

STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES IN ONLINE COURSES:

**A Study Using Asynchronous
Online Focus Groups**

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Abstract

In an effort to improve the quality of online learning, an online focus group research project was undertaken to better understand how online students approach web based learning and how this approach changes with greater experience in online courses. Because of the unique nature of online learning, asynchronous electronic focus groups were used to allow participants to discuss and interact through a medium that is part of their online learning environment. Over seventy-five online students, both new and experienced online learners from 11 public and private institutions, participated in the asynchronous focus group research project. Several important themes emerged during both the fall and spring semesters. Most significant was the importance of the role of faculty in facilitating successful online courses through effective communication with their students, presence online, and timely assessment of student work throughout the course. Other factors that emerged as significant to online learning included the importance of flexibility in online courses, the discipline necessary to be successful in online courses, the importance of communication among students as a means to enhance the online learning environment and also the importance of student support systems to foster a positive online learning experience.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

METHODOLOGY

- ? Five online focus groups of 10/12 participants in the Fall 2001 and eight online focus groups of five to 12 participants in Spring 2002
- ? Contacted via email with instructions for entering the discussion list September of 2001 & January of 2002.
- ? First set of discussion threads for new focus group members – general questions, student preparation, student computer skills, student support services, student faculty interaction
- ? First set of discussion threads for returning focus group members – student interaction, student preparation and advisement
- ? Online coursework activity log sent to students week of November, 2001 & April, 2002
- ? Second set of discussion threads for new focus group members – overview questions, online tutoring, group projects, assessment
- ? Second set of discussion threads for returning focus group members – expectations of online courses, challenges and global questions regarding online courses

DATA ANALYSIS

- ? Data analysis began after all students responded to the first set of discussion threads and continued until the completion of the second set of discussion threads
- ? Analysis followed qualitative coding procedures seeking out common themes in the data.

GENERAL INFORMATON

- ? Students indicate the primary reason for taking online courses is the flexibility online courses offer
- ? The primary challenges of online courses are – technical challenges & intellectual challenges
- ? Discipline & staying on task are also significant challenges when taking online courses
- ? Students indicate that mathematically based courses are much more difficult online
- ? The online environment can generate better communication among students, especially for those students unwilling to speak in an onground classroom setting
- ? Faculty must assist in fostering positive communication
- ? But some students indicated that the online environment does not provide the intangibles of communication that are provided onground

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

STUDENT PREPARATION FOR ONLINE COURSES

- ? Some students did not prepare for their online courses
- ? Students who had experience with online courses found preparation for the next online course much easier
- ? Those who did prepare took two different approaches
Technical preparation:
 - software and/or hardware upgrades
 - explored course websites / tested features of the site
- ? *Course preparation*
 - reviewed readings
 - same preparation as for onground course
- ? Students also commented on the benefits of working ahead if allowed in some online courses

ONLINE COURSEWORK ACTIVITY

- Data collected from one week online coursework activity log:
- ? Students spend an average number of 15 hours per week on one online course
 - Approximately 3.5 hours per week on offline reading
 - Approximately 2.5 hours per week on formal reports
 - Approximately 2 hours per week on individual projects
 - ? Sunday – most active day for online coursework
 - ? Humanities courses most time intensive of all online courses
 - ? Greatest student activity for online courses was in the evening during the week and throughout the day on Saturday/Sunday

STUDENT COMPUTER SKILLS

- ? Knowledge of the Internet and ability to navigate websites, email programs, word processing software essential skills for online students
- ? Students with more technical knowledge believed more computer skills were essential vs. students with less technical knowledge indicated that students could learn skills as they progressed through online courses
- ? Students had thought about the potential for technical problems and had plans in place if they encountered such problems (family/friend computer, work computer after hours, library)
- ? Faculty should be aware of the potential for technical problems and should clearly outline procedures at the start of the course should students encounter such problems
- ? Institutions must be responsible for the infrastructure supporting online courses and students should not be penalized if that infrastructure encounters problems

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

STUDENT FACULTY INTERACTION

- ? Faculty need to provide continual communication to students to answer questions regarding the online course
- ? Assignments must be given with full and complete instructions and expectations to avoid confusion
- ? Communication between faculty and students requires faculty to respond in a timely fashion to student communications, especially responding to emails.
- ? Assessment of student work must be clear and ongoing throughout the semester
- ? A positive relationship between students and faculty develop when faculty foster a positive communication environment

STUDENT TO STUDENT INTERACTION

- ? Students feel more connected to other students via communication in online courses
- ? This communication enhanced the learning environment for online students
- ? A potential detriment to this enhanced interaction among students is the possibility for misunderstandings or flaming discussions online

ASSESSMENT

- ? Students continued to emphasize the need for timely feedback from faculty regarding their progress in the course
- ? Students also needed to have a clear and continual understanding of how they were being assessed throughout the course

OVERVIEW QUESTIONS

- ? Students indicated that what makes a good instructor a good online instructor is faculty presence in the online course, communication, accessibility, active involvement and clarification in assignments and grading
- ? Most students also indicated that they would take another online course, primarily because of the flexibility that was offered online
- ? Some students also commented on the amount of work that online courses require. These students indicated they did not anticipate that online courses would require significant effort and time

STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

- ? Registration experiences ranged from very good to very bad – some registered completely online others registered onground
- ? Advising experiences also ranged from very good to very bad
 - Some students saw no need to utilize an advisor
 - Other students utilized advisement and recognized it's importance
 - Advisement occurred onground for some and online for others

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- ? Students indicated the need for institutions to recognize registration and advising needs for online students were different than the needs of onground students. Students emphasized the need to put in place systems to address those differences
- ? The primary suggestion was creation of a website specifically for online students that allowed for registration and advisement to occur completely online
- ? Security and privacy concerns were also mentioned if such a website were developed

GROUP PROJECTS

- ? Few students participated in group projects, those that did indicated the difficulty of coordinating group participation at a distance, and also difficulties in communication and cooperation that may occur in group projects onground as well as online

ONLINE TUTORING

- ? Those students who did utilize the Smartthinking tutoring system were pleased with the experience
- ? Others who did not indicated it was a service that they would seek out in the future

Introduction

As part of the continuing efforts to improve the quality of online learning in the course and program offerings of a state-wide consortium of higher education institutions, we have undertaken a three year research project to better understand how online students first approach web based learning and how that approach changes as they become more experienced. We have chosen to conduct this research using online asynchronous focus groups.

On-line focus group research is in the preliminary stages in both social science and market research. Researchers are beginning to understand that using asynchronous and synchronous technologies augments the benefits of focus group methods. Qualitative analysis, through the use of focus group research, can provide a rich source of information regarding the online learning experiences of students. Because of the nature of online learning, the use of asynchronous electronic focus groups will allow participants to discuss and interact through a medium that is a part of their online learning environment. Research questions that explore an on-line phenomenon are strengthened through the use of a method of research that closely mirrors the natural setting under investigation (Gaiser, 1997). Use of asynchronous online focus groups that transpire over the course of a semester reflects the environment experienced by online students.

Advantages of on-line focus groups, more specifically synchronous online focus groups, that have been noted include congruence with the environment being studied, increased ease of communication between participants, greater equality of participation in the discussion, anonymity of participants, reduction in bias, ability to recruit diverse populations, and the ability to address more controversial topics. Disadvantages associated with on-line focus groups, include under representation of the overall population because only internet users are included, loss of verbal cues during communication, potential problem of protection of privacy of discussion, a high no-show rate among participants agreeing but failing to take part in the online focus groups, and potential issues regarding flam-

ing discussions within an on-line discussion (Geiser, 1997; Montoya-Weiss, M., Massey, A., Clapper, D., 1998; Schneider, S., Kerwin, J., Frechtling, J. & Vivari, B., 2001; & Tse, A., 1999). Lack of nonverbal (facial expression, body posture, etc.) and paraverbal cues (voice inflection, interjections, laughter, etc.) have been identified as another disadvantage to online focus groups. Yet other research has suggested use of common emoticons and abbreviations can augment the lack of nonverbal and paraverbal cues in an online environment (Schneider et al., 2002 & Walston & Lissitz, 2000). A further disadvantage attributed to online focus groups includes more abbreviated responses to questions and an overall lower level of individual dialogue in the discussion (Schneider et al., 2002). This disadvantage was evident in synchronous online focus groups and may not be applicable to asynchronous focus group discussions.

For some students a benefit to the asynchronous on-line learning environment is the ability for enhanced communication between students and faculty versus communication in the on-ground classroom environment. Students apprehensive about communicating in an on-ground classroom are more likely to participate in discussions via an on-line environment. Issues related to race, social class, age and perceived level of expertise are not apparent in an on-line forum; participants hesitant to enter discussions in-person may be more comfortable entering on-line discussions (Sullivan, P. 1999). On-line focus groups may facilitate discussion of more controversial topics than would be possible in a traditional focus group format. Students may feel more comfortable discussing difficult issues regarding the on-line learning experiences. However, the moderator must be sure to set ground rules at the beginning of the session that will establish the tone of the discussion and prevent students from entering into flaming rhetoric or discussions that deviate far from the topics presented.

This methodology offers two other advantages for this type of study. It overcomes the problems of distance and time. Our multi-institutional sample includes students with distance and time constraints that would preclude them from par-

ticipation in an onsite focus group. There is also a time and money savings. The asynchronous chat room creates an immediate transcript of the focus group which can be reviewed by both the participants and the researchers. This eliminates the need for costly transcribing of tapes and allows the participants to comment on or correct any information immediately or at a later date.

METHODOLOGY FOR ONLINE FOCUS GROUPS

This study was conducted during the Fall 2001 semester and again during the Spring 2002 semester using students who were enrolled in online courses or an online program and were matriculated at any of 11 institutions which are part of a state-wide consortium. The institutions and the one system representing four institutions participating in the research recruited between eight and ten online students, representing a sample of students taking on-line courses at their institutions. The students recruited include both new and returning on-line students, to gain a better understanding of the variety of their experiences. Participants received detailed explanations of focus of the research, their responsibilities as participants and signed informed consent forms. Participants were provided a stipend for participation in the focus groups at the completion of the semester.

