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# Students' Perceptions and Opinions of Online Courses: A Qualitative Inquiry

The screenshot shows the South Texas College eSTC Distance Education website. At the top left is the logo for South Texas College eSTC Distance Education. At the top right are links for "STC Home | FAQ | About Us!" and "eSTC en español". Below the header is a navigation menu with icons and labels for: home (main page), My eCourses (login), catalog (online courses), degrees (online programs), students (useful resources), faculty (useful resources), library (find books), S.T.E.N. (expert network), and eSupport (need help?). The main content area features a banner image of hands typing on a laptop with the text "Try our DEMO class" and "convenience service value quality". Below the banner are three columns of content: "Announcements" with links for Student Orientations, Faculty sign-up for eTeach and Blackboard Basics Workshops, and Help Desk Hours; "What does it take?" with a list of requirements including Commitment, Discipline, Self-motivation, Good time management skills, Basic computer knowledge, Basic Internet navigation skills, A stable internet connection, and A reliable computer; and "Are you READI for online courses?" with a "Take the Survey" link. An "Information" section includes "Students - 8th Drop Rule" and a "Live Support ONLINE" button. A W3C XHTML 1.0 logo is in the bottom right corner.

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## **Background**

As stated by Means, Toyama, Murphey, Bakia, and Jones (2009) institutions of higher learning have been quick to adopt online learning. Several studies, including those by Parsad, Lewis, and Tice (2008) and Allen and Seaman (2008) examine the rise in online course enrollment.

Academic institutions believe that “online education initiatives [can] be justified on the basis of cost efficiency or need to provide access to learners in settings where face-to-face instruction is not feasible” (Means et al., 2009, p. xi). They go on to state:

Online learning has become popular because of its potential for providing more flexible *access to content and instruction at any time, from any place*. Frequently, the focus entails (a) increasing the availability of learning experiences for learners who cannot or choose not to attend traditional face-to-face offerings, (b) assembling and disseminating instructional content more cost-efficiently, or (c) enabling instructors to handle more students while maintaining learning outcome quality that is equivalent to that of comparable face-to-face instruction. (Means et al., 2009, p. 1)

In an effort to meet the growing educational needs of the region, and supported by recent findings by Cole (2007) in which distance education was found to be a viable, desired, and needed portal of access to higher education for Hispanic students, South Texas College (STC) is in the process of adding a sixth, virtual campus. Cole identified evidence to support the College’s continued “investment in and use of distance education to provide access to higher education,” and furthermore she provided “a profile of the significant characteristics of students who are likely to utilize distance education successfully.” One of the strategic directions of STC

indicates that the college “proudly provides opportunities to all students with high expectations for their success” (2007). By ensuring that the local population has access to postsecondary education by creating a college going culture, STC has seen an unprecedented rise in student enrollment which has led to a strain on resources. The introduction of a virtual campus would not only assist in alleviating the strain that has come about as a result of being ahead of enrollment projection models, but would also provide students with another means by which they can gain a postsecondary education.

The college has seen a 150% increase in distance learning, which includes online courses, over the past five years compared to a 40% increase in traditional courses and the number of students utilizing distance education continues to grow (STC, 2009, p. 1; STC, 2010). Distance learning enrollment numbers will most likely increase when STC’s virtual campus is opened.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of the study was to gain insight into the experiences STC students have had in their online learning courses. In particular researchers wanted to understand what difficulties students faced during their enrollment in online courses and whether these difficulties inhibited the successful completion of their courses. Additionally, researches sought to understand the reasons behind students’ choice of online courses as well as their satisfaction level with student/instructor communication.

### **Research Questions**

This particular study was designed to investigate students’ attitudes and perceptions regarding different aspects of STC’s online courses. What affected students’ decisions to enroll, re-enroll, or not re-enroll in online courses? What difficulties were faced during the course of taking

online courses? Were students satisfied with the level of communication that they had with their instructor?

(For a complete list of questions asked of participants, please see appendices A, B, & C.)

