



IACBE

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JOURNAL FOR ADVANCING BUSINESS EDUCATION

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JABE 1

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 3 **About the Journal**
- 4 **Editorial Team**
- 5 **From the Editor**
- 7 **The Hyflex Learning Model: An Application for Business Education**
 Sharon Beaudry
- 23 **Building Workplace Readiness Skills Through Learning Contracts in a
Management Internship Course**
 Wayne D. Sneath & Marjolijn van der Velde
- 41 **A Content Analysis of Dissertations on Business Topics: A Quantitative Study**
 Katherine N. Yamamoto, Linda Samek, Greg Aldred, & Robert A. Lloyd
- 64 **Student Success and Engagement: Understanding Online Business Education
Through Student Learning Outcomes**
 Antwon D. Woods & Arianna C. Stokes
- 77 **Redefining Work-Life Balance for Business Faculty-Before and During Covid-19**
 Steve Custer & Rodger Minatra

ABOUT:

The Journal for Advancing Business Education is a practitioner and scholarly journal that publishes the best work in the field of business education to enhance teaching, achieve student learning outcomes, and meet program goals. The Journal follows the general IACBE theme of "Moving. Forward. Together." All submissions are subject to a double-blind peer review process. The Journal is an online journal and accessible on the IACBE Web page. The Journal for Advancing Business Education is a biannual publication.

MISSION:

The mission of the Journal for Advancing Business Education is to publish best practices and scholarship in business and business-related fields to improve business education and society.

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FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

Catering to the needs of 21st century college students, many institutions of higher education have created classes and programs that are more flexible and shorter than traditional models. Micro-credentialing is an example of a flexible version of education. Micro-credentials, such as diplomas and certificates, are representations of what learners know, can do, and have accomplished. Micro-credentials differ from conventional credentials in that they tend to be competency-based, recognizing the mastery of proficiencies rather than traditional higher education measures like classroom seat-time. Micro-credentials often focus on more specific skills as compared to traditional degrees and certificates. Micro-credentials may also be stackable, which means that each micro-credential has value on its own, and that several related micro-credentials can stack up to a larger and more comprehensive qualification.

Why would anyone want micro-credentials? Micro-credentials have a different value to different stakeholders. Technology and the workforce are changing at a rapid pace. To stay relevant, workers need to become lifelong learners so they can constantly update their skills. In turn, higher education also needs to stay relevant and to make changes to meet the evolving needs of learners. As the workforce shifts to skills-based hiring, higher education will also need to offer more skill-based education. As a matter of fact, some business schools and online-institutions already focus on micro-credentials and competency-based education.

Students and employers might also value micro-credentials because they are often used to recognize learning, skills, and accomplishments of students that otherwise tend to go unrecognized in the regular classroom and curriculum. For instance, skills that are commonly not very well assessed and recognized are 21st Century Skills, such as critical thinking, collaboration, creative thinking, and communication. Employers have clearly signaled that they value and seek these skills in graduates. It is now up to institutions of higher education to follow this call and design and offer appropriate educational credentials.

Thank you!

Christian Gilde
Managing Editor

Journal for Advancing Business Education

VOLUME 3, ISSUE 2

JABE 6

**THE HYFLEX LEARNING MODEL:
AN APPLICATION FOR BUSINESS EDUCATION**

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ABSTRACT

The global pandemic of 2020 significantly changed education delivery methods in higher education. One approach that gained interest was the Hyflex model, which is a spinoff of the hybrid model. The Hyflex learning model uses pedagogical and technological approaches to provide flexible participation modes that can change based on student needs throughout the course. This paper presents three applications of Hyflex in undergraduate business education courses to explore the model's framework, along with its success rates, benefits, and challenges, to determine if it may provide a pathway to evolutionary changes in course delivery for the future.

INTRODUCTION

During the 2020 Covid pandemic, education delivery significantly transformed due to the necessity of public health protocols to reduce the spread of the virus. As such, educators learned to adjust and deliver content in new ways. Among these challenges was the delivery of content to a group of students that may be in the classroom, remoting in, or watching instructional videos online – all in one class! Many faculty, who have been juggling these challenges, may have tripped onto the Hyflex delivery method without ever having heard about it before.

This paper will share the history and framework of the Hyflex learning model, along with applications of this pedagogical model in three business courses. In addition to the course design, assessment results will be shared that provides student performance and feedback on the method, as well as primary research on the benefits and challenges of this course delivery approach. Furthermore, this model will be reviewed in terms of the changing needs of students, as well as how higher education may look to this model as a way increase course capacity while managing budgets in the future. This paper will also consider if this flexible teaching model is just a passing phase or may be more widely adopted in the future.

BACKGROUND

Started in 2005, by Dr. Brian Beatty and his colleagues at San Francisco State University, the Hyflex learning model was developed after many years of experimenting with alternatives to blended learning (Beatty, 2019). The purpose of this adaptation of the hybrid model was to extend their face-to-face classes to online, while not ignoring their in-class students. Their goal was to allow much greater flexibility for students to balance work and family obligations, while also considering different learning needs and preferences within one class. Beatty also noted the ability to build greater capability and capacity within courses aided in expanding the traditional instructional environment (2019). The Hyflex model settled on flexible learning paths that allow students to determine the best path on a daily or weekly basis.

According to Beatty (2019), the principles of a Hyflex course is based on four foundational pillars (figure 1) – learner’s choice, equivalent learning outcomes, reusability, and accessibility:

- **Learner’s Choice:** The first principle, learner choice, means that students have various methods to participate in the class and this can change daily, weekly, or topically.
- **Equivalent Learning Outcomes:** Since students have choice, each choice of activities must have equivalent learning outcomes. In other words, the in-class activity must meet the same outcomes as an out-of-class activity.
- **Reusability of Learning Artifacts:** The next principle is reusability which means that artifacts from one mode of learning are available as learning objects for all students. This might include a video from the classroom that can be used for students who did not participate in the synchronous class.
- **Accessibility for All:** The last principle is accessibility to the learning materials and technology that must be available in all modes to students. This principle should consider the user experience for all students regardless of disability.

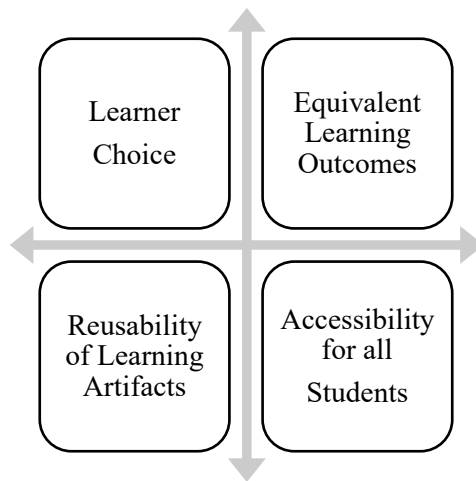


Figure 1: Hyflex Learning Model Pillars (Beatty, 2019)

There are many variants of the Hyflex model, most of which have been developed over the last decade by scholars and institutions from around the world. For example, the Mode-Neutral model was developed by Smith, Reed and Jones (2008) which focuses on constructionist philosophy which emphasizes the learner’s prior experiences. The Multi-Access model provides a similar structure to Hyflex, while accentuating personal learning approach (Irving, 2009). The Flex Learning method was developed by Pennsylvania State University in which faculty take a student-centered approach to develop learning activities for maximum engagement in all modalities (McCluskey, Shaffer, Grodziak, & Hove, 2012). Other varieties of the model include Converged Learning (Taylor & Newton, 2012), Bendflex (Central Georgia Technology College, n.d.), and Multi-Option (Elder, 2018).