For the Fall 2001 project, students were separated into five focus groups based on the number of online credits they had accumulated. Students new to on-line education were placed with other new students, and participants with more on-line experience were grouped with students with similar experience. This allowed new students to discuss issues pertaining to entry into the on-line education environment, more experienced participants could discuss issues faced when already exposed to the on-line education environment. Each focus group had students representing at least three different institutions. There were a total of sixty-four participants at the beginning of the project in the Fall 2001 semester. Each focus group had a minimum of eleven participants, with a maximum of fourteen in one group. Eight participants withdrew from the study before completion, leaving fifty-six total participants for the entire semester. By gender, there were forty-

three women (67%) and twenty-one men (33%) in the project. This demographic is roughly equivalent to the percentage of men and women taking online courses at the participating institutions.

For the Spring 2002 semester, those students who were continuing to take online courses and who were interested in continuing in the study were collapsed into four focus groups. An additional set of four new focus groups was formed with students who were not participants in the Fall 2001 project. As with the Fall 2001 focus groups, the new participants were separated into groups with every effort being made to keep students new to online learning in groups separate from those with more online learning experience, but this was not possible for all groups. For the returning participants, every effort was made to keep the original groups intact, but because some students were no longer taking online courses and others were not interested in continuing, one group had only five participants while another group had ten. Three of the new focus groups for the Spring 2002 project had ten participants, the fourth had eleven participants. By gender, there were twenty-six female participants (60%) and 17 male participants (40%). Two participants were not contained in these percentages; their gender was not indicated. Of a total of seventy-four students enrolled to participate in the Spring 2002 semester focus groups, fifty-four students completed participation.

Participants were contacted via email in the second week of each semester. They were given instructions regarding a general overview of the project, their responsibilities as a participant, ground rules for the discussion and information on how to log into the discussion groups. It was important to explain the requirements and expectations for the participants and to establish necessary ground rules prior to beginning the focus group in order to facilitate a positive environment that encourages active discussion by all participants. Participants were asked to print and save the email message for future reference.

Participants were expected to take part in two focus group sessions during each semester. The first thread posted to each focus group contained a welcome message, introduction and a sample response to a question in a discussion thread. The

sample response was designed to help participants understand the detail of the responses desired for each question. Following the welcome message, four separate threads were also posted. The threads represented major topic areas deemed important to students' experiences in the online learning process. These questions were generated following a review of the online literature regarding student experiences and also content review by a panel of experts.

The Spring 2002 focus groups followed the same format. Students returning to their second focus group discussion were welcomed back, reminded of their responsibilities to the focus group and were asked to read and respond to a new set of discussion threads. The new focus group participants were given the same instructions as the Fall 2001 participants and the same set of threaded discussions. In an effort to enhance understanding of students' experiences with online learning and contribute to the themes developed from the Fall 2001 responses, the same questions were asked to the new participants in the Spring 2002 focus groups.

A week after the first set of discussion threads were posted for the Fall 2001 and Spring 2002 groups, follow-up emails were sent to those participants who had not responded. Students who had not logged onto the discussion groups a week following the initial email were sent a follow-up reminder to log into the focus groups. Included in this reminder were the instructions for the focus groups that were sent in the original email. Students who had not logged onto the discussion two weeks after the initial email and one week after the first follow-up email were sent an additional email reminding them of their participation in the focus groups and the need to log on and respond to the questions posted.

To facilitate greater discussion, participants were encouraged to respond directly to comments posted by other participants without input from the moderator. This was encouraged in order to facilitate greater discussion on more topics than those introduced by the moderator and lead to greater understanding of the experiences of online students. A benefit to asynchronous discussion allows both participants and moderators to reflect on what is being discussed and how to re-

spond to this discussion (Monotya-Weiss, et al., 1998). This reflective time allowed for continual analysis of the responses, uncovering new themes and introduction of new topics based on those emerging themes.

A second set of discussion threads was posted at the end of each semester. Students were contacted as they had been for the first set of threads, via email directing them to the site. The second set of questions sought more in-depth understanding of issues and themes that had emerged during the first set of questions and also sought to gain greater understanding of students' experiences as they had progressed in their online courses throughout the semester. This set of discussion questions focused on assessment within the online course, utilization of online tutoring services, experiences with group projects and a final set of questions regarding what students believed made a good online instructor and whether they would take another online course.

Initial Analysis

Two weeks following initial student participation, the discussion responses for each focus group were combined and sorted by topic. Each topic was coded in collaboration with Diane Goldsmith, project director, following data analysis procedures for focus groups as detailed by Krueger (1994) and following qualitative coding procedures seeking out common themes in the data. Topic areas were designed to facilitate responses that would move from more general understanding to more detailed discussion during the second contact during the semester following Krueger's (1994) suggestion to begin focus groups with initial general discussion of topics to allow participants to become familiar with the topic area, and then follow with more key questions regarding the areas of interest.

This method was modified for the online environment. The first set of focus group questions was more general and designed for understanding the initial processes of learning in an online environment. The second set of questions was designed to understand the students' experiences throughout the semester, focusing on specific activities that may have occurred during the semester.

Based on themes developed from initial coding procedures, these themes were integrated into the second semester of focus group questions, allowing for an iterative collection of data. New discussion threads added for returning focus group participants included “student-to-student interaction”, “the most significant challenges faced in online courses”, and the “process of student preparation for an online course after having taken at least one online course”.

General Questions

The first set of questions that were posed to students addressed some general information regarding online courses including why the student selected an online course, what challenges they anticipated during the semester, and the expectations they held for their online course.

As expected, most students indicated that restrictions in personal schedules made online courses appealing, including the convenience of not having to be on campus during the week, flexibility with personal commitments, and ability to take courses around work schedules.

I have a very busy schedule and it is hard to commit to being in class on a specified date and time. Online classes give me the flexibility to take classes and complete the work on my schedule and at the times that I can fit it in which vary each week. [EB – F1]

I am taking on-line courses to suit my work schedule. I do not have time for much of anything else on the day I work other than work. Its a hour ride to and from with a twelve hour watch. In one word it would be, flexibility [SG – F2]

My work schedule is very demanding and I commute 2 ½ hours a day, I needed the flexibility. [VB – SFG5]

When asked about the challenges students anticipated encountering online, challenge was conceptualized for some as technical challenge, for others as intellectual challenge, and for others as a discipline challenge.

From a technical perspective, students believed that they would encounter challenges when working with computers and challenges understanding the Internet and various software programs that are necessary to function within an online environment.

I expect to find more challenges in software usage and compatibility of versions and completing the large amount of homework. I also feel challenged trying to connect with the links and using unfamiliar features and software. It is difficult to do the homework without a teacher there to get me over the little and big problems that I encounter as I am working with the computer and the course work. [SW – F5]

As an intellectual challenge, students believed that the greatest challenge to online courses would be learning and understanding the concepts that would be presented in the course (i.e. course content would be a challenge).

Possible challenges would to not have a full understanding of a concept and be in need of extra help. [JJ – F2]

The instructor has a completely different style of teaching that I am not used to. He sums up an entire chapter in 10 multiple-choice questions. It has been difficult for me to relate accounting equations and questions into a multiple-choice question. But I think I am getting the hang of it. [EB -F5]

I get a lot more from lectures than reading and so this course being totally reading and discussion will definitely be a challenge for me. This is another reason I took the course, to learn not to depend so much on lectures for information. [MM – SFG5]

Another challenge that students discussed was the challenge of being a disciplined student in the online environment. Students believed that because there is no specific meeting time (i.e. on-ground class time) that there would be a greater need for self-discipline and also a need to be self-motivated if they were to be successful in their

online courses.

Discipline is a very important part of online learning. I am finding this to be the most difficult aspect for me as an online student. I delude myself into thinking I have more time to complete assignments because I don't have to physically show up for a class. [VG – F1]

The challenges I expect from these classes are, for the most part, ones of personal challenge, to discipline myself to keep up with the work, meet the deadlines and do quality work, but also to learn on my own. It is difficult to teach yourself about computers, but learning them this way, you know you have the support behind you, but you are more apt to challenge your own self before going to others. [TL – F3]

Another interesting student perception regarding the challenges of online courses was the belief that mathematically based courses (i.e. math, statistics, finance, accounting) would be much more challenging in an online environment than on-ground.

The difficulty of some online classes versus others, classes involving math, may have problems because you can not see the development of the problem on the board (i.e. when an instructor reviews some questions and makes sure you know where to go to in the book and use the right table, etc.). [CG – F4]

Mathematics and classes involving math to me are very hard to accomplish online because you need someone to guide you while doing the problems. [VH - F4]

Students also indicate that there is a challenge for faculty to facilitate and foster communication between students and faculty and among students. Some students have had experiences with faculty who have not adequately communicated with students, leaving students feeling frustrated throughout the course.

Finding a level of interaction with stu-

dents and the professor can be difficult to do. Some courses I have taken have been on the cold side, others have had excellent interaction. [DP – SFG5]

I know that the teacher is available via email, and the online message boards, but it's still not the same as having him or her next to you, helping you out. [SR- F7]

I have had challenges with instructors in the past regarding being able to ask questions and get clear answers on a timely basis. [DC – SFG5]

When discussing their expectations for online courses, students believed course content and development of understanding in the course should parallel what is learned in an on-ground setting. Students indicated they thought that online courses would be more challenging than on-ground courses; some of those reasons are listed above. But students were careful to emphasize that the greater challenge should not come from course content; online courses should not be conceptually harder than on-ground courses.