### **Methodology**

All student groups were identified using the STC Banner database. First, all students who were taking at least one online course in Fall 2009 were selected. From this group students were then divided into two categories: students who had persistent, semester-to-semester enrollment in online courses and students who were enrolled only in online courses. The group of students who had persistent, semester-to-semester (Spring 2009 to Fall 2009) enrollment in online courses was comprised of students that were enrolled in a mixture of online and traditional classes. The group consisting of students who were enrolled exclusively in online courses was comprised of students that were not registered for any other type of course during the Fall 2009 semester. In addition to these two groups, this study involved a third group which consisted of students who had previously enrolled in at least one online course during the Spring 2009 semester, but that had not reenrolled in online courses during the Fall 2009 semester. Students who had either withdrawn or graduated were excluded from this particular group. Samples from each group were randomly selected and telephone interviews were conducted. The average interview lasted from ten to fifteen minutes.

## **Findings**

Analysis of interview data allowed researchers to pull out several main themes. While these were not the only topics or ideas discussed during the course of collecting qualitative data, the following themes were discussed most often.

### *Reasons for Enrolling in Online Courses*

Students indicated that their main reason for enrolling in online classes was due to the flexibility that such courses offered. They cited the fact that they could work on their coursework in different settings and times as a contributing factor in making their decision. As one student stated, “It’s just easier with the time. Like you can do school work at work or the library, or wherever there is a computer. [It’s] also less time consuming.” The flexibility that these courses offer enable many students to pursue their education while dealing with conflicting life demands such as working and raising families, “I work full time and I’m a single parent, and I take classes at night and mostly all classes I need are not offered at this time. So I have to take online courses.” Another single parent student reiterated the benefit of online courses stating: “That I don’t have to pay for a sitter after work.” Other students cited health related reasons, “I have really bad asthma and cannot go out during winter.” While another student stated because she takes care of her two disabled children, online courses were the only option for her. It is clear that online courses are providing students the means to achieve their college goals despite certain life circumstances that might otherwise have impeded this realization. The same factors that contributed to initial enrollment in online courses were cited as reasons for reenrollment in online courses in subsequent semesters.

### *Difficulties with Online Courses*

A number of students indicated that they initially believed that online courses would be easier than regular courses, but they later discovered that this type of course was actually more difficult than they expected. These difficulties arose out of what the students perceived as disadvantages to online coursework. The most commonly cited disadvantage of taking online courses was the lack of face-to-face interaction. As stated by one student, “I prefer sitting and having the teacher right in front of me...also the group work is a learning experience for me and you can’t really do that online.” A number of students felt that having the instructor and other students in the same room provided a form of interaction that facilitated the learning process. Understandably, this was something that could not be achieved during the course of online instruction.

Students also felt that the lack of a lecture component in online coursework engendered a feeling that they were “teaching themselves.” One student reiterated this point by saying, “I personally learn better through lecture than having to go through the material and teach myself, so I didn’t do so well, so I haven’t taken any more [online courses].” The students that felt that online coursework meant that one had to “teach themselves,” or participate in self-taught instruction, also believed that the lack of structured, scheduled times put them at a disadvantage. The absence of daily in-class reminders of class exams and assignments made things more difficult for some students. For example, one student told us, “I don’t do well when there is a lack of structure. You need to be disciplined.”

Some students also mentioned being challenged with the varying platforms of online course delivery. As one student pointed out, “the instructors all have different requirements...its confusing the way they want the assignments...some use Course Compass and others want the assignments sent through Blackboard, others through email; so it gets to be difficult finding out

how each instructor wants things done.” Other issues that were mentioned were technical problems (slow internet speed and server being “down”).