Beatty addresses many of the benefits and challenges of implementing a Hyflex model. Considerations for the institution often includes an interest in growing enrollment from outside the region, as well as better capabilities when facing emergencies, such as natural disasters. In fact, four years before the 2020 pandemic, Beatty noted a key driver of this model was the need for business continuity planning in higher education (2019). The faculty also use this model to build capacity of their programs and better serve students. As Beatty notes, responding to the changing needs of students is a primary driver of this model (2019).

There have been several studies analyzing the success of the Hyflex and related learning models. One study reviewed the performance of students in a statistics course with flexible learning options. The study concluded that there was no significant difference in student performance based on their attendance options (Miller, Risser, & Griffiths, 2013). In a large undergraduate business course, researchers looked at student self-reported satisfaction scores among four different participations types. This study showed no statistical differences in satisfaction among the four participation types (Lakhal, Khechine, & Pascot, 2014). In another study focusing on performance in MBA courses, the researchers sought to understand if a Hyflex model would increase the performance of online and classroom learners. The results showed the

performance of classroom student remained the same, while online learner’s performance significantly increased with the Hyflex model (Lightner & Lightner-Laws, 2016).

According to Beatty (2019), the last decade has expanded instructors and programs at universities that have implemented some form of the Hyflex learning model. Some of these schools include Peirce College in Pennsylvania, Delgado Community College in Louisiana, Ohio State University, University of Michigan, and Montana State University.

COURSE DESIGN & IMPLEMENTATION

Introduction

For the purpose of this study, the Hyflex method was used to deliver three business classes. The introduction to database and entrepreneurship classes has a cross section of student levels, while the applied senior project class was mainly seniors. The majority of students taking these classes were business majors. The courses included the following detailed in figure 2.

Course	Course-Level	Prerequisites	Student	Majors
Introduction to Database for Business	100	None	Primarily sophomores, however, range from first-year to senior students	Primarily Business majors with some other majors
Introduction to Entrepreneurship	300	None	Wide range of students	Primarily Business majors with some business minors
Applied Business Senior Project	400	Yes, Capstone course	Seniors, with some juniors	Business only

Figure 2: Summary of courses researched

The following will share the course design, approach, and instructor experience for these classes. To introduce the concept, students were sent email communications a few weeks before the start of class letting them know they had options regarding the course delivery. Since this was the first time using this method, students were asked to respond to the instructor with their preferred class meeting option which included in-class, remote, or online. However, they were told that their delivery method could be changed at any time for any reason.

Introduction of Database for Business

The 100-level class, Introduction to Database for Business, is an introductory class in which students learn how to design, create, and maintain a database for business purposes. While this course primarily focuses on the software, students also must be able to communicate about

their databases in written format. Students taking this class tend to encompass a wide range of students from first-years to seniors in a variety of majors.

This class was previously a fully on-campus class that had to be significantly adjusted for the period of the Covid pandemic and Hyflex model. To ensure that students had options, instructional videos were prepared for the entire course. The class took a flipped approach requiring students to watch the videos before coming to class, so they were prepared. These videos were always short, between three to eight minutes, generally only covering one topic. This was particularly useful in this software class since students would often re-watch the videos when having to apply the concept to a new problem. Discussion board assignments were also used to encourage student-to-student interaction as well as share projects with each other.

The class hours were also divided into two segments – one for students who wanted to meet in class, and the other for students who wanted to meet remotely. This was done since it was challenging to assist both groups of students at one time. These class periods were used for application of concepts. In other words, students were at the computer working through assignments. This approach allowed the in-class students to spread out in the computer lab, receive individual help, and work through the assignments. The remote class also used the period to work through assignments, while being able to share their screen when they needed assistance. Online students would reach out mainly through e-mail when they needed support or pop into the remote session to ask questions. Most students maintained one participation method throughout the term, however about one quarter of students did adjust their method.

From the instructor's perspective, the course design worked very well. The only changes that might be explored in the future would be trying to merge the in-class and remote session for greater student interaction.

Entrepreneurship

The 300-level class, Introduction to Entrepreneurship, provides students with the fundamentals of starting a small business. The class focuses on how to conduct research regarding a business concept and the essentials of building a business plan. The class also has regular guest speakers and field trips to introduce students to entrepreneurs and business resources. There are no prerequisites in order to attract students from a host of majors and student levels.

The course was reimaged with the Hyflex model, so it could include students from many locations. The entrepreneurship class was also developed using a flipped approach. As with the database class, students viewed short instructional videos and then participated in group discussion boards and completed individual assignments. Most of the content of this work focused on the process of developing a business plan.

The class meeting time was primarily used to meet with entrepreneurs and organizations that provide resources to small businesses. While normally this would include a mix of guest speakers and field trips, this class met remotely each week due to Covid restrictions. Most of this time was scheduled to interact with a host of entrepreneurs from around the state, country, and world. Students participated in these remote sessions which ended up being a highlight of the class. Videos of these sessions were posted for those who chose to participate online each week.

In future iterations of this class, a fuller Hyflex approach will be taken for in-class, remote and online participation options. While the guest speakers are always a highlight, exploration of local field trips using remote technology may be attempted. Lastly, additional student-to-student

interaction will be included beyond the online discussion board, such as break-out-rooms and groups.

Applied Business Senior Project

The last class to use a Hyflex delivery model was Applied Business Senior Project. This 400-level class, which is a series of classes over three terms, serves as a capstone in which senior business students identify, develop, manage, and deliver results of a business project. These applied projects are typically individual project for real businesses. This class is usually taught in class, but due to Covid, the Hyflex model was used.

The senior project class also used a flipped approach using many of the materials already developed for the online version of the class. This included several short instructional videos to provide content. Like the other classes, all assignments were posted in the learning management system. Occasional guest speakers would remote into the sessions. In addition, students met with the instructor to discuss projects in one-on-one meetings, which continued through video conferencing technology.

Students were given a choice of class meetings. Like other classes they could meet remotely, on campus, or participate online. As with the database class, separate class sessions were conducted for remote and in-class students. Many of the seniors appreciated this approach since most were already working professional jobs or internships. This flexible approach allowed them to balance their many responsibilities.

From the instructor perspective this class is well suited for the Hyflex method. In the future, the only change that would be made for this class is to meet with in-class and the remote group of students at the same time to increase student-to-student interaction.

RESULTS

Following the term, a review of the student performance by primary participation mode was conducted. In addition, a survey was administered to all three classes. The goal of the survey was to determine which elements of the flexible learning model were helpful to students. They were also asked which of these elements they would like to see continued in the post-Covid period. The students were questioned about challenges of the model as well as the benefits. The following summarizes the results for all three classes.