I think students should expect that the class would be as challenging as an on-ground class, but certainly not harder!! Why would someone elect to take a class that they knew would be harder? I think that is my biggest issue with my class. I took it so it would save me some time, and I am spending more time preparing than I would for a regular class. [AD – F1]

I don't think we should expect it to be more of a challenge at all. It may well be more challenging based on the fact that we don't have face-to-face communication with the instructor or possibly the information, but it should not be designed from the start to be any more challenging than attending a class. [CR - F1]

Some students indicated that the challenge to online courses would require greater creativity, and use of different resources within the process.

Maybe regarding the course work should be more challenging in the sense, more creativity since you are using the Internet, you can be more creative with your work, thoughts, and comments. [SC - F1]

Discussion regarding student expectations for online courses focused on the expectations students had for faculty teaching the courses. Students expect faculty to maintain interaction with the students and also maintain student discussion. Faculty are also expected to provide feedback through comments, and also provide the student with timely and clear assessment.

I have found in this particular course that I do not have much help, guidance or feedback from this instructor. I don't feel that I am provided with the proper tools to complete assignments and wonder all the time whether I am doing the work as she expects. [EB - F1]

So far I am enjoying my classes but found that the instructor in a class really impacts the students and if you have a good instructor who keeps the group on focus and makes regular contributions to the focus group especially touching base with all of the students comments is helpful. [SB - F4]

Students emphasized that immediacy of feedback is crucial. Interestingly, students discussed the role of the faculty member in the online environment in terms of the importance of faculty interaction and assessment of student learning, and did not discuss the importance of the ability of faculty to present materials and dispense knowledge in course content. This area will be explored more fully in the section regarding student-faculty interaction.

I expect that the only drawback thus far has been the lack of feedback I have gotten from the professor for my current course. Feedback always helps me fine tune future assignments and is a vital part for me in the learning process, and I feel that this area has been somewhat lacking in my personal situation. [VG - F1]

I expect my professors to clearly state the intentions of the class. I also expect them to pose questions and actually attend their own forum. [KR - F1]

Students were better able to articulate their preferences as a student in comparison to discussion of perceived learning styles. Students fell into two categories when discussing preferences, those who believed online courses are better versus those who believed that on-ground courses were better. Those students who indicated that online courses are better believed that interaction between student and faculty and among students were better than on-ground. In the online environment, independent learning is fostered, and students who are reluctant to speak in the traditional classroom environments feel more comfortable in discussions online.

As an online student, I have found that it is my responsibility to initiate communication with the instructor. Even in a traditional classroom, it is hard for a professor to know if his students understand the material. But at least the professor can see the students and perhaps interpret their body language. Also, sometimes a quiet student may have their question answered because another student speaks up and asks a particular question. With online learning, a student really needs to make an effort to have a dialogue with the professor. In my case this works well. Sometimes, in the classroom setting, I can be "shy" or feel intimidated by an instructor. Being able to write my questions and concerns in an e-mail is sometimes easier for me than raising my hand in class. [MR - F4]

Being able to communicate with the whole class at any time I was able to get the feedback that I was looking for to make sure that I was doing the assignments right. [AB - F3]

Along this line of thinking, students believed that the increase in the number of participants in the discussion allowed for more viewpoints to be explored. With the asynchronous format of online

courses, students have more time to think about responses, which can also create a more thoughtful discussion than one that occurs on-ground.

Because online discussions are really the only way we communicate with one another I think that having something to say is a responsibility also. I do believe that the discussions that we have in our online class are interesting and I think that discussions in an online environment may in fact be better. I think that some people shy away from speaking in class but in an online environment no one knows who you are and you don't have to speak up in front of a group of people. Overall however, I feel that taking an online course really isn't that different from taking any other class. It just gives you more of an opportunity to speak without feeling embarrassed or what have you. [RR – F3]

Yes it can be more enriching. Everyone is participating, so people that might not otherwise speak up are given the opportunity to contribute, and with that you get a wealth of knowledge and diversity [AD – F1]

Students who perceived on-ground courses to be better believed that the immediacy of discussion between instructor and student and student to student was more constructive than the delayed discussion online. These students also believe that instructor responses to questions are better on-ground than online. Physical accessibility to instructors was seen as a benefit to on-ground courses, students believed they could hold faculty more responsible to their expectations of the course in a face-to-face environment. Students also discussed more extras, or intangibles, that are beneficial in an on-ground course, including the benefit of an instructor who is a good lecturer. The responses below were from students taking their second course online.

On-line there really isn't much the professor can do to make the material exciting, and there is no way to really have an open forum discussion, and be in the moment actively discussing the

material. [TH – F3]

I don't enjoy taking online courses at all. I find I can absorb more information when the teacher is in front of me. Plus with email if you don't get a reply there's always some excuse as to if or not you really sent it or if you actually did the work. [SW – F5]

This student had never taken an online course prior to the online focus group.

The disadvantage is what I have been experiencing this semester. The instructor does not answer phone calls or emails. You can't corner them face-to-face and get an answer, you just have to hope you are doing what is expected even though your instructor isn't. [EB – F1]

Student perceptions regarding what they expected from an online course revealed some of the characteristics of an adult learner. Students discussed the utilitarian function to education, the necessity for efficiency in their education, and often discussed what they needed from their educational experience.

My expectations for this course is to gain the knowledge that I need and apply it to the work I'm already doing. [VH – F4]

My expectations for the course I am taking on-line now involve gaining skill and familiarity with working with the web and web pages. I would like to be able to achieve financial success in my profession by marketing products on the www. [SW – F5]

I do think, from what others have spoken to, that DL is more suitable for the working adult learner. Not to say that a younger student would not do well, but I think there are different motivators for adults than for younger students. [EB – F1]

Recognizing what they perceived to be a significant challenge to the online course, students discussed the importance of “keeping up” with the

course. For some this challenge will be balanced with other demands typical of an adult student.

The challenges I expect to encounter with this class are keeping up with the work – it is a relatively heavy course load on top of other classes, and difficult to view it as a priority because we do not actively meet as a class at any time. [TH – F3]

I can speak for myself, challenges are always right around the corner. Between working, overtime, kids, house...each day delivers a new frustration that has to be dealt with. It's nothing new to all of us. Since an on-line class is not structured the same as actual class time, i.e., regular set time periods, and most of us run the class from home, many interruptions occur that pull us away from the task-at-hand. [EZ – F5]

The biggest challenge I face is how time consuming online classes are. I thought I would be able to spend more time with my daughter but instead am deeply stressed to state that my two classes require more work than any on-ground course I have ever taken. [KR – F1]

When discussing their responsibilities in an online course, students believe that they must participate in class discussions, which in turn encourages student to improve the course for themselves and for their classmates. But students believe faculty are responsible for creating and fostering this type of environment, which facilitates communication and camaraderie among students. Students believe, in addition to the responsibilities as described in the course syllabus they have a duty to work to enhance their online courses through participation in course discussions.

Students are expected to self motivate themselves so that they absorb the required material at the pace dictated by the instructor. We are expected to use each other as resources and ask for help before we run into time related problems. [CR–F1]

One of the challenges happens to be one of the benefits I need to make sure I log on and utilize the class as much as possible. [CL – F4]

Because online discussions are really the only way we communicate with one another I think that having something to say is a responsibility also. [TH – F3]

STUDENT PREPARATION ONLINE

When discussing preparation for online courses, students indicated they either did or did not prepare for their online courses. For those who did prepare for their courses, preparation was either from a technical perspective or from a coursework perspective.

Those students who indicated they had prepared for their course from a technical approach mentioned going to the course website, playing with the features of the site to feel more comfortable in the actual navigation of the course website. Other students discussed how they had made technical upgrades to prepare for the class; this included upgrading modem connections and software capabilities.

I prepared for taking on-line courses by playing on the computer. It still has taken me awhile to get the hang of it. You must be observant of the menu on-going in the left column of the screen. [SG – F2]

I prepared for taking my first online course by attending the orientation offered by my professor where we learned the basics of how to navigate around the site. [VS – F3]

The only thing I did was to convert my Internet service to cable. Cable service is 100 times faster than the standard 56k phone connection. [ML – F3]

Those students who prepared for their online courses who took the coursework approach indicated that they prepared for the class the same as they would have prepared for an on-ground course. This preparation included reviewing materials prior to the start of the course, reading

through textbooks, and reviewing materials central to the course.

I really did nothing special to prepare for my first on-line course other than register and order my books. My first online course was "Mark Twain and His Times." There was a lot of reading for that course, so I started reading my books as soon as they arrived. This gave me a little confidence on the day the course started. At least I knew I wouldn't fall behind right away. [MR – F4]

I prepared for my first online course the same way as I did for an actual on-campus class. I bought the books I needed and a fresh new five-subject notebook, which is coming in handy! [SC – F1]

When students were asked when they would complete their coursework, some students indicated they had set aside time that was to be dedicated to completing class work. Most students indicated that they would work on course assignments during times that became available in their schedule, taking advantage of all free time that they could. In either case, students stressed the essential component of having a flexible schedule in order to meet the demands necessary to be successful online.

I do a little at lunchtime at work, some while my children do their homework and the bulk after they go to bed between 9 and 11 p.m. Weekends depend on my responsibilities with my children. [EB – F1]

I do most of my online work on weekends when I can focus with a clear head instead of having to do it after work when I am feeling drained and tired. I also try and participate in the discussion boards during my lunch break at work. I use that time to read what others have written and make my responses. [KB – F1]

I do most of my reading in the bathtub (it is the only place I can be alone when

the kids are here and awake). I do the rest when everyone is sleeping. I am thinking of moving the computer into the bathroom. [JR – SFG5]

In addition to the flexibility students sought within their course work, students also indicated that having the opportunity to work ahead of the course schedule was an additional benefit that assisted students in not falling behind in their coursework.

I am working ahead a lot to keep myself in a situation where I can't get behind, even if something comes up that keeps me busy for a few days. [EB – F4]

Like most of the others have said in the group the key is to stay ahead of the game and not fall behind. I found that by staying slightly ahead of the schedule that it greatly enhances my grades, as I'm able to take on more active role in the threads rather than doing the reading a day or two before the assignment is due. [RC – F5]

Students who have had experience in online courses indicated that preparation for their next online course was similar to their initial course preparation and was easier for their second course. Many students did mention they would put forth greater effort to stay ahead of material and not procrastinate on assignments in their next online course.

