and approaches to supporting students. This free eBook, *Paths to Success: How Community Colleges Are Strengthening Guided Pathways to Ensure Students Are Learning*, features narratives, best practices, and suggestions from campus leaders.

Call for Proposals: Conference on Diversity, Equity, and Student Success
Many institutions have released statements condemning the racial and social injustices in our communities, and institutional leaders have acknowledged the urgent need to address structural racism and inequities in higher education. But making real progress toward sustainable transformation will take more than just words. Join us for a conference that will go beyond the rhetoric and prioritize campus strategies, institutional culture, and accountability in operationalizing the values of equity and diversity.

Virtual Symposium on Academic Integrity
The integrity of the college degree is in peril. AAC&U and the International Center for Academic Integrity are cohosting a virtual symposium, “Renewing the Legitimacy of Learning,” on October 21–22 to explore practical strategies for teaching faculty, information technology leaders, and students to curb recent spikes in honor code violations.
Webinar: Supporting Student Success through Faculty Development
This free webinar from AAC&U and OneHE will explore scalable and sustainable faculty development that reaches all faculty on campus, not just a few. Learn how to leverage OneHE's microlearning approach to improve faculty practice and support teaching excellence at your institution.