

ASSESSING QUALITY OF THE HYBRID LEARNING MODEL FOR MBA STUDENTS AT A PUBLIC INSTITUTION

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This research focuses on a qualitative study that examines ways to improve instructional delivery for graduate students in a California State University MBA program. The setting for this research was a predominantly Hispanic institution in California. As part of a student satisfaction survey, 105 graduate students in business in MBA courses were queried about their instructional preferences—if allowed to choose between face-to-face only, hybrid, or online delivery methods. For this research, the hybrid format applies to any instruction where content is delivered both online and face-to-face. In the scope of this research, hybrid is defined as a course in which at least 50 percent of learning activities are transferred to the online format. The goal is to enrich students' learning experience by combining the best features of face-to-face and online courses. This dual format was categorized as a hybrid class.

Research questions explored perceptions, attitudes, and value added in using a hybrid instructional delivery model. In total, 95 percent of students surveyed reported a preference for the hybrid format. Three central themes emerged from the data as rationale for this strong preference: family/personal time, increased self-efficacy, flexibility.

The first theme, family/personal time, was reported by 90 percent of the MBAs. Students specified that the hybrid format allowed them to spend more time with family or focusing on personal activities. This resulted in better focus on the material when needed in class, and a heightened sense of balance and overall ability to maintain an organized lifestyle. Students reported the hybrid experience was far more positive because it enabled them to balance family and personal obligations, as well as professional and work obligations, without losing the personal contact with others in the MBA program and with the instructor. They reported the quality and adequate level of contact was not lost because 50 percent of the course was still face-to-face.

The second theme, self-efficacy, was also reported by over 92 percent of participants. Students stated that the 50 percent online component afforded them the ability to work at their own pace more, which allowed them not only a heightened sense of control over the quality of the outcome of their work, but a heightened sense of an ability to absorb and retain more by the end of the course.

The third theme, flexibility, was reported by 98 percent of students. The majority of students in MBA courses had demanding professional work responsibilities. The hybrid format allowed them to complete the academic work for the course, without neglecting the demands of the professional positions. Many reported it was far easier to attend class once a week face-to-face, without feeling the anxiety they often experienced about neglecting professional work when being forced to attend all classes face-to-face.

While the growth of online and hybrid learning has more than doubled over the past 10 years, traditional public institutions attempting to retain AACSB accreditation are concerned about the level of learning that will result in moving to the demand for this delivery method. These institutions continue to question

whether the hybrid format can be adequate to assess learning outcomes in a manner that will meet accreditation standards. However, particularly with MBA programs, the trend toward the newer delivery methods has gained so much momentum that it seems the traditional programs may have no choice but to move toward newer delivery methods—or cease to exist.

Previous research supports the idea that the hybrid delivery model may be ideal for all students, but this may be especially so for MBA student who generally have greater personal and professional responsibilities. While online learning as a form of distance education has increased rapidly in MBA programs, the hybrid model has also increased, not only among the profit model universities, but among the premiere graduate programs for business as well. As the online and hybrid models flourish, traditional MBA programs at public institutions have faced greater competition for the best MBA students. It seems that the programs that do not follow suit and adjust to the rapidly increasing demand for alternatives to the traditional face-to-face only format, will eventually be unable to attract enough students to survive.

In the end, there are several further considerations that need to be taken into account in offering hybrid classes. One, is whether the technology exists at that campus and is available to deliver the online component—as well as whether instructors using this format are well-versed enough in that technology to deliver the hybrid format.

A second consideration is that it can make it more difficult for students to make personal connections and build trust without meeting face-to-face, or with fewer face-to-face meetings. It is difficult to determine the inflection that someone intends behind his or her words in type, particularly if that person is an unknown entity. Misunderstandings caused during on-line sessions could potentially cause barriers in face-to-face settings. On the other hand, students who are normally less vocal in face-to-face interactions might be more comfortable contributing to discussions in an on-line setting. Like social media forums, there is a certain level of anonymity from communicating through text. Typing discussion comments into a class online forum can feel different—and more liberating—than speaking out in a classroom setting.

Thus far, data on hybrid courses appear positive, but further exploration is necessary. Many people view that the success of the course format depends on the nature of the students involved. Therefore, it is important to continue to study the effectiveness of hybrid courses in order to understand how they fit into the world of modern education. It is also important to understand how students' experiences in a course affect their ability to perform, particularly in comparison to a traditional face-to-face classroom. Hopefully, this research will help advance that understanding within a public university setting with predominantly Hispanic graduate business students.