I am much more at ease with the classes I am taking online this semester. I am much more relaxed and comfortable about emailing my instructors with any questions. [CP – SFG5]

I am not sure I am doing anything differently. I do have to admit I am a lot more comfortable and prepared then when I took my first online course. [SZ – FG3]

I find that I wait till the weekend so I have an entire block of time or even in the evenings, and it tends to cut into my family time, so I am hoping to discipline myself better to free up more time for

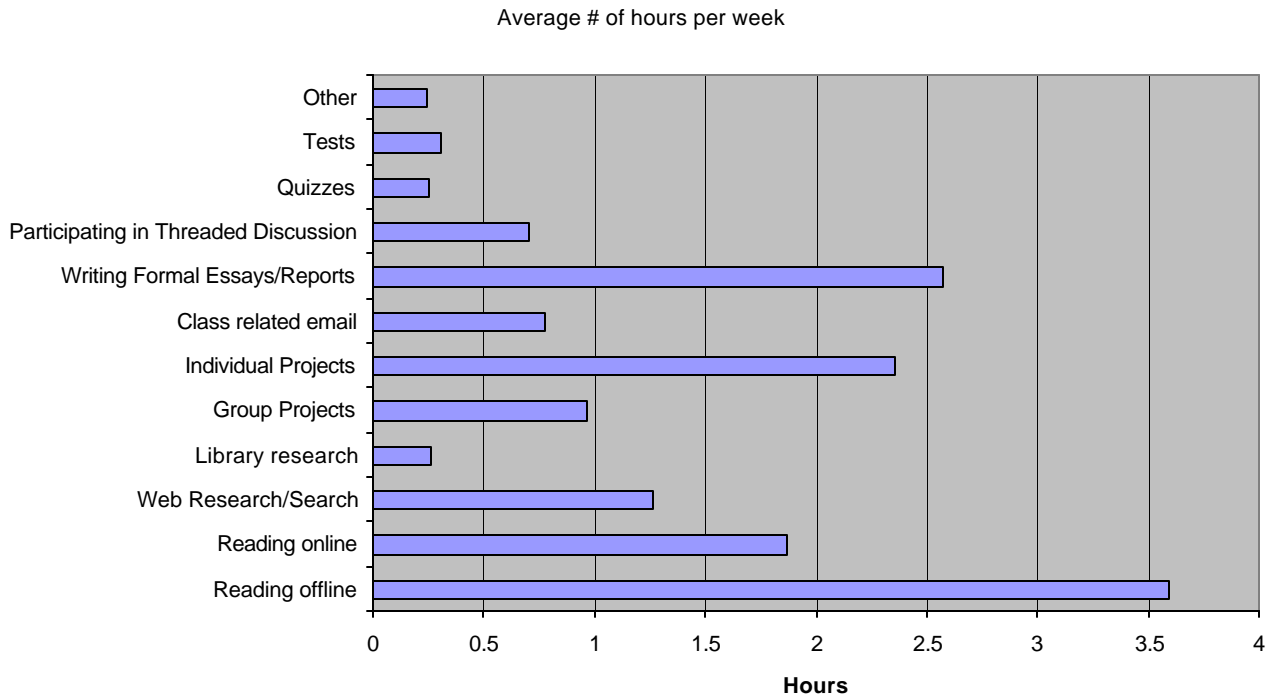
my family, which is why I am taking online classes in the first place. [TL – FG3]

This semester I am attempting to spread the work out a bit more throughout the week, it is easy to put off work until the last minute when you do not have to physically have class meetings, so more efficient time management is what I am planning on using this semester. [TH – FG3]

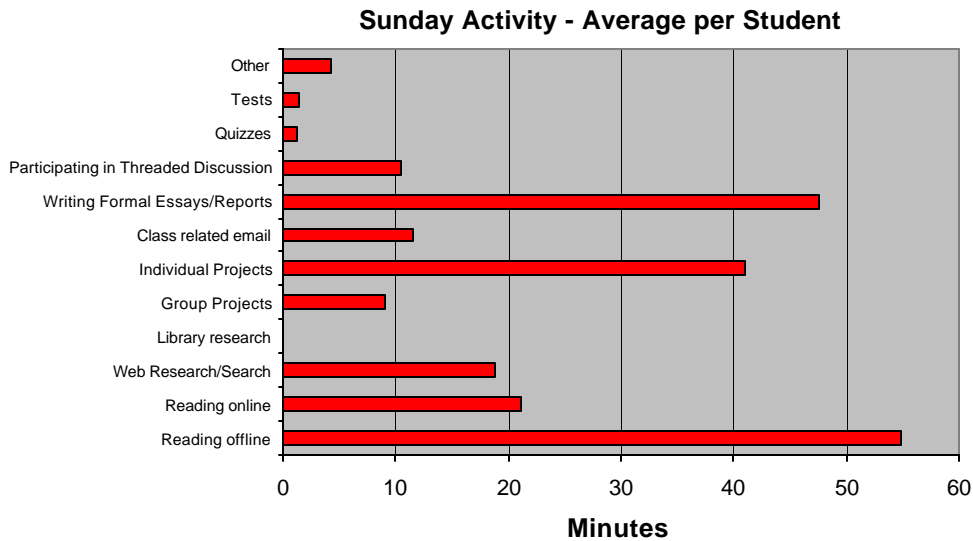
ON-LINE ACTIVITY CHARTS

Fall 2001 Participants

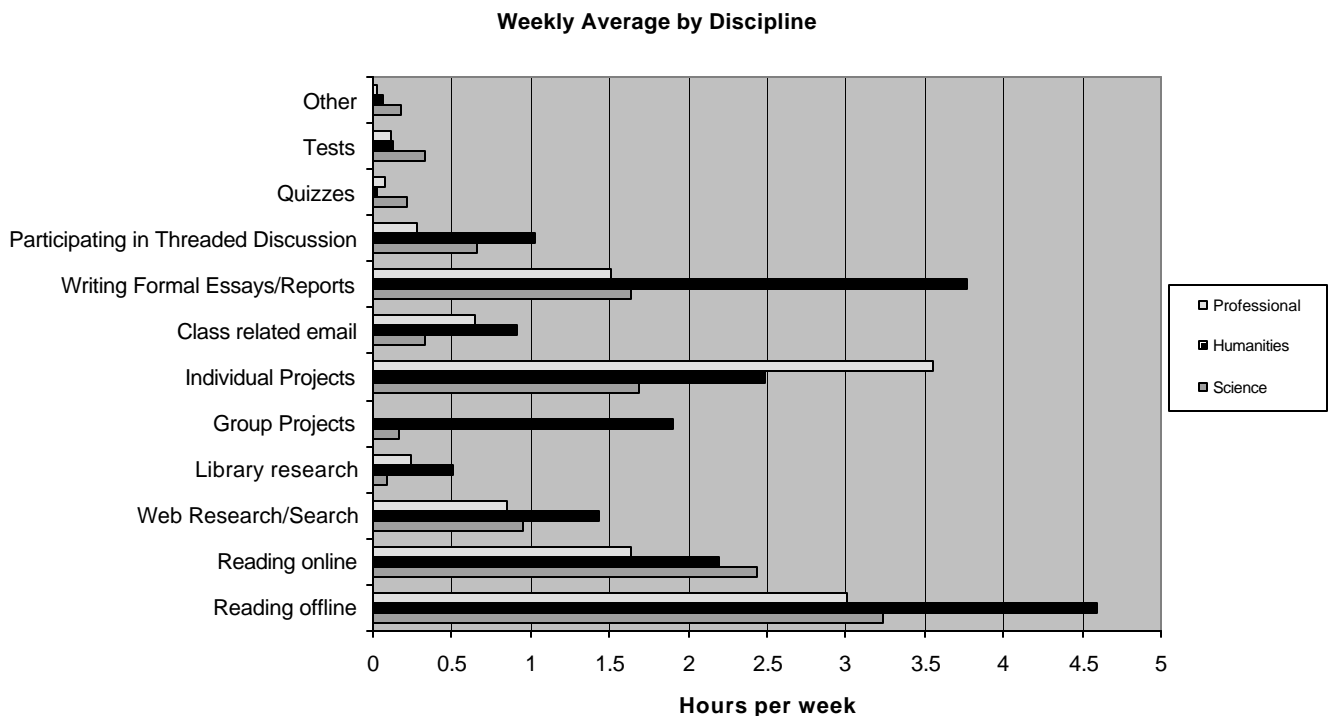
To aid in understanding how much time students spent per day/per week on various activities related to online coursework, students were asked to keep an activity log for one week. The log was structured to have students keep track of the number of minutes spent each day during particular course related activities.