### *Intervening Factors*

It is apparent that other factors have influenced whether students have successful learning experiences in online courses. Some students claim that some courses are well suited for this delivery method while others are not. A few students described their experiences in taking math courses online and felt that this class was better offered in a traditional setting where the students could see the instructor working out problems on the board. Two other students who had taken Anatomy and Physiology online also believed that this course was not well suited to an online course format due to the large amount of information that is presented in this class. Individual learning style was also a mediating factor in doing well in an online class; some students described themselves as more of a “hands-on” type of learner and others mentioned that online classes are better suited for “audio learners” as opposed to “visual learners.”

### *Reasons for Not Reenrolling*

While some students stated that the reason they were no longer enrolled in online courses was because they were dissatisfied with the platform or overall structure of online classes, the majority of students cited the limited availability of online courses as the main reason for not reenrolling. In fact, some students’ only critique of online courses was the lack of online course availability, “They don’t offer enough courses...if I could take all my courses [online] I would.”

### *Communication with Online instructors*

Overall students are satisfied with the level of communication they have with their online course instructor. Most students felt comfortable communicating with them and only a few reported



discomfort when communicating with instructors. An overwhelming majority of students contacted their instructors via email. It is also important to note that instructor response was prompt and that all students interviewed said that instructors typically respond to their emails within a day. Most students find this method of communication very convenient; one student said, “You email and they respond within the same day. It’s easier through email...because as soon as class is done I’m out the door so it’s hard to find time to find teachers, get them and sit there and talk to them.” However, a few students stated that they still prefer face-to-face or verbal interactions: “Sometimes I wish I could talk to [online course instructor] more one-on-one, because I feel better talking to her this way and she can answer all my questions about course material that I have.”

### *Online Student Services*

The availability of various student services online would greatly benefit STC students, particularly those with time constraints. Students felt the main benefit of providing services such as financial aid advising, registration, and advisement online would be the elimination of wasted time waiting in long lines. Jagnet is the primary portal where students go to get check their information and register for classes. All students reported using this service but some mentioned that they would benefit from being able to do more on this website including being able to change their address, pay for classes, and receive advising. However, in terms of counseling, some students felt that discussing these issues would be better in person.

### **Recommendations**

STC is providing a vital, sought after option for individuals in the community to participate in postsecondary education by offering online courses. While the opinions and recommendations

of students that have been, or are currently enrolled in online coursework suggests that some improvements could be made, an expansion of online courses would clearly be welcomed.

### *Student Issues*

It is apparent that some of the factors that are inhibiting student success in online coursework are a result of personal student issues rather than institutional problems. Students understand that these types of courses require commitment and dedication and that a student must be self-motivated to do well in order to succeed. The homepage of STC's Distance Education website emphasizes that commitment, discipline, self-motivation, good time management skills, basic computer knowledge, basic internet navigation skills, a stable internet connection, and a reliable computer are essential to participate and succeed in distance education courses. Unfortunately, some students underestimate the skills and abilities that are required for a successful experience when enrolling in online courses. While the brunt of the responsibility for overcoming obstacles such as procrastination and commitment are the responsibility of the student, STC could assist students by incorporating a mandatory online orientation course that clearly outlines what is expected of students enrolled in online courses. An online orientation in addition to the already available Readiness for Education at a Distance Indicator (READI) quiz—which assess student readiness for distance education classes (STC, n.d.)—would insure that students have a better understanding of the expectations that STC has of them as online students.

### *Course Content*

While some students suggested that some of courses—such as mathematic or certain types of sciences courses—might not translate well into an online environment, it is possible that the inclusion of additional course content might help these courses translate better into an online

environment. For example, one student described how one particular instructor dealt with this issue by providing videos that students could access over their course shell. This student stated, “What I liked about one of my math classes is that he had videos of where he was teaching and showing, it was like you were in the classroom...it helped...it was the best instructor I ever had.” Adding the video component to some of the courses may also address some students’ desire to see course content in a lecture format.

Students also felt that becoming accustomed to online course formats can represent a challenge – a problem which is compounded when each instructor uses different platforms and software for course delivery. Therefore, in addressing this issue STC should consider and research the possibility of selecting a standard online course delivery platform (e.g. CMS) that could be used across all classrooms while still providing the flexibility for all faculty to incorporate all the resources and tools they deem appropriate to effectively conduct their course.