Demographics

Before reviewing the performance and student feedback, an overview of the student demographics by class is provided in figure 3. A total of 44 students participated in the research. The 400-level capstone contains mostly senior business majors. Seventy-seven percent of students completed the feedback survey in this course. The other two courses have a variety of majors and standing levels. The 100-level class had students from all four class standing levels, however the majority were juniors. This class, which has no prerequisite, includes mostly business majors but is also a required class for students in other majors outside of business, including the communication and geomatics degree programs. Seventy-four percent of students in the 100-level class completed the survey. The 300-level class also has no prerequisites, but it is an elective for all but business management majors. This class also had students from all four class levels, as

well as a variety of majors. One hundred percent of the students from this class completed the survey. When combined in figure 3 the data shows that a broad range of students were surveyed for this study.

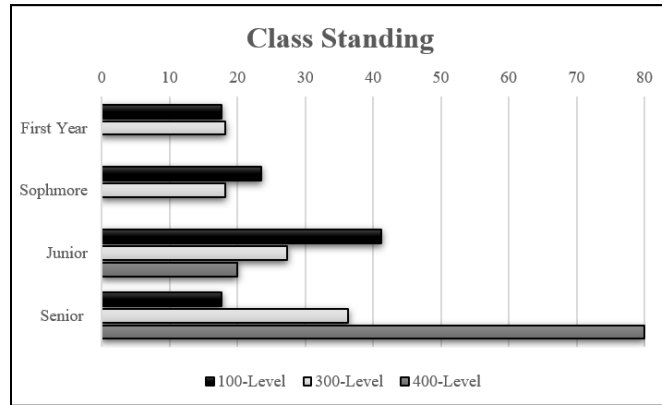


Figure 3: Class Standing for all three classes

Course Performance by Participation Model

The first assessment of this model focused on a review of the final grades based on primary attendance mode. The modes were assessed based on students that primary attended the class online (asynchronous), remote (synchronous), or in class, as witnessed by the instructor. A fourth category was created for students that regularly used two or more participation modes (dual), often using online as one of these selected modes. Figure 4 displays the aggregate results for all three classes. The participation mode popularity by students within these classes was generally the same across all four modes, with the remote and dual mode being the highest. There was a slightly higher final grade for students that participated using the in-class and remote methods. Students choosing multiple participation methods performed slightly under the in-class and remote students. Finally, the online student performed the lowest overall. However, in summary, these differences are minimal and would need to be further studied to understand the factors leading to these findings.

Grade by Participation Mode				
Type	N	Mean	Min	Max
Dual	12	82	68	95
In Class	10	86	78	96
Online	9	78	65	94
Remote	13	87	77	96

Figure 4: Grades by Participation

Flexible Components of the Courses

The courses contained several Hyflex model components. Among these were a choice of class meeting type, access to instruction, materials and assignments, as well as how they interacted with the instructor. The following provides the student responses in all three classes. Included are students' responses during the Covid pandemic. Students were also asked to provide their interest in the continuation of these Hyflex components following the pandemic.

The first inquiry was student feedback regarding a choice of meeting options. These classes all had remote, online, and in-class options available to the students based on their personal preference (except for the 300-level class that had no classroom option). Most students in all three classes noted that meeting options were extremely helpful (figure 5). It is interesting to note that the students that rated the choice of meetings as only slightly helpful were sophomores regardless of the course taken, while the first-years, juniors and seniors rated this option as more helpful. The sophomore outlier was a consistent theme in the following three questions as well. Next, the students were asked if this would be a choice they would like to have following the pandemic (figure 6). Again, students were interested in having choice of how to attend classes in the future. All three courses remained somewhat consistent in their responses for the study term versus the post-pandemic future.

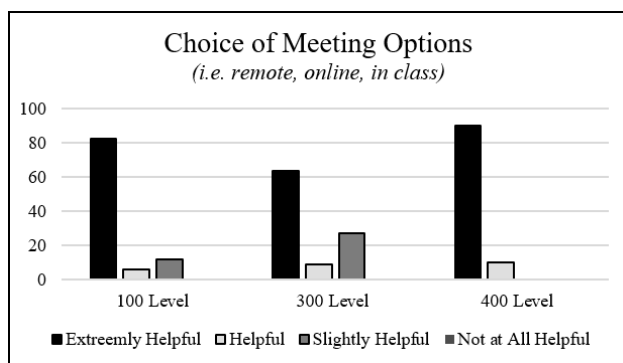


Figure 5: Choice of Meetings

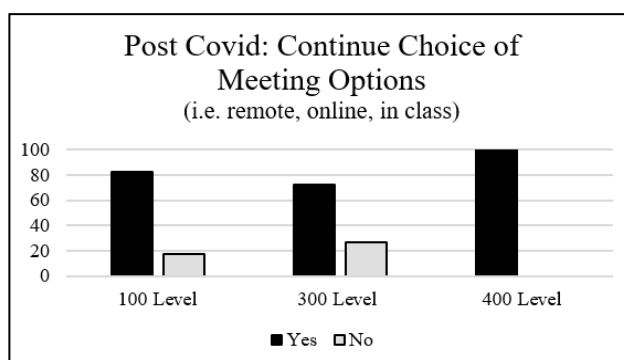


Figure 6: Choice of Meetings Post Covid

Each of the classes were developed with instructional videos for students to access direction and content through video. In most cases, this was in addition to content delivery during the in-class or remote class meeting. The exception to this was mainly seen in the 300-level course, where the class meeting was mainly used for guest speakers. A majority of the students found the ability to access instructional videos extremely helpful or helpful. However, it is notable that of all three of these classes, this was particularly useful to students taking the 100-level database class. Due to the content that focused on software, as well as the modified flipped pedagogy approach, students not only watched videos to learn concepts, but often re-watched them multiple times when applying concepts (figure 7). Also, as noted, the 300-level class used most of the class meetings for guest speakers and a majority of course content was only available through video, which could account for more variation for this class. As for post Covid, most students reported that they would like to see instructional videos continue (figure 8).

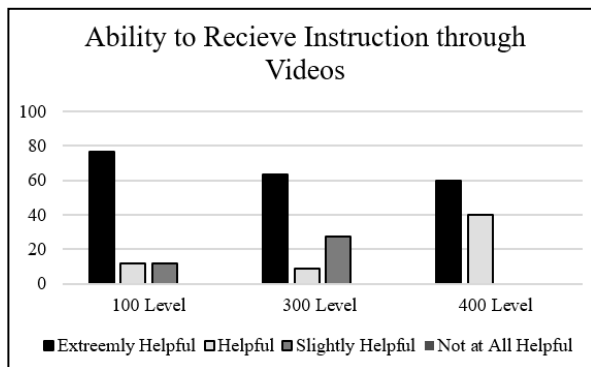


Figure 7: Ability to Receive Instruction through Videos

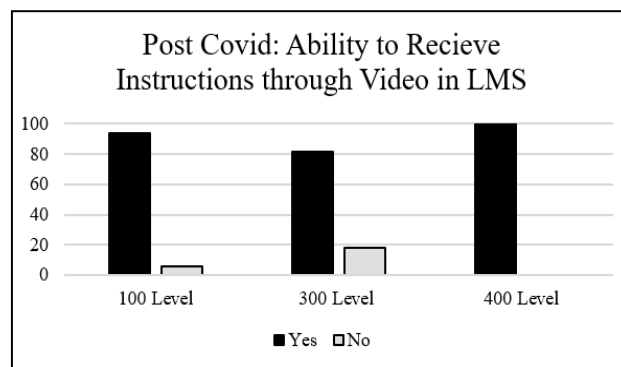


Figure 8: Ability to Receive Instruction through Videos post Covid

The students were also asked about being able to access course materials and assignments in the learning management system (LMS). While this is not unusual for most courses, it is not necessarily required practice at most institutions for all delivery modalities. Some instructors still do not use the LMS to post materials or assignments for on-campus classes. In all three classes, students found this aspect of the class extremely helpful or helpful (figure 9) while only a small percentage found it slightly helpful in the 100 or 300 level class. Post Covid, the majority of students would like to continue to have access to materials in the LMS (figure 10).