The number of hours students spent reading offline clearly exceeds the number of hours spent per week on all other activities related to their online courses. Sunday was the day that most students, on average, did work for their online courses



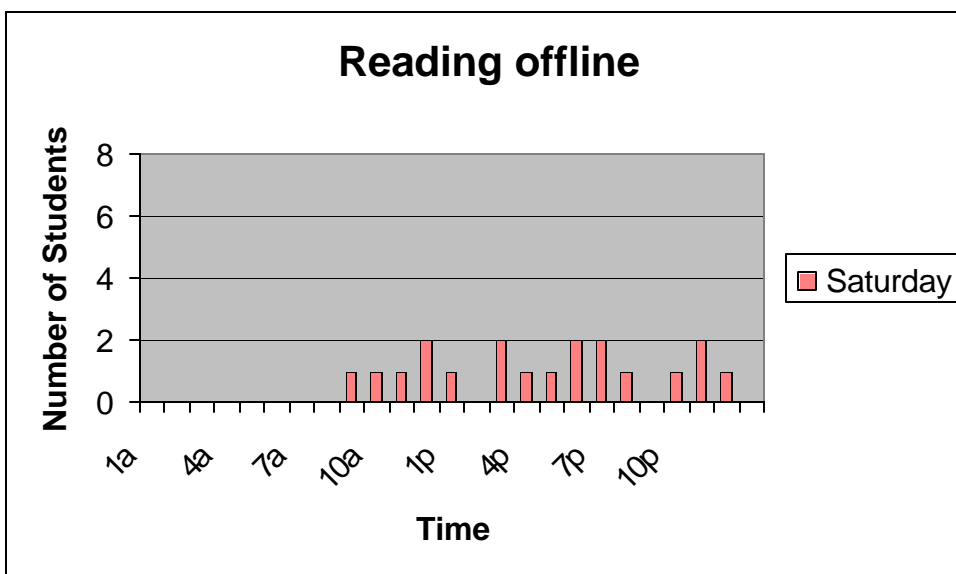
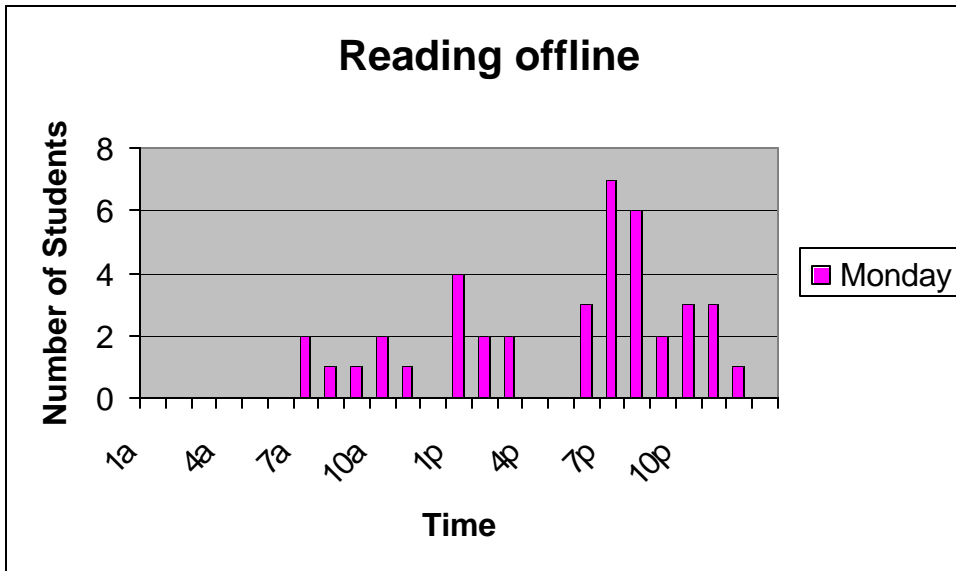
When comparing activity by discipline, humanities courses required the most work in terms of average number of hours spent per week per student.



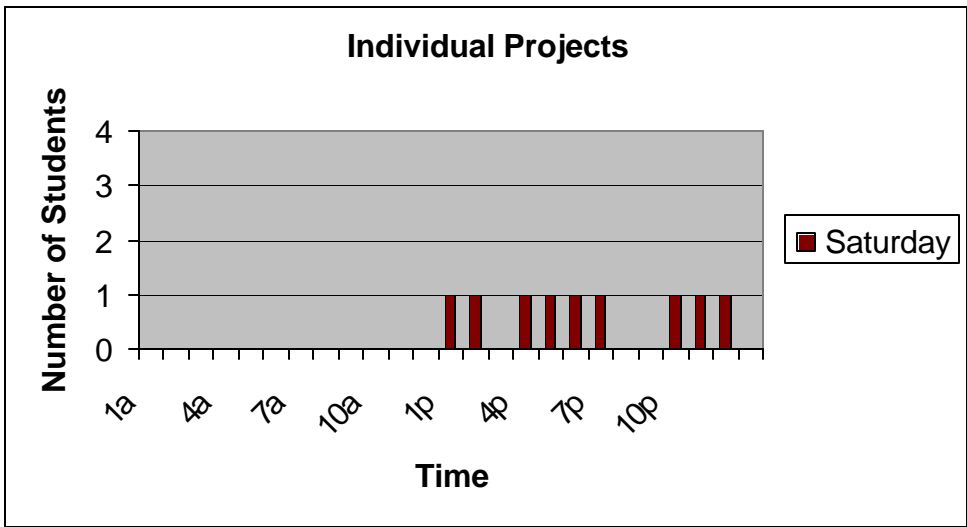
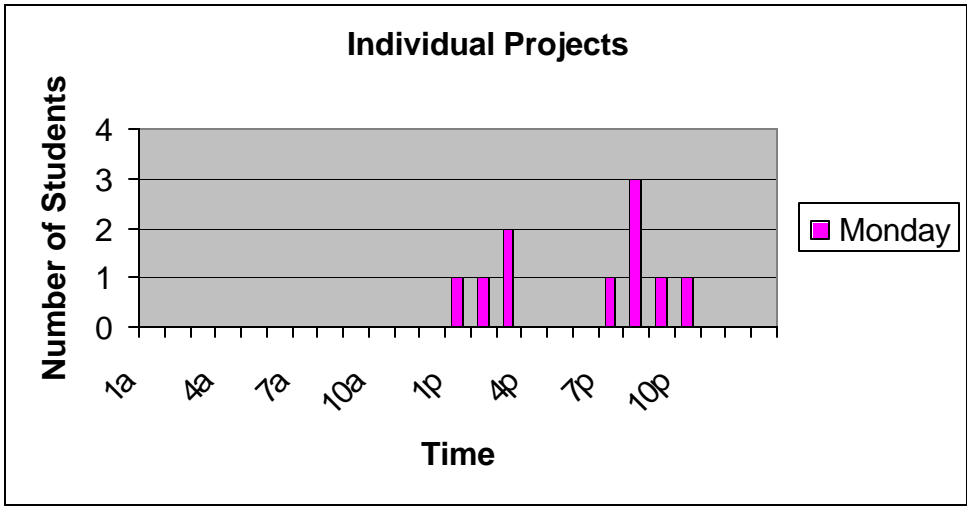
Spring 2002 Participants

To gain greater understanding of the time of day students are most often engaged in various activities associated with their online courses, all participants in the Spring 2002 online focus groups were asked to keep an hourly log of their online activities over the course of one week during the semester.

Consistent with the data from the online activity charts for the Fall 2001 participants, reading offline was the activity students engaged in most during the semester. Greatest student activity for online courses was on evenings during the week and most of the day on Saturday/Sunday.



Individual projects were also an activity many online students participated in, again most often in the evening during the week and throughout the day on weekends.



STUDENT IMPORTANCE OF COMPUTER SKILLS

Most students agreed that in order to be successful in an online course, a student must have an understanding of general word processing software (i.e. Microsoft Word), an understanding of how to use email and the Internet, and also how to attach documents in email.

You need to understand how email works and how to manipulate text. The ability to cut and paste and save to different formats is key. [CR – F1]

I think you need to be comfortable using the computer, at least as an end user. You don't need to know how it works, or why, but at least be able to use the programs with some ease..
AD – F1]

Other students indicated that knowledge of more advance technical skill was necessary in order to be successful in the online environment. Interestingly, students' perspectives on the importance of computer skills appeared to be related to the level of technical knowledge they already possessed.

You will need to make sure you have good computer skills before taking an online class. You will need to make sure you can put together papers in word or excel for the class. You need to feel comfortable on the computer. I have been using computers for years and am the systems contact in my office so I have plenty of experience. [CD – F4]

I believe you have to have a very good grasp on using most software programs such as Microsoft Word...it is also important to know how to use the Internet and know how to attach and download files. [KB – F1]

I think you need to be comfortable using the computer, at least as an end user. You don't need to know how it all works, or why, but at least be able to

use the programs with some ease.
[AD – F1]

Students who had limited knowledge, believed that with time, and practice, students with little computer technical skill could be successful online, and students with extensive technical understanding believed that this understanding was essential to success in distance learning.

I started my first DL class with practically NO computer skills, now I am not too bad, I can get around the net and the classroom. I have had no problems so far. [DC – F4]

Students also indicated that there must not be a fear of technology when entering the online environment, and that overcoming this fear and "jumping in" to online courses results in development of technical skills.

But if you are a good self learner all this will come in using the class site and experimenting. That is how I did it and I am doing well in my classes. [EB – F4]

You do not have to be extremely technical. Solid ability with a word processor, how email works and an ability to navigate around the site is all that is really needed. Lack of fear of new things on first online class, also. [SZ – F3]

I think you need basic computer and Internet skills, but there is no better way to learn than being thrown into the fire. [MM – SF5]

When asked about how they would address technical problems that might arise during the semester, most students reported having a back-up plan in case such a problem may occur. Having a back-up plan indicates that students did have the forethought to understand that such issues could arise and that they would need a plan to overcome these problems. The back-up plan for many students included identifying a computer and Internet connection that would be available if their computers failed. Students mentioned work, the library and family/friends as potential sources of computer/internet access. Other students men-

tioned spouse, family, friends or co-workers with extensive computer expertise who could be available to assist them in case of technical problems.

I have had computer problems many times. We have two computers at home. I have access at work and my husband has a computer at his shop. If my computer is giving me trouble I use the others until I get it fixed. [SB – F4]

I will complete my assignment at work after hours and will have to use my father's computer over the weekend as much as possible. [KB – F1]

During this discussion, students also indicated that faculty should also be aware and sensitive to problems relating to technical issues. Students believed faculty should have guidelines in place regarding technical problems, and how students could complete material and submit assignments if such problems arose.

Faculty should address the potential for technical problems before the courses begin and throughout the semester. They should outline a plan or alternative to hand in the assignment in case a problem arises. They should have an additional email address, a fax number and office hours should anyone feel they need to contact them for questions. [VH – F4]

Don't get me wrong I am no advocate of bureaucracy but I am an advocate of fairness. The same rules for all courses will even the playing field. The same rules will also make taking online courses more universally understood and accepted. [SZ – F3]

Ultimately students felt that responsibility for technical problems that were on the "student end" should always be the student's responsibility, but flexibility by faculty was encouraged.

I think that faculty should mention the possibility of technical problems. However, if it is a particular user's problem, no latitude should be given. A person can log on from almost anywhere. So

just because their home computer isn't working is not an excuse for not checking or participating from somewhere else...the library, work (after hours of course). [AD – F1]

It seems simple, but faculty should address how students can deal with technical problems. Teachers should make it perfectly clear that the students themselves are responsible for handling problems and having alternatives in place. This can be as simple as giving a list of possible solutions such as having access to other machines, using the mail, and (maybe most important) not waiting until the last minute to complete and turn in assignments! [JA – F3]

Students also indicated that institutions should be responsible for online course infrastructure, and when this infrastructure caused student delays, students should not be held responsible. If this did occur, faculty should be flexible with students and not hold students accountable for failures at the institutional level.

I will agree with you on the fact that the students are responsible with their own connection, computers, etc...but if there is a problem with the server that the course is being run on is a different issue. One of the colleges that I am taking an online courses from restricted access to the server while they were cleaning out the nimda virus and the instructor gave guidance to each student on what to do. I applaud his efforts. [CG – F4]

But the college has some responsibility for their site and to address problems

STUDENT—FACULTY RELATIONSHIP

students have with the site. [SB – F4]

This relationship appears to be contingent on the presence of several important keys that are necessary to develop a relationship with students online.

Students indicated that feedback by faculty, that

is timely and consistent, is crucial to their success within an online course. Frustration and confusion arise when faculty did not provide timely and consistent feedback to their online students.

The instructor does not answer phone calls or emails. You can't corner them face to face and get an answer, you just have to hope you are doing what is expected even though your instructor isn't. [EB – F1]

My online instructor has been very responsive to all my concerns. Sometimes it's hard to judge the comments, when you're face-to-face you can look at reactions, and know if you're on the right track. [AA – F1]

If the professors don't answer my questions or doubts promptly, my assignments won't meet his or her expectations and the end result will be that the information I was supposed to get will be lost along with an unfavorable grade. [VH – F4]

When the two of you can have a clear transfer of understanding of what is expected and then how you are doing, it makes for a successful partnership. [VB – SF5]

Assignments must be clearly presented to students. When students did not receive clear instructions and expectations for assignments, confusion and frustration followed.

I find that the instructor always has a specific response time for receiving assignments, but never has one for giving out new assignments, it just seem to be done at her discretion. [VG – F1]

I find it is more difficult to ask questions about a particular assignment when taking an online course. [MH – F3]

If is also important for instructors to ensure that their materials are clear and leave no room for ambiguity. Neither they nor their students may know

there is a misunderstanding. [JA - F3]

Along with timely feedback by faculty, students needed to have timely responses to emails when attempting to communicate with faculty. These timely responses help to clarify expectations but also indicated to students that faculty were engaged and committed to their online courses.

I would say the online faculty is better. For instance, my teacher usually would have office hours where as the online course, she is around practically 24/7! As of yet, I don't think there are any disadvantages to it. I mean I am able to reach my teacher when I need to speak to her most which in my opinion is a huge benefit. [SC – F1]

It is difficult to ask a question or discuss any discrepancies you may find in the reading because you have to wait sometimes days to get a response, which does not help you as you are going over the material. [TH – F3]

I have one instructor that does not "chat", but rather says what needs to be said and ends the email, or discussion; while yet another one, sends me verifications, and kudos on jobs well done, while yet another posts homework and/or assignments and is not heard from unless you need them to be heard from. [TL – F3]

There are also instructors who have very little interaction with the class, don't answer emails and/or questions in the threaded discussion, and don't provide grades/feedback on the assignments I hand in. With this type of instructor, the "relationship" is a bit strained, because I pretty much feel like I'm on my own, and I never know where I stand with them. [MR – FG6]

If faculty do provide a positive communication environment, one in which students feel their questions are being addressed and they receive timely feedback and assessment, then a positive relationship between student and instructor can emerge in the online course.

When the two of you can have a clear transfer of understanding of what is expected and then how you are doing, it makes for a successful partnership. [VB – SFG5]

Of the 12 courses I have taken online, there have been three with one in particular where student to instructor communication was stellar. In all three, the instructor made them that way. [DD – SFG5]

The problem with interaction is easy to solve, however it starts with the faculty. The professor in any of the courses I have taken sets the tempo of interaction. [DP – SFG5]

Faculty must provide students with continued assessment of their work. Students indicated a need to have an understanding of how they are progressing in the course, and a need for this assessment to be provided on an ongoing basis.

But, I feel that an in person review of your work can be more effective than playing email tag while trying to discuss your paper/work. Most of the time, I get back a mere grade and not any description as to the quality of my work or ways to improve. [CG – F4]

However, as the course started having online discussion groups, I started to understand what they were looking from the students. At this point, they have sent out progress reports, and having a personal message from them on my progress was very important. [CP – F2]

If faculty fail to provide these elements, the environment to foster positive relationships with students fails, students become frustrated with the course and may struggle to reach the course objectives.

I am very disappointed in the quality of the classes I have been receiving lately, and I'm very frustrated. The quality of some of the instructors has been horrible; the feedback from these instructors has been nonexistent. Here I am in

week 5 of a module and I have not received a grade and/or feedback on ANY I've handed in for one (maybe even two) of my three classes. [MR – FG6]

I have yet to get a corrected paper back from an online course. I ask, how can I improve my work if I don't know what I did wrong. [JF – FG8]

The professor has posted no insight into the weekly discussions and like you pointed out has not indicated if our thinking is correct. Even her weekly lectures are no more than a page in length. A part of me says to shut up and take an easy ride while the other is screaming how much money the course cost and we should get more out of it. [DP – SFG5]

It seems like a totally hands off type of teaching for the professor, with minimal input from her. This creates a disadvantage for the student, as they must almost become their own teacher, not having the benefit of the interaction and discussion between teacher and students. [PB – FG6]

I would not choose to take another online course because if I want to learn something on my own, I will. I do not need to pay money for someone to sit at a college collecting a paycheck for minimal "teaching". [SA – F2]

A good online instructor needs to be available off line as well. Also, they need to be a little more empathetic. They should be able to communicate and make the student feel at ease. [JR – SFG5]

The instructor must have clarity, good organization, and always respond back to whatever questions a student has. Most important I think that the instructor should keep you up to date on how your progress is in the class. [JB – FG6]

I think a good online instructor has to have a lot of patience, both for people

and for the communications medium itself. I am currently involved in a class where the teacher is very brusque and aggressive with the students. the teacher's attitude is creating a classroom environment where it isn't comfortable to ask questions. [MS – SFG5]

The second part of the overview question asked students to consider, if all other things were equal (i.e. cost, location, availability, time, travel) – would you choose to take a course online or on-ground, and why.

Most students agreed that taking online courses was beneficial and would consider taking another one. The most common reason for taking online courses was flexibility in scheduling and their responses supported this perceived benefit.

I would choose to do online education if all were equal because of the convenience to my schedule, and the fact I think I am learning more online. I did like meeting people and interacting with colleagues on campus, but with two children and another on the way that is out of the question [EB – F4]

With all things considered, I would definitely take on-line courses again. The most significant reason for me is the flexibility I have as to when I complete my assignments... I like and NEED the convenience of on-line... Plus I think it makes me more disciplined to do well and not just hand in work because it is due. [TL – F3]

For my schedule, online classes are the best way for me to continue my education. I think I've learned more taking online classes over on campus classes. [DL – FG8]

Some students commented on the amount of time they spent on their online coursework.

I was absolutely overwhelmed by how much work was involved in both online classes. I was consumed with an abundance of online work, day and night. I did not have even one weekend to relax this semester. I also think the teachers

(some) are trying to make up for the lack of class time by overloading the students with tons of work. I seriously was on the computer all night every night and early mornings. [KR – F1]

Will I take another online class...No way! I spent more time doing homework on line then I did doing homework for my on campus class. I had to be on everyday, or at least every other day, or we would be penalized on our final grade. Truthfully, the work was more than I could handle. I did it, but I spent more time on line or doing homework, than I thought I would have to. [AA – F1]

I don't know if I would take another online course. This course had a lot of work and I don't know if it would have been any different if it were a regular class. [JR – SFG5]

Other students did not believe that online courses were the better choice for their educational needs, but because of the flexibility afforded by online courses, these students will continue their education online.

If all things were considered equal (cost, location, availability, time and travel) I would go back to the traditional classroom, but we don't live in a perfect world so I will continue online. [SK – FG8]

If all things were equal, it would be on the ground, simply for the interaction. However, since in reality not all things are equal, the difficulty in obtaining interaction in an online scenario is more than offset by the other benefits of distance learning. [DP – SFG5]

In general I would almost always take an online course to an in-person course. This is primarily due to scheduling reasons. [MS – SFG5]

STUDENT TO STUDENT INTERACTION

When discussing the interaction among students in online courses, participants noted that there is development of a sense of community online. Students feel more connected to other students via communication online during their courses than they do in their on-ground courses.

Communication online is more prevalent in the online environment! I have found that I talk more with students...and the teachers. You also have an opportunity to read other people's experiences and opinions. I find this most stimulating! [CL – FG4]

You feel you are part of the loop and not lost in space. You're able to bounce ideas off people and get a perspective that you might not have thought of. [RB – FG1]

You know you aren't 'alone' if you are frustrated, or have done well, you can gather other ideas and opinions and have a conversation about a certain topic and in some cases when I can't understand what I have read, I will ask a classmate or jump on the discussion board and read different takes from the assignment which helps me to see it differently or see it in the first place. [TL – FG3]

Greater communication among students develops an enhanced learning environment. Students indicate that learning is fostered through student to student discussion; having the opportunity to hear others' points of view on subject matter and also having the ability to ask questions about course material aids students in understanding their online courses.