### *Student Services*

Students would welcome an expansion of the online student services that are offered. While most students are satisfied with the services that are already available online, many also feel that expanding these services would be of great benefit since it would lessen the burden of having to make trips to campus and waiting in long lines. The primary service that students would like to see added is additional help with financial aid. Although students can submit their application online, they do not get feedback if something is incorrect. Also, students feel that going in for advising can sometimes be problematic due to finding a time to meet with advisors and that the addition of online advising would also be welcome. Lastly, since students have already become familiar with Jagnet, this would probably be the best portal to launch all other student services.

## **Conclusion**

Online courses provided by the office of Distance Education at STC are filling a niche in the community for students who would otherwise have difficulty in accessing higher education. It is apparent that many of the difficulties and issues faced by students are similar to those faced in traditional, face-to-face courses. The expansion of online course offerings would be welcomed by students who have previously enrolled in online courses.

## **Appendix A:**

### **Protocol for students who have persistent (Spring 2009 to Fall 2009) enrollment in online courses**

- How many courses are you currently enrolled in?
- How many of those are online courses?
- How many on-line courses have you previously taken?
- What STC campus would you consider to be your home base?
- What was the reason you first enrolled in an on-line course?
- Why did you decide to take more on-line courses?
- What do you think are the advantages of taking an online course?
- What do you think are the disadvantages of taking an online course?
- If you could choose two things that would improve your experience in online courses, what would that be?
- Do you feel comfortable communicating with your online course instructor? Why or why not?
- Have you had any problems communicating with your online course instructor?
- Is your course instructor available when you need them?
- How do you usually communicate with your online course instructor?
- Do you prefer online or regular courses?
- Why do you prefer these types of courses?
- What types of student services have you used online?
- Do you wish there were more student services online, what types?

## **Appendix B:**

### **Protocol for students who are no longer enrolled in online courses**

- What STC campus do you consider to be your home base?
- How many courses are you currently taking?
  - How many of those are online?
- How many online courses have you previously taken?
- What was the reason you first enrolled in an online course?
- Why haven't you taken more online courses?
- What do you think are the advantages of taking an online course?
- What do you think are the disadvantages of taking an online course?
- When you took your online course, did you feel comfortable communicating with your online course instructor?
  - Why or why not?
- Did you have any problems communicating with your online course instructor?
- Was your course instructor available when you need them?
- How did you usually communicate with your online course instructor?
- Do you prefer online or regular courses?
  - Why do you prefer these type of courses?
- Would you take another online course?
  - If yes, when do you plan to enroll in more online courses?
  - If no, what would make taking more online courses appealing to you?

- Are there online services that you wish were available to you?
  - If so, what are they?
  
- What do you currently do if you need services like financial aid assistance, counseling, advising, etc.?
  
- If you could choose two things that would improve your experience in online courses, what would that be?

## **Appendix B:**

### **Protocol for students who are *only* enrolled in online courses**

- Which STC campus do you consider to be your home base?
- How many on-line courses are you currently enrolled in?
- How many on-line courses have you previously taken?
- What was the reason you first enrolled in an on-line course?
- Why did you decide to take more on-line courses?
- What do you think are the advantages of taking an online course?
- What do you think are the disadvantages of taking an online course?
- Do you feel comfortable communicating with your online course instructor?
  - Why or why not?
- Have you had any problems communicating with your online course instructor?
- Is your course instructor available when you need them?
- How do you usually communicate with your online course instructor?
- Do you prefer online or regular courses?
  - Why do you prefer these types of courses?
- Are there online services that you wish were available to you?
  - If so, what are they?
- What do you currently do if you need services like financial aid assistance, counseling, advising, etc.?
- Would you use services more if they were available only or more convenient to access online?
- If you could change two things about online courses, what would they be?



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