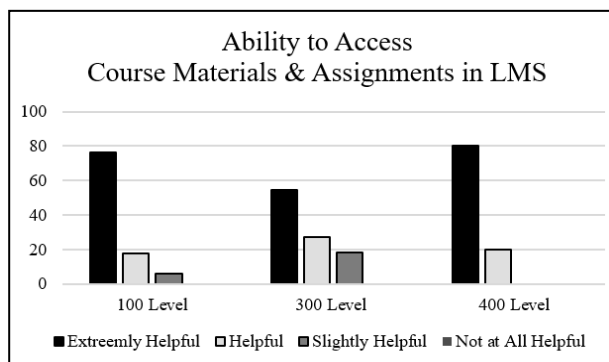


Figure 9: Assess to Course Materials & Assignments in LMS

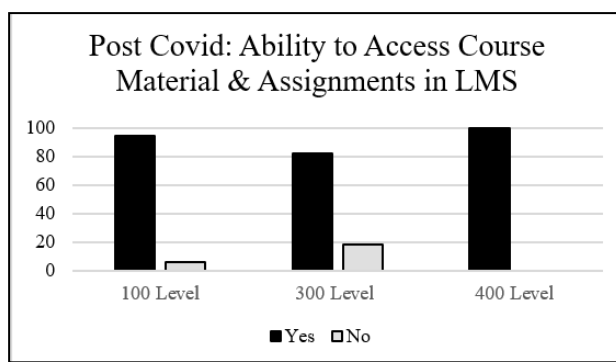


Figure 10: Assess to Course Materials & Assignments in LMS post-Covid

Lastly, students were asked about flexible options regarding how they could meet with the instructor. Students had the ability to meet with the instructor in person, through a remote platform, or by phone. This was particularly important for the seniors in the 400-level capstone class who require one-on-one mentoring. Also, due to the content nature of the 100-level class, students heavily rely on the instructor. While still seen as helpful, this choice was likely rated lower in the 300-level class due to less individual direction that was needed in this class (figure 11). Interestingly 100% of students wanted to have choice in how they could meet with the instructor following the pandemic (figure 12).

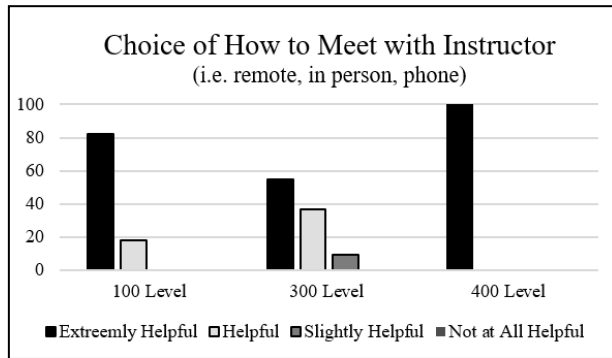


Figure 11: Choice of how to meet with Instructor

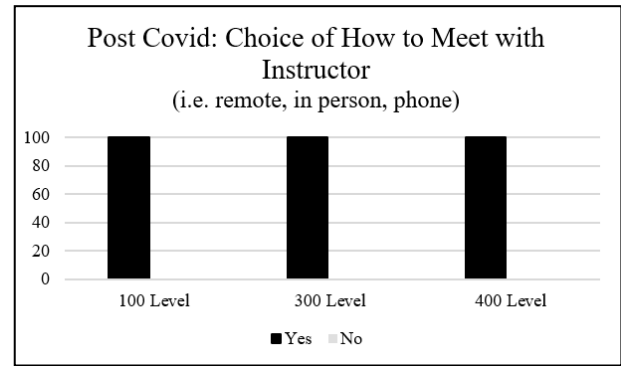


Figure 12: Choice of how to meet with Instructor post Covid

Based on the unusual environment during the pandemic, the student responses to these questions are not unexpected. Students had a wide variety of concerns and pressures during this period that did not just focus on school. However, it is notable that a majority of students at all levels have interest in these flexible learning options in the future. This could reflect some changing interests based on skills and experiences learned during the pandemic.

Benefits and Challenges of the Flexible Learning Model

The Hyflex model, which provides students with a host of choices, also provides students with both benefits and challenges. The following summarizes and analyzes the benefits and challenges of the Hyflex model as seen by the students.

Benefits

Students in all three courses were asked about a series of benefits regarding the flexible course design from flexible attendance options to balancing outside obligations with school. These options are highlighted in Figure 13 and displayed by course level. The benefits include flexible attendance, safety concerns, choice of where to live, match with learning preference, more personal choice, balance school with home and family, and balance school with work.

Of the benefits noted, students considered the ability to balance work with school to be the most important. Interestingly, 25% of students from the 100-level course, which was taken by first-years to seniors, consider work-balance important. This was closely followed by the 400-level senior class. Many of the senior students reported that they were employed in professional

jobs or were pursuing internships, often working remotely for a company. Among the students in the 300-level entrepreneurial class, 24% stated that personal choice was considered a benefit, however those same students did not find the flexible attendance to be a benefit.