I like the opportunity to hear and interact with students. Some students have different ideas that I hadn't thought of so, I end up learning more about a topic of discussion. [DW – FG3]

I enjoy reading other peoples work. It seems that it broadens your perspective

of the subject being discussed. Some of the work by others is very good. [SZ – FG3]

In the classes I have taken so far we have used a discussion group or threaded discussion. This has been a good learning experience by reading other posts. [CP – FG2]

Many times on-campus if your teacher is not a good facilitator discussion never takes off, online you have to post reactions and comments and this leads to very enlightening interactions. [EB – FG4]

As students indicated in interaction with faculty online, students are not as intimidated to speak to other students online as they may be in the on-ground classroom environment.

I think I communicate more online with my fellow students than I ever did on-campus. I think the nature of these online classes forces interaction and leads to interesting discussion. [EB – FG4]

I have found I can express my ideas and talk about my likes and dislikes through this method better than in person. [VH – FG4]

More open communication among students may also be problematic. Some students indicated having experienced more 'crass' communication in emails between other students, and also that the lack of nonverbal cues sometimes cause misunderstandings in postings.

I have seen heated exchanges from people who have taken postings out of context and there really is no need for that...people have a tendency to be defensive of their posting and some people have thicker skins than others. [RC – FG4]

Unfortunately I believe some students tend to be more crass when posting opinions online because there are limited consequences of your words. Some comments that were posted during the

discussion board of my sociology class were very offensive, which led to a lot of petty back and forth postings between certain students. [TH – FG3]

ASSESSMENT

An additional set of focus group discussions asked students how they were assessed for the course, and whether they felt this form of assessment was fair. Again, students emphasized the need for quality and timely feedback from instructors, and that variety in assessment procedures was beneficial to the student. Students not receiving ongoing feedback and assessment of their work were frustrated by the lack of instructor involvement in their learning.

I truly have no idea how my instructor assessed my work. We had reading assignments and papers and tests, but I received no feedback on any of them unless I pressed the teacher for a response. [VG – F1]

We had to keep a journal on our own and submit it at the final class. That has not been checked during the entire semester. Our final class is going to be held this Wednesday and right now I am not sure if I have done the journal correctly or not. We had several on-line multiple-choice quizzes. There have been several essay type questions, which were usually responded to by the professors. We also had some projects that were submitted via email. Some were responded to and others were not. [SA – F2]

My experience with assessment was very fair. The syllabus was explained in detail and we knew what and when assignments and tests were required. The lab assignments that were required were e-mailed for grading to the instructor who then returned them via e-mail with grades and comments. The tests we took were instantly graded as soon as we 'submitted' them online so we knew instantly how we had done. My overall impression of my online course

was very favorable. [VS – F3]

I would have liked the assessment if the instructor gave out grades on the different papers that were submitted. The course is almost over with and I am left in the dark on how I am doing in the course. I have no idea what my grade will be. [JB – SFG5]

The assessment was really basic, but I think it worked well. We were given so many points for each assignment, and different assignments are worth different amounts of points. [SR – FG7]

Discussion of a class ranking system for one online course was troubling for this student and for others in the focus group.

I still feel that the assessments I've had were fair. One thing I noticed with my most recent online course, however, was the class ranking status. I'm not sure this serves any useful purpose. In fact, I think it puts undue pressure on some students. A low ranking doesn't necessarily mean a student is doing poorly, just that others are doing better. Class ranking doesn't tell you how much you've learned and accomplished, but it can hurt one's confidence or undeservedly inflate one's ego. I think they should do away with this and just stick to traditional grades. [MR – F4]

GROUP PROJECTS

Students were asked about their experiences with group projects throughout the semester. Many students did not have group projects in their online courses, but those who did reported on the challenges of working in groups in an online environment.

The first group project I had I had to deal with people who may have been a bit more pushy with things and did not want to listen to anyone else's ideas. That was one challenge. The second challenge with most of the groups I found was the time limit. Many other

people who were in my group were a bit busy and it was hard to get together so we met in person to work on our group project together which solved a lot of our problems, the communication was better. [SC – F1]

It was a challenge doing the group projects. Lucky for me I worked with a great partner and we met every challenge that was given to us on the project. We made time get together on line, but it wasn't easy with the different schedules. I think if you put a little effort into it , it could be done. [AA – F1]

The syllabus for contained group assignments, but we simply adapted them to individual work. I can't imagine how online students could complete a group project in one semester. [MR – F4]

I've worked on team projects and have found it very difficult to get in touch with teammates, ensure everyone is fulfilling their tasks, brainstorm easily, and to really get to know the people I am working with. [DC – SFG5]

Students who had experience working in groups along with those without experience working on group projects online both discussed the challenge of synchronous meetings.

I think the biggest problem was the actual logistics of communicating. There was a strong desire to have team discussions (voice) and we never could get a good time to talk. [MS – SFG5]

The hardest part about participating in group projects online would be to organize everyone together. For us, it was difficult to arrange a time to meet so our second site visit was cancelled. [SD – SFG5]

I have not yet to experience any group assignments or projects for any of my online courses. I would think that this would be a difficult process. I would think the biggest challenge would be getting the group coordinated. I think group work would be hard to do

(especially if it's a group of five or more) online. [SK – FG8]

STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

This set of questions sought to understand student perceptions of online support services. The first part of the question addressed their experiences registering for their online courses, the second addressed advisement support for online students. Registration experiences ranged from smooth and easy, to substantially challenging.

Registering was very easy. I faxed the application with a credit card and received my login information via email and logged in. [ML – F3]

The registration process is very simple. I receive a catalogue in the mail. Everything else is all electronic. I register electronically, pay with my credit card, and order my book for efollett.com. If I didn't have 2 other classes on the campus, I wouldn't know it was there. [TT – F4]

My last experience for signing up for my online course wasn't good. I signed up for my online class and then faxed in my sign up form for my campus class. For some reason they signed me up for one class and not the other because they said I owed them money. [RB – F5]

Registering for the courses has not always been smooth. There have been times when I registered for the course through normal channels, but didn't know how to get registered or access to the course online until the last minute. [DC – SFG5]

When discussing advisement many students indicated that they did not see a need for advisement services. These students also indicated they did not understand how or why advisement was beneficial.

I have not found a reason for the "advisor" yet; maybe someone could shed some light as to what this person is for. [TT – F4]

I haven't asked for advising yet really. I will look to instructors if I need help. [CR – F1]

As far as receiving advisement for choosing courses, for the most part I feel my advisors have encouraged me to take courses more from where they need the enrollment most, than by looking at the proper progression of courses in my degree program. Although I must admit that I have choosing my courses more by what interests me most at the moment, than by following a plan. I figure if it's a subject that I WANT to take, I'll do better at it. [ED – FG6]

I wish I had more to contribute to this discussion, but to be honest no one advised me at all about anything. I just kind of signed up, just like that. [CG – FG7]

Most of the things that I do are via online. I did not need guidance in the courses that I need to take. [PR – FG8]

Those students who did indicate an understanding of advisement had very different advisement experiences. For many students advisement occurred in an on ground environment, typical of traditional advisement models, they met face to face with an advisor to discuss their online course selections.

Both registration and advising were the same for this online course as for traditional courses. I spoke with the department head, as I have done in the past, and experienced no problems. [JA – F3]

I just sat down with my advisors and they told me the class(es) were being offered online and to register for them. [DW – F3]

Others benefited from advisement that did not take place on-ground. These students communicated with advisors via telephone or email.

I have no problem with advising as long as I did the legwork in finding the

correct person. At {} I did it through a phone meeting and email. [EB – F1]

Shortly after registering, I was contacted via email by {}. She helped to familiarize me with distance education overall and to answer any specific questions that I had. [VG – F1]

Other students received advisement they considered to be weak and at some points completely unhelpful.

Trying to find someone that could actually sign me up or ask questions was terribly difficult. The actual instructors were the only people who knew what was going on. [CR – F1]

The suggestions I have for online students are to speak to advisors that have an idea about on-line programs and about the actual material on-line. [TL – F3]

Other students did receive good online advisement. These students indicated that their advisors were aware of online course offerings, assisting them in making their course selections.

I emailed my teacher after I looked at the courses offered and he told me what to do and I did it. No problem at all. Advising was great, he answered all my questions and gave me great advice. [GP – F2]

Institutions must recognize that the advisement needs of their online students are not always being met. Students will require very different types of advisement based on the course work selection, hybrid (both online and on-ground), traditional (on-ground only) and distance (online only).

The needs of the student have to be addressed and a system specifically for this has to be put in place. Online student's needs cannot be addressed through the existing traditional registration methods. [EB – F1]

I think registering online is a great idea, but they need to figure out how it can be done when you are receiving

student aid. [JR – SFG5]

Several students suggested the need for institutions to develop both registration and advisement centers exclusively for online students. Student suggestions for development of such programs included websites specifically for online students with links to course registration, online advisement with faculty familiar with online learning, online payment options, and contact information when students have specific questions related to their online education.

What I think would be helpful is to have an online registrar. For students who live out of town, or even out of state, registration should be completely online with confirmations sent. There should also be specific numbers to call or an email address that is specifically for online registration. [EB – F1]

I am one of the out-of-state people, but would suggest that everyone should be using online registration. [RP – F1]

On the web site for the particular college in question, provide a link to the HOME page for ONLINE learning, and call it online, not distance or some other possibly misleading word. That Online Web Site should have an easy to understand home page with a site index that is searchable so that students can locate ALL online courses that institutions offers as well as a calendar feature to show WHEN each course will be offered. [CR – F1]

Others who have had experience with online registration did emphasize the need for these sites to have secure connections. There was realistic concern that personal information, including social security numbers and credit card information was being transferred over an unsecured web site was occurring, leaving students vulnerable to identity theft.

You must include your social security number on the web page, which is

unsecured. Then when the automatic response sends your confirmation email back, again there is your social security number traveling through cyberspace in an unsecured email. [EB – F5]

ONLINE TUTORING

Students were asked whether they had utilized the online tutoring service, and if they found the service to be beneficial.

Unfortunately only two students had used the service. But the experiences these students had with online tutoring were very positive.

Yes, I have used the online tutoring. Both of my online teachers made us aware that this online tutoring was available (in about the fourth or fifth week into the course). I have sent my papers to the online tutors who replied within 48 hours. It is a tremendously helpful source. They not only corrected my papers, but gave me suggestions on how to make them better. I found that my grades were greatly improved after sending my papers to the online tutoring before handing them in. It is too bad that more people did not take advantage of this help! [KR – F1]

The only tutor I used was Smarthinking tutor to rewrite a completed midterm exam, which enabled me to move from a B to an A. This was a onetime offer from our instructor. Smarthinking worked very well, the tutor returned my essay very quickly. I did not use a tutor to help me with the course itself. [CP – F2]

Many students indicated that they would be eager to use online tutoring and would look for the opportunity to do so in future online courses.

I haven't used the online tutoring program as yet as well but I think that it should have been offered in the be-

ginning of the online class. I think that if it was offered early it might have helped students who needed the help but don't get me wrong its a great idea that they offered it in the first place. [SC – F1]

Wow, this is a valuable service. I wish I had known about it, I definitely would have used it. [KR – F1]

I haven't utilized the online tutoring option but I find it nice that it is available to people who are having difficulty. I think that it is great that services like this are offered in an effort to give online students all the benefits of campus education. [EB – F4]

Other students indicated that they did not see a need for online tutoring, even if it was made available to them.

I was not aware that any online tutoring was available. To be honest, I didn't need it. I do think that it's a good idea, especially if someone is trying to do their entire degree online. If they need help, it gives them someone to turn to. [MH – F3]

I also had no experience with the online tutoring offered. My course was rather straightforward and I found that the text and assignments were clear and I did not look for extra help. [VS – F3]

I have had no experience with online tutoring. My instructor has made the course very straightforward and the material is presented in such a way that it is easily understood. Any help that I have needed I have contacted my professor. [RR – F3]

CONCLUSION

The fall and spring online focus groups provided significant insights into those factors that students indicate are extremely important in online courses. Online courses will continue to appeal to students because of the flexibility provided, specifically for adult students who must juggle the responsibilities of work and family. But the role of faculty/instructors developed as the most important aspect of online courses from the perspective of the students participating in these focus groups. Students indicate that without faculty communication, presence online, and assessment throughout the course, frustration and confusion develop quickly and students feel they are not getting the full benefits afforded in their online courses. Students recognized the most significant personal challenge to online courses was not the challenge of course content, but the need for discipline in managing the work equipments of their online courses while balancing the demands of careers and personal commitments. Communication and interaction among students were also identified as unique and important aspect of online courses. Students recognize their roles in facilitating communication as a way to enhance their online learning experience yet also need faculty input and presence in fostering development of student-to-student communication. Finally, recognition of the need for student support systems exclusively designed for online students is an area that has yet to be fully developed and implemented for online learners. Students will benefit from greater understanding of the role of advisors in online courses and programs, and will be better served by registration processes that are designed with an understanding of the unique needs of online students.

Appendix A
Demographic and Credit Information by Quoted Participant

Participant	Gender	Race	Age	# of credits	# of credits online	Total # of online credits
AA - F1	F	W	40	62	0	3
AB - F3	M	W	30	45	3	3
AD - F1	F					
CD - F4	F					
CG - F4	M	W	33	48	6	9
CL - F4	F	W	28	99	6	6
CP - F2	F	W	26	31		
CP - F6	F			72	15	6
CR - F1	M					
DB - F2	F	W	49	45	0	3
DC - F4	F	W	50	76	3	3
DC - SF5	F	W	47	102	6	3
DD - SF5	F			60	48	6
DL - F8	M			76	9	9
DP - SF5	M			81	36	9
DW - F3	F	W	43	112	3	3
EB - F1	F	W	35	46	0	3
EB - F4	F	W	37	71	3	3
EB - F5	F		37	27	15	3
ED - F6	F	W	48	48	3	3
EZ - F5	M	W	42			
GP - F2	M					
JA - F3	M	W	45	186	0	4
JB - F6	F	AA	23	3	0	3
JF - F8	F					
JJ - F2	F	W	40	54	3	3
JR - SF5	F	W	38	18	0	3
KB - F1	F					
KR - F1	F					
MC - F2	F	W	39	89	0	3
M - F3	F	W	24			
ML - F3	M	W	56	69		
MM - SF5	F		48	61	0	3
MR - F4	F	W	35	81	6	3
MR - F6	F			9	75	15
MS - SF5	M		25	33	0	3
PB - F6	F				0	3
PR - F8	M	W	50	0	0	3
RB - F1	F		37	27		
RB - F5	F		37	27	15	3
RC - F5	M	W	26	33		6
RP - F1	M	W	52	93	0	3
RR - F3	F	W	21			
SA - F2	F	W	55			
SB - F4	F	W	38	52	6	6
SC - F1	F	AA	24	36	0	6
SD - SF5	F	W	31	72	0	6
SG - F2	F	W	37	97.6	0	3
SK - F8	F	W	26	42	6	3
SR - F7	M			0	0	3
SW - F5	F	W	50	152	9	3
SZ - F3	M	W	52	93	3	9

Appendix B

Thank you for agreeing to participate in what will prove to be a very exciting online focus group! We are looking forward to your insights and thoughtful comments throughout the semester. Before we begin we need to review the instructions for gaining access to the focus groups and also some general guidelines for the semester. This information is extremely important - so we ask that you carefully read the entire message and then print and save this email message for future reference.

Introduction to On-line Focus Group

As a general introduction, this focus group is part of a larger study designed to provide an integrated approach to online learning through excellence in teaching, outcomes assessment and student services.

The primary objective of this focus group is for you to provide information regarding your experiences with on-line learning, and the services that support it such as advising, tutoring, and the library.

The moderator for the focus group is Laura Burton. She is a research assistant for the Connecticut Distance Learning Consortium. She will be your contact throughout the semester. If you ever have questions or concerns - you will contact Laura at lburton@charteroak.edu

Ground rules for on-line focus group participants:

Check your email regularly throughout the semester for information regarding the focus group. When prompted by an email message, log onto the focus group within one week of receiving the message and thoroughly answer the questions. Then during the next few days, return to the focus group and read what others in the group, including Laura, have posted. You can then comment on responses posted by other group members. This will assist in developing a dialogue between you and the other members of the group

For this focus group to be successful - we are relying on all participants to facilitate group discussion.

Etiquette

- do not use slang/profanity/or acronyms
- do not attack (verbally) the responses of another group member
- if you disagree with what is being posted respond to that posting in a professional and courteous manner

When responding to questions within the focus group - answer questions as thoroughly as possible - try not to reply with one-word answers (i.e. yes/no). The questions are designed to elicit detailed responses from participants and to facilitate discussion among group members.

You are encouraged to take time to think about the questions posed and to then thoroughly respond to the question. Again questions are designed to elicit detailed responses from participants and to facilitate discussion among group members.

We ask that you come back into the forum a couple of days after you have posted your initial comments, read what others have said, and comment on their thoughts and ideas. This is encouraged throughout the study and is what makes it a focus group.

We expect that others answers will help you clarify your thinking or stimulate new ideas.

Because we are communicating in an asynchronous discussion Laura will not always immediately respond to discussion posting - you are encouraged to respond to other discussion postings even if Laura has not made comments regarding these postings.

Responses should reflect what is being posted in the focus group discussion and should stay on topic. Participants can comment on issue posted from previous discussions - but should not use this as a forum to discuss issues outside of what is posted for the focus group (i.e. this is not a gripe session)

How to log onto the focus group discussion:

The following link will take you directly to the student page of the Connecticut Distance Learning Consortium website (in some email messages, you made need to cut and paste this link into your web browser).

[<http://www.ctdlc.org/Student/index.html>](http://www.ctdlc.org/Student/index.html)

Once on the student page - in the middle of the page in RED letters it says:
FOCUS GROUPS STUDENT - CLICK HERE

After you click on that banner - you will see a box that asks you to register to use the focus group - you are already registered - so you can click on the log in page -

you will be asked to enter your username and password -
your username is YOUR LAST NAME
your password is YOUR FIRST NAME

Once you are logged in - you can enter the threaded discussion. There is a link to a user's guide to threaded discussion to help you understand how to use threaded discussion. The link is located below the focus group banner.

Now you are ready to get started!!!

Please log onto the site some time between now and September 21st, to begin participating!

Thanks again - and we look forward to an exciting discussion.

Appendix C

Welcome to the on-line focus group!! To begin the discussion - I would like each person to introduce herself/himself and tell us about your area of interest academically. At the end of this message - you will see an example of how to respond to a discussion question - you can use this as a guide for how to answer questions throughout the semester. I'll start the introductions... My name is Laura and I will moderate the focus group. I am a research assistant at the CTDLC, and I am also a graduate assistant in sport management at the University of Connecticut. One of my areas of interest academically is the development of talent in US female Olympians. I am looking forward to a very interesting semester discussing what it's like to be an on-line student.

Now - here is the example response to the discussion question:

Why did you take an on-line course? For the B.A. program at my college I need to complete six credits in arts or music. Because I am working full-time and already taking two classes on campus at night, I decided it would be better to take these art credits online. I can use the computer at work to connect and get the materials for class during the day and then use my computer at home to work on class assignments on the weekend. I can take up to 9 credits online for my program, so if this class goes well, I hope to take two more classes next semester. I am concerned about taking a class online. I'm not sure if I have the technical know-how to be successful in this type of class. I have never taken a class in any other way than in a regular classroom setting. I think the decision to take an online class will help me to finish my program more quickly than if I had to take all of my classes online.

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