Virtual courses and tangible expectations: How to align student and instructor opinions of online courses

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Why Expectations Matter

• Existing empirical research suggests that instructors’ and students’ expectations of college courses may be misaligned in both face-to-face and online courses

• Misalignment of expectations results in a poor experience for all parties marked by frustration and resentment

• Distance learning courses amplify the importance of aligned expectations because of asynchronous interaction and pedagogy
What Can Be Gained from Studying Expectations

• Given the growth of distance learning, examining stakeholder expectations can improve:
  • Student readiness for online learning
  • Instructor pedagogy & preparedness
  • Institutional structures and policies governing distance learning
Prior Research

• Prior research suggests that online students’ expect:
  • Frequent communication and responses within 24-hours
  • Clear instructions and information regarding how their work will be evaluated, including requirements for interaction
  • Assignments be graded immediately and clear grading

• Current research is limited since it does not compare students’ and instructors’ expectations of online courses; instead only focusing on student expectations
Research Questions & Data

• Three main research questions:

1. What are community college stakeholders’ expectations regarding the role and responsibilities of the institution, instructors, and students in the online environment?

2. How do instructor and student opinions differ and align regarding online coursework?

3. How can expectations inform institutional policy?

• Data includes interviewed with 46 students and 38 college personnel
Overview of Findings

• Stakeholders generally agreed on broad expectations of online courses, but they disagreed on the **details**

• Expectation categories:
  • Course difficulty
  • Time management
  • Pedagogy and assignments
  • Communication and feedback
  • Students’ and instructors’ technological competency
  • Student readiness

• Findings presented in the aggregate; organized by expectations of courses, students, & instructors
EXPECTATIONS OF ONLINE COURSES
Instructors and students both expected that online courses would be easier than face-to-face courses prior to involvement in an online course.

“[Students] see commercials on TV all the time. They are like ‘Take class online and still live your life the way you were before.’ Well they see those commercials and they think, ‘Oh that will be great for me. I can do that’...All those people in their pajamas give this impression that, ‘Oh, this is a piece of cake.’” (Instructor)

“I thought that they were going to be extremely easy. I took it as an easy way out.” (Student)
But after their initial experience, stakeholders felt that online courses are in fact more difficult and more time-consuming than traditional courses.

“Distance learning is a lot more work. Anyone that thinks that it’s not has never done it. Because once you teach an online class, you realize it takes so much more of your time than a face-to-face class.” (Instructor)

“When I think that you are first trying distance courses, they are very time-consuming as you get them off the ground. And then as you begin to manage them, you know, they become easier, although I think certainly not as easy as people who don’t teach them seem to think and certainly not as easy as the students think when they are going into them.” (Instructor)
EXPECTATIONS OF STUDENTS
### Time Management Expectations of Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students’ expectations of themselves</th>
<th>Instructors’ expectations of students</th>
<th>Expectations Alignment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students expect themselves to be responsible for their own learning <strong>as guided by the instructor</strong></td>
<td>Instructors expect students to take <strong>complete responsibility for their own learning</strong></td>
<td>Different</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students expect themselves to balance work, home, and school demands to stay on top of school deadlines</td>
<td>Instructors expect students to meet course deadlines</td>
<td>Same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students expect themselves to be self-driven to stay on task and complete assignments, but that the <strong>instructor plays a role in their motivation</strong></td>
<td>Instructors expect students to be independently motivated and <strong>do not expect that they can contribute to student motivation by developing engaging activities and pedagogical approaches</strong></td>
<td>Different</td>
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# Expectations of Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Technological competency</td>
<td>Students expect themselves to already possess the requisite technological skills for online courses</td>
<td>Instructors expect students to have adequate technological skills and appropriate computer access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication &amp; Feedback</td>
<td>Students expect themselves to communicate about logistical issues more than academic issues because of the lack of immediate response</td>
<td>Instructors expect students to be proactive in communication and ask for help when needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Readiness</td>
<td>Students expect that talking to friends and family prior to online course enrollment is adequate preparation to determine online course enrollment</td>
<td>Instructors expect students to attend an institutional student readiness activity prior to online course enrollment</td>
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EXPECTATIONS OF INSTRUCTORS
Communication Expectations

Students expect immediate responses to emails (within 2-24 hours), whereas instructors expect to respond within 48-hours and not over the weekend.

“A mature distance learner is very demanding…and in many cases, are unreasonable in their expectations. You know, they have lives, but their instructor does not.” (Instructor)

“My teacher takes 2 days to answer back emails. Yeah, she said within 48 hours she will respond…but sometimes questions have got to be answered like right now.” (Student)
Feedback Expectations

• Students expect instructors to provide clear guidelines for assignments and assessments; some instructors meet student expectations, while others only provide numerical grades.

• Discussion board feedback was particularly problematic for students.

“She’ll give us questions and in those questions it might ask you to ‘discuss such-and-such, being in depth with this, be specific with that’ and you can put your opinion in there. But the things is...you don’t get any feedback. And so it feels like ‘Why am I telling you anything if you don’t really [read it]? I mean like you are not responding to me in any kind of way.’ It’s almost like you are talking to a wall.” (Student)
## Expectations of Instructors

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<th>Instructors’ expectations of themselves</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogy</td>
<td>Students expect instructors to use varied and engaging course materials and assignments to deliver course content. They prefer the use of technology to provide a range of delivery mechanisms</td>
<td>Instructors do not expect themselves to master technological tools outside of Blackboard and the majority depend on text to deliver content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technological Competency</td>
<td>Students expect instructors to have high levels of technological skills and capacity and to be able to assist them with IT problems</td>
<td>Instructors expect students to access technology experts through student services</td>
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Implications

• Colleges may be able to enhance outcomes in online courses through a two-part strategy that includes more robust student readiness activities for students and pedagogical training for instructors
  – Colleges can help instructors improve their pedagogy to make online learning courses more engaging, well-structured, and interactive
  – Students need to be aware of the academic and technological demands of online courses before enrolling
Student Readiness

• Make completion of distance learning orientations mandatory and offer them during registration periods.
• Refine content of orientations to ensure they give students practice in—not just overviews of—relevant skills and knowledge associated with success in online courses.
  – Time-management
  – Computer literacy
• Integrate information about distance learning in other college induction activities.
Professional Development

• Help instructors leverage more multi-media tools.
  – Provide an archive of asynchronous training for new technologies, demonstrations of how technologies can be used, webinars introducing new technologies to faculty, and web-based “newsletters” highlighting the exemplary use of technological tools

• Ensure that all online instructors have a basic level of computer proficiency and can help students with basic technological questions

• Recruit strong online faculty as “master” teachers to work with their colleagues on course development and refinement.