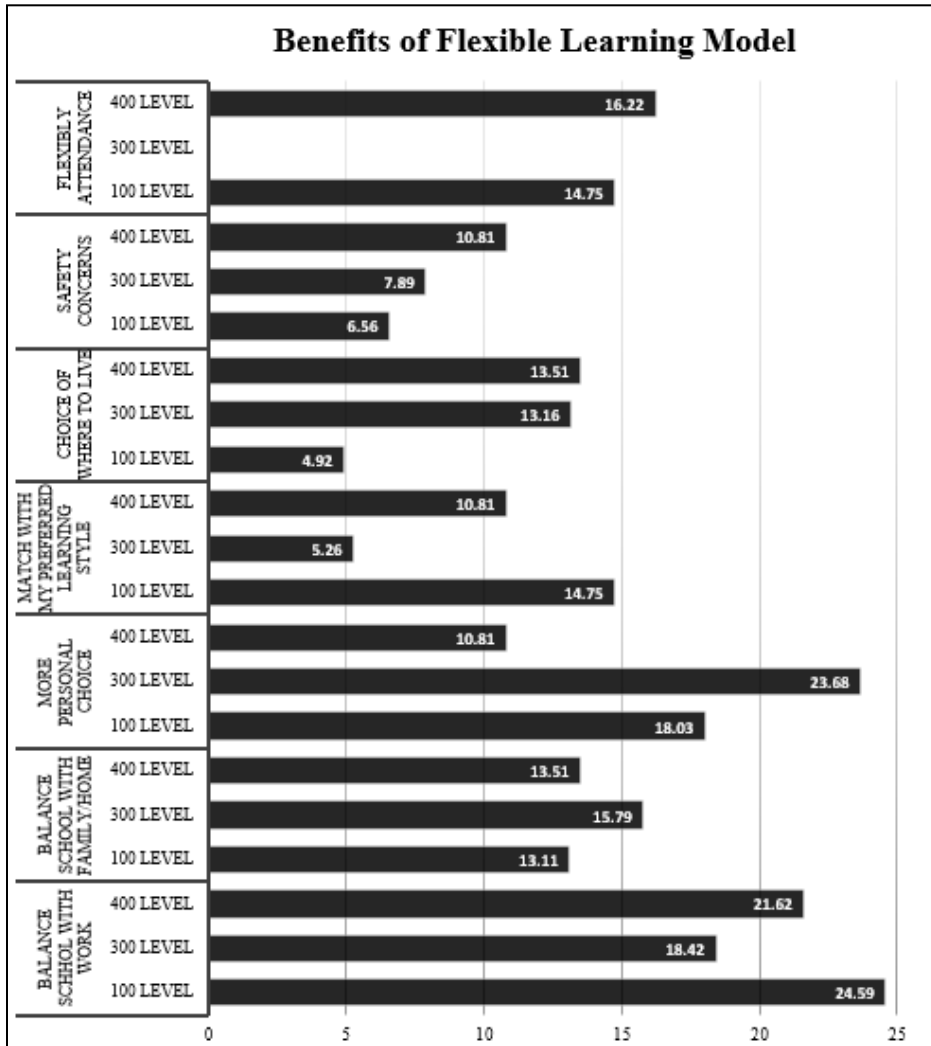


Figure 13: Benefits of Hyflex Learning Model

Surprisingly, among the lowest rated benefits were safety concerns, despite that the classes were taken during the pandemic. Also, while around 13% of students in the 300 and 400 level classes stated having choice of where to live was important, less than 5% of students in the 100-level class found this to be important. This might be due to the fact that many upper-class students chose to save money by moving home or moved for a job. Lastly, the benefit regarding learning style was more important to the 100-level class students. It is likely this is more strongly emphasized in this class because of the technology content that required more hands-on instruction.

Students noted that the ability to balance school with athletics was helpful in the flexible class structure. Also, because the classes were fully developed and open, some students observed that the ability to move ahead in the course was helpful to use their time more effectively.

Challenges

The students were also asked about the challenges they faced in the Hyflex learning model. Specifically, they were asked about technology, too many choices, self-motivation, less interaction with both other students and the instructor, more personal responsibility, and less structure (Figure 14).

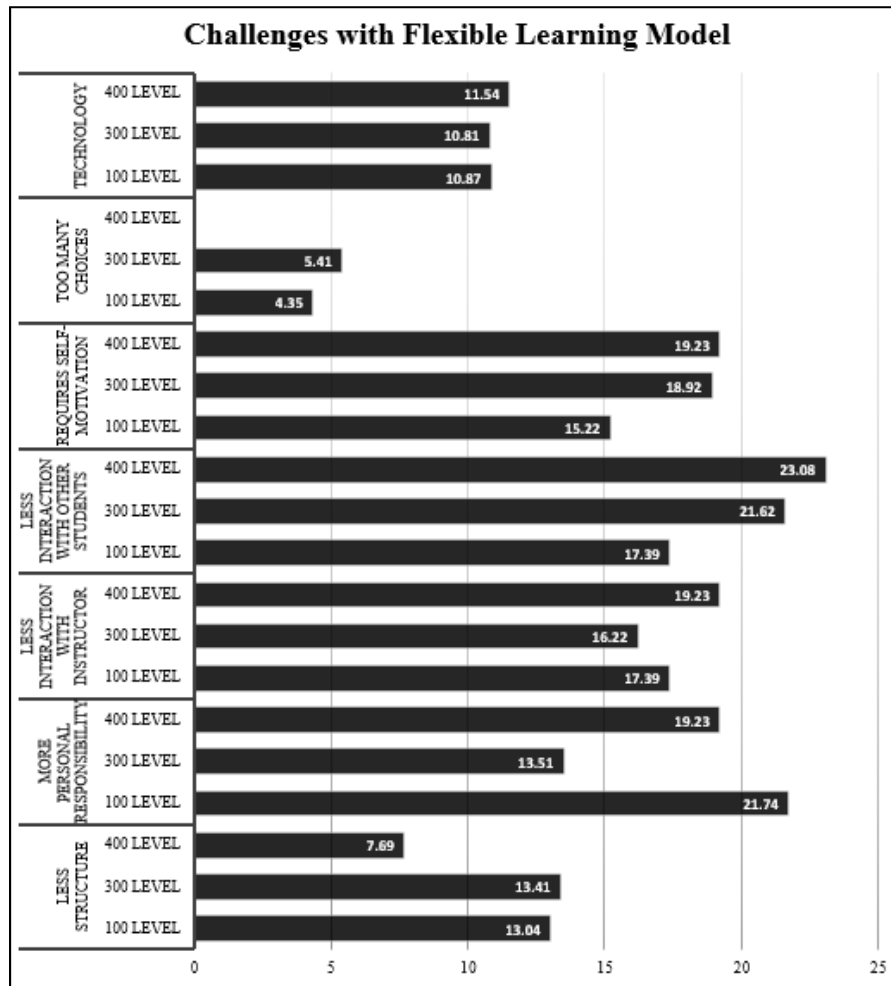


Figure 14: Challenges of Hyflex Learning Model

Of the least challenging aspects of the Hyflex model was choice, as most students, particularly the 400-level seniors, did not consider this a challenge. Related to this was the concept of course structure. While some students did find this challenging, it was generally rated lower. Also, of note is that about 11% of students had challenges with technology. In these classes, some of this can be related to internet conductivity while other challenges that students faced was access

to software. For example, in the database class, a small percentage of students had many challenges using the virtual desktop that the institution had developed during the pandemic.

Some of the largest challenges around the flexible learning model concern interactions between students. While there were remote, in-class and online discussions, 18 to 23% of students missed the interaction with fellow students. Of course, this was likely magnified during the Covid pandemic and may not be as profound in a post-Covid world where isolation may not be as significant. Moreover, another challenge for students was less interaction with the instructor. Also, the related questions regarding self-motivation and personal responsibility were observed as challenges by about 20% of the students. This is particularly pronounced in the 100-level technology class.

Other Student Feedback

Students were also provided the opportunity to add additional comments about this model. Many of the comments were in support of continuing the model following the pandemic, while others noted how communication with the instructor played a factor in driving their success. The following are a sample of student comments about the Hyflex model:

I loved that when I had questions you would reply very fast. I also liked being able to have the choice of going in person or Zoom. Made meeting and lancing life events a lot easier.

I love the ability to be flexible about my learning and would love for the options to continue after Covid.

Please encourage professors to continue this model!! A lot has changed this year and my degree and livelihood relies on hybrid learning.

I enjoy being able to work full time. It was still very easy to contact you if I could not find the answers I needed online.

The majority of students in all three classes supported the use of the Hyflex learning model during the Covid pandemic. Moreover, an overwhelming number also supported continuing most aspects of the model in the future. While the model did bring some challenges, such as less interaction with students and instructor, most students enjoyed being able to have more choice and balance school with work and home obligations.

DISCUSSION

Limitations

This research was limited by the small sample size within three classes. Larger scale studies should be explored to further understand the trends of this topic for the future of higher education delivery methods. Additionally, while the research did focus on three different levels of business education, a broader exploration should be conducted to understand how Hyflex can be applied to other business courses and levels of education.

Lessons Learned

The lessons learned from this small study is that a wide range of undergraduate students can be successful when given a choice of delivery model within one course. However, this model requires a careful mix of content delivery combined with quick and continuous communication from the instructor. Using a flipped instructional method combined with well-designed activities that promote student-to-student interaction is helpful in balancing student choice with reduced feelings of isolation. Moreover, instructors should also leverage the advances in the remote technology improved during the pandemic. While this may require some trial and error, developing efficiencies in course preparation and delivery, it will be critical to support the Hyflex model. Faculty that have significant experience in teaching both online and in-class may be more prepared to envision the merging of these two delivery modes into one class.

Careful consideration of the type of course, level of course, and students should also be reviewed. From this small study, the model can be successful in all course levels but might be more appropriate for higher level undergraduate business classes. This model, as developed at San Francisco State University, targeted graduate programs where it is not unusual for students to be working adults balancing work, home, and school simultaneously. Providing participation options can help retain students who are working or have other obligations.

Future Work

One of the challenges of this model is developing activities for the various delivery modes that have the same level of quality and learning outcomes. This may mean designing activities that can support interaction between remote and in-class students, while at the same time creating a separate activity for online students to support learning of a concept. An additional challenge will be developing options for interactions for a full-term team project. This is likely to require more faculty support to develop and iterate these classes.

In addition, while the technology has improved significantly, there are still challenges in teaching a class that includes both remote and in-class students that support equal participation. This may include additional monitors so both the students and instructor can see and interact with the students. In the classroom, this may include a motion-sensor camera and advanced microphones for the classroom. Once again, instructors will have to be trained and expect some trial and error in developing smoother interactions that do not minimize remote participants.

Based on what was learned in this small study, future work in this area could include more in-depth analysis of the application of the model in a side-by-side course comparison to study student success and faculty feedback. Also, a deeper understanding of success and retention of online students in a Hyflex course would be useful. Additionally, testing of technology options and participant interaction would be beneficial in moving this learning model forward.

Here to Stay

Based on the high level of support for the Hyflex model seen in this study, Hyflex may be here to stay in a post-Covid world. It is notable that students rated benefits such as balance with work and personal choice higher than concerns about safety during the Covid period. This may reflect that the Hyflex model may fulfill needs not directly related to the pandemic.

Many students, especially seniors, shared that they were working in professional and internship positions in a remote capacity. More and more universities are exploring this model as

student expectations may be changing. This is particularly relevant as more employers are looking to reduce the overhead of office spaces and adjusting what work may look like post-Covid, it would not be surprising that students are also expecting a variety of experiences in their education. This may be particularly important as students want to model a workplace experience while in school.

The Hyflex model may also be attractive to university administrators as they continuously seek to increase enrollment and retention while reducing costs. The Hyflex model may allow colleges and universities to combine low enrolled course sections online and on campus into one class with less faculty resources. However, universities should also recognize the additional workload that a Hyflex course may require to both develop and teach. Certainly, course caps should be carefully monitored for this model.

The HyFlex model may provide evolutionary changes in course delivery that can provide students choice, while driving enrollment and retention. However, to provide meaningful student choice and success, the Hyflex model cannot be haphazardly developed and adopted, as this is likely to result in a poor student experience. For long-term sustainable adoption of the Hyflex learning model, universities need to support faculty in understanding this model, testing various methods, and developing confidence.

CONCLUSIONS

This small study of the Hyflex learning model in three business courses provided an overview of its history and framework. This article offered a review of the pedagogical approach for the course design. Moreover, student performance results were shared based on participation methods. The students were also surveyed about their experiences and the results were shared in terms of course features, as well as the high degree of interest in these features for the long term. Student challenges and benefits were also reviewed in order to determine adjustments to the model moving forward. Finally, consideration of the lessons learned from this study were discussed along with its future work and long-term considerations to develop this model for the future.

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**BUILDING WORKPLACE READINESS SKILLS THROUGH LEARNING CONTRACTS
IN A MANAGEMENT INTERNSHIP COURSE**

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ABSTRACT

Learning contracts are an integral component to the success of a student's internship experience, form the basis for the student's job responsibilities, and give the site supervisor and faculty a means to evaluate the student. The relationship of the learning contract, self-directed learning, and workplace readiness skills were examined in an undergraduate business school setting. Students in classes where the learning contract was the foundation for the internship class and its related assignments and course activities received higher ratings by their site supervisors on their soft skills and self-reported a greater focus on setting goals in their internship.

Internships and other types of experiential learning (EL) are increasingly important components of the college curriculum for students at a wide-range of institutions. These experiences allow universities and employers to work collaboratively to address the reported “skills gap” in the current U.S. and world economy. Research on internships has shown benefits in helping students to gain and practice both hard and soft workplace skills (Helyer & Lee, 2014; Dabke, 2016). Yet, even with the increase in internship experiences, employers continue to report a dearth of soft skills in the current college graduate workforce. They report highest expectations for new hires in the competencies of leadership and teamwork, written and professional communication, and analysis and problem solving (NACE, 2016, para. 4). One mid-western university’s affiliated employers, much like those in the studies already mentioned, continue to express high expectations for overall soft skill readiness of graduates through focus groups, college advisory boards, and direct discussions with faculty and staff. In response to these expectations, the university implemented an experiential learning (EL) requirement of all students. The EL requirement can be met through a traditional three-credit hour internship on site with a business or industry partner or through a field experience course in which small teams of students from across business and technology disciplines consult with clients on organizational problems.

While the curriculum for internship courses at the university has been increasingly standardized in order to assure that all students are receiving practice in developing soft skills and applying the hard skills of their discipline, one course, MGMT 490: Management Internship, developed a series of interrelated assignments designed to meet these objectives. Of particular importance in these assignments, largely because of the inclusion of internship site supervisors in the process, was the development of a learning contract which serves to help students to define soft and hard skill practice goals and to engage in meaningful self-directed learning supported by both faculty and site supervisors. Through multiple revisions of the contract format and the interrelated assignments, the course became a model for all other internship courses in the university’s college of business. The description of the learning contract assignment, and its application in the MGMT 490 course, provide a useful model for faculty to encourage greater student agency in defining and practicing soft skills and guiding their own work in an internship course in preparation for effective contribution to the workplace and in response to the necessity for life-long learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The learning contract assignment is a direct adaptation of King and Sweitzer’s model from their 2009 work *The Successful Internship*, but is grounded in several other examples of contemporary experiential and self-directed learning assignments. King and Sweitzer (2014) subsequently submit that little research has been conducted on effective pedagogical practices in academic internships, and that their work serves both to define the types of learning which can occur in these experiences as well as provide tangible examples of exercises which allow students to build skills across four primary learning domains: professional, academic, personal, and civic. Effective assignments which facilitate learning in internships address one or more of these domains, but it is important to remember that none of the domains are intended to be “rigid, mutually exclusive silos of learning” (King & Sweitzer, 2014, p. 41). Rather, what is more important is to set students on a path of self-directed and individualized learning which helps them

to integrate knowledge and skills from across these domains. In fact, it is what King & Sweitzer (2014) term student engagement and “self-authored” (p. 43) learning which are becoming more important to student success over the lifespan of a career involving multiple shifts not only in unique jobs, but across an increasing number of full career changes. Ultimately, according to King and Sweitzer (2014), “regardless of an intern’s developmental position, the internship can be a context for promoting a self-authored approach to learning” (p. 43). Their foundational work continues to inform current research on the benefits of learning contracts in internships, particularly the challenges presented in remote learning and virtual internships during the COVID-19 pandemic (Christian, McCarty, & Brown, 2021) and in honors programs (Haseleu & Taylor, 2020).

Another example of self-authored learning which helps students to engage at the level of setting their own goals for performance and grade evaluation of performance is provided by Erickson and Cooper (2017). The authors respond to what they perceive is a lack of student engagement in courses where assignments are directed “at” students to help assure participation rather than developed “with” them to allow for greater autonomy and self-direction. Their shared purpose exercise asks students to reflect on those approaches to learning which have been most effective for them in their success in previous courses, and to develop several of these for a current MBA course (Erickson & Cooper, 2017, p. 390). In addition to allowing for greater collaboration for determining the “context” or purpose of the course, the students are also asked to commit to one tangible action which would better allow them to align their learning and performance with the shared purpose developed by all students in the course. Supported throughout the semester by peer discussions and ongoing reflection culminating in a final course paper, the exercise becomes “a methodology to increase student engagement and facilitate students taking responsibility for their learning [resulting in] commitment to, and responsibility for their learning and [an] opportunity for case-in-point learning” (pp. 404-405).

Erikson and Cooper (2017) describe the results of their shared purpose exercises designed to explore teamwork. They indicate that while students often had challenges articulating their roles and impact in teams at the start of a course, through the developmental process of the shared purpose assignments and structured reflections, students articulated growth in areas such as giving and receiving feedback to peers, accountability to team goals, and developing measurable team performance and project metrics (pp. 402-404).

Key to the success of Erikson & Cooper’s exercise is reflective activity, and at a depth and frequency to assure movement beyond surface identification of concepts. To develop this approach, Miller and Maellero (2016) employ a root cause problem solving exercise to deepen student reflection on collective analysis of case problems which they find sometimes suffer from only surface level discovery. In their graduate-level operations and leadership courses, teams of students are assigned cases describing business operations challenges. As part of the analysis, they must complete a “Five Whys” exercise as part of the Check stage of Deming’s Plan-Do-Check-Act model as well as create a team reflective paper describing the process of their changing understanding of root causes (p. 173). The authors argue that the approach “deepen[s] students’ understanding of the observations they made about their own thinking and acting” and supports “more precise abstract conceptualizations about their concrete learning experience and more practical plans for the application of learning” (p. 171).

Similar to Miller and Maellero’s exercises, the reflection provided on the learning contract and other assignments in the MGMT 490 internship course are structured around the Kolb

Experiential Learning Cycle and place the challenge of meaning making from experience on students via the stages of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Christian, McCarty, and Brown (2021) also utilize the Kolb Model for reflection in an approach they developed to help students in clinical, internship, and other experiential learning settings to deal with the uncertainty of these experiences during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly as most of the learning during this time was mediated via a combination of synchronous and asynchronous deliveries very different from more traditional in-person or face-to-face interactions. The authors describe their model as integrative and combining Schoel and Maizell's adventure wave with Kolb's experiential learning cycle (Christian, McCarty, & Brown, 2021, p. 268). Kolb's four stages of doing, reflecting, generalizing, and transferring are combined with Schoel and Maizell's adventure wave model of briefing, doing, and debriefing into an approach which facilitates more self-directed and constructivist learning, a significant challenge in the isolation of the pandemic and the uncertainty of the transition of learning from face-to-face to asynchronous and synchronous online modalities (p. 267).

An important element in assuring self-directed learning in Christian, McCarty, and Brown's (2021) model is the use of learning contracts which the authors argue "are consistent with the constructivist belief that students have a natural ability to think and construct knowledge primarily on their own" (p. 267). However, faculty must help students to hone in on appropriate and achievable goals considering the constraints imposed by the physical isolation of the COVID-19 learning environment such as limited in-person feedback by other experiential learning stakeholders, including internship site or clinical supervisors (Christian, McCarty, & Brown, 2021). Learning contracts compliment other types of course activities such as faculty observations of student performance, written reflections, and synchronous virtual class discussions and debriefings on the activities completed in various clinical and internship experiences, even those which themselves were often completed virtually during the pandemic (i.e. recorded clinical sessions with clients or patients and remote/virtual internship work).

The foundational learning contract work of King and Sweitzer (2014) has also continued to influence the use of the approach in programs which involve student learning in addition to experiential methods. Haseleu and Taylor (2020) describe the results of adapting learning contracts in an honors program. While internships are often a part of honors program requirements, so are more independent project-based learning approaches where students explore topics they generate in partnership with faculty mentors. Hasleau and Taylor (2020) explain that a frequent criticism of learning contracts is that there are not common expectations and quality standards set so that the results may appear to be less rigorous or "diluted" than those of traditional course formats (p. 175). As King and Sweitzer (2014) define a contract as having clear goals, focused activities, and measurable outcomes, Haseleu and Taylor (2020) have added other quality and rigor measures to their honors program learning contract model and requirements. These include: defining the explicit need for the learning/project, designing engaged learning activities, performing valid faculty assessment of student learning, identifying appropriate learning resources and strategies, as well as defining project timelines, credit hour awards, student-faculty meeting dates, and approval mechanisms. Including these comprehensive learning contract requirements, much like the design of an honors course itself, has built on the core components of the King & Sweitzer (2014) model and resulted in 96% of honors students and faculty surveyed at Haseleu and Taylor's institution indicating that the revised honors project contracts are "very useful" in defining expectations and directing learning (Haseleu & Taylor, 2020, p. 185).

THE LEARNING CONTRACT ASSIGNMENT OVERVIEW

The learning contract is the foundation for the vast majority of assignments in the MGMT 490 internship class, a capstone-level course in the university's BBA-Management and BBA-Business programs which students can choose to fulfill their experiential learning requirement. Students are introduced to the learning contract in a welcome email sent several weeks prior to the start of the class. In the email, the importance of the learning contract is explained and students are urged to review the assignment materials in the learning management system (LMS) during the first few days of class.

The LMS also includes a resource article on the fundamentals, goals, and objectives of the learning contract, assignment details with examples, and a template for students to use as they develop their own contracts. Students work on the learning contract during the first two weeks of the semester, and it is strongly recommended that they develop it in collaboration with their internship site supervisor to assure that established goals also mesh well with day-to-day responsibilities of the internship experience. Faculty email the site supervisors during the first week of the semester not only to introduce themselves, but also to explain in detail the academic focus of the internship class and the importance of the site supervisor to a successful student experience. Site supervisors are told they can expect their intern will be in contact with them to discuss the goals of learning contract assignment.

Students are required to develop a minimum of four goals: academic, leadership & teamwork, professional, and personal. For the academic goal, students are to select a concept, technique, or skill that they have learned in one of their previous courses and apply it to the internship experience similar to this requirement in Erickson and Cooper's (2017) shared purpose assignment. The example students are given is to learn a software program for supply chain management. Supply chain management is a concept covered in the operations management class in the BBA Business degree. The leadership & teamwork goal ties directly to the university's Excellence System, a set of nine soft and hard skill competencies described in detail later. Here students are to focus on a goal related to establishing team goals, motivating team members, aligning team member skills to team assignments, and determining how the students can gain leadership or teamwork skills. What students wish to learn in the workplace is the focus of the professional goal, and the personal goal addresses ways students may experience additional growth during their internship.

Once goals are determined, students establish at least one desired learning outcome in each of the four areas. Proposed actions to achieve the goal and a specific time frame for completion comprise the activity section of the learning contract. The final component of the learning contract is the assessment and evaluation section. Here students state how goal completion will be measured, who will determine whether the goal has been completed, and a specific time frame for completion.

LEARNING CONTRACT SAMPLES & THE PROCESS OF REVISION

As noted earlier, students sometimes have difficulty choosing a single goal of focus for each of the four components of the learning contract, and oftentimes need additional guidance in drafting the various components. Since the contract lays the foundation for future assignments in the course, a considerable amount of time is spent on developing it during the first several weeks of the semester. Faculty provide detailed feedback to the student and there is the opportunity for revision numerous times until both the student and faculty are satisfied. To demonstrate the revision process, several examples of the student's initial work and their final goal in their learning contract follow.

Example 1 is a student's academic goal on the learning contract for their internship at a sales organization (see Table 1). Academic goals, where the student needs to connect learning from one of their academic classes to their internship experience, are often the most difficult goal for a student to write. With so many academic courses to choose from, students can be overwhelmed with the many options they have. As a result, students can be overly ambitious at the beginning of the internship and propose a laundry list of goals related to past courses or they have challenges identifying specific academic strengths or weaknesses. Thus, they sometimes struggle to choose a single concept or technique to focus on throughout their internship. Faculty can provide assistance by having the student look at the top three responsibilities in their internship and guide the student to look for connections between those responsibilities and the courses they have taken.

In this example, the goal/outcome incorporates learning concepts from two classes - a communications class, COMM 120: Presentation Techniques, and an introductory management class, MGMT 211: Management Foundations. The student identifies specific activities they will be involved in to accomplish the goal such as visiting a specific number of bank branches in a month to: 1) review referral opportunities; 2) identify better ways to approach customers; and 3) answer questions. The final component of the learning contract, assessment and measurement, addresses SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Time-Specific). This student's goal is very detailed, is easily understood by both the faculty and site supervisor, and demonstrates realistic activities.

Example 2 focuses on the leadership & teamwork goal of a student's learning contract (see Table 2). The goal is to host a staff meeting and to shadow their site supervisor as a way to learn the various components of organizing and leading a meeting. To assess successful completion of the goal, the student details what will be accomplished (hosting at least one weekly update meeting, scheduling the meeting, preparing the agenda, and taking the leadership role in conducting the meeting), the time frame (by the end of the semester) and who is responsible for evaluating if the goal was completed (the site supervisor).

The next example, shown in Table 3, is an initial professional goal for one student which required revision. Instructor feedback to the student suggested they "*Choose just 1-2 focus areas such as basic business banking, cash management, or QuickBooks knowledge and carry that all the way through your goals, activities, and measures.*" The student was then given several additional days to make modifications to the goal and resubmit. The revised submission in Table 4 includes a very specific goal and the assessment/measures are now in line with the revised goal.

Oftentimes students need to make just a simple adjustment to their learning contract. In the final example shown in Table 5, the student was asked to be more detailed regarding the presentation of a project. The revised learning contract goal in Table 6 includes specifics on who

will be included in the presentation and who has approval authority. If the student was asked to submit a third revision, they would be tasked with identifying a timeframe for the goal such as by week twelve of the semester or by the end of March.

REFLECTION ON THE LEARNING CONTRACT VIA INTERCONNECTED ASSIGNMENTS AND COURSE ACTIVITIES

The learning contract lays the foundation for all subsequent assignments in the MGMT 490 internship course. This includes journals, synchronous class sessions, a mid-semester site visit, and the final reflection paper. Fifty hours at the internship site are required for each academic credit earned. Most business students take the internship for a total of 3 credits. Students track their hours worked via their journals, at the mid-semester site visit, and in their final paper. The site supervisor verifies hours worked at both the site visit and also in the end-of-semester site supervisor evaluation.

Students complete the learning contract in the first few weeks of the course. After the learning contract has been approved, students refer to it in numerous other assignments. Students submit journals on a weekly basis and report any progress made toward each of the learning contract goals, any general activities completed, plus the number of hours worked since the last journal entry and the total number of hours completed in the internship to date.

Synchronous online class sessions are also held four times during the semester, typically once a month. The class meetings give students the opportunity to hone their communication skills in a virtual format. Each student reports on the key components included in their journal (activities, progress towards learning contract goals, and hours worked). Special topics for discussion are also included in these synchronous sessions, including overcoming conflict, communication strategies, and analysis of leadership styles. These special topics are addressed in the class as a whole or in small group sessions which then include a report out on the key points of the discussion and application to the internship experience.

The mid-semester site visit is attended by the student intern, the site supervisor, and the course faculty. Students are responsible for scheduling the site visit, setting the meeting agenda, and preparing any related materials. Site visits are conducted via Google Meeting, Blackboard Collaborate Ultra, or occasionally, depending on the firewall of the internship site, via Microsoft Teams or by telephone.

The student intern is responsible for facilitating the site visit and, at a minimum, covering the following topics: 1) introductions; 2) current responsibilities; 3) their strengths as an intern; 4) areas for improvement; 5) challenges and benefits of the internship thus far; 6) progress towards meeting learning contract goals; 7) hours worked to date; and 8) a summary of key action steps to be taken after the meeting. Since internship responsibilities can change over a period of months, the site visit is the student's last opportunity to propose any revisions to the learning contract. These mid-semester revisions to the learning contract must be approved by both the site supervisor and the faculty. After the site visit, students submit a written recap and reflection on the meeting via email to both the site supervisor and the faculty. This email recap and reflection reinforce business communication skills as well as the critical role of ongoing and deeper reflection explained by Miller and Maellero (2016).

The culminating paper due during the final weeks of the semester is the student's opportunity to reflect on both professional and personal growth throughout the semester. Each goal of the learning contract is to be addressed separately and students must note the activities that were performed, what was learned, and further learning that is needed to achieve the objective. Each goal must be clearly tied to at least one previous course completed and the relevance to the course is explained. Students must also demonstrate the learning that has taken place by including an example from their internship experience and by integrating references that support their goals. If further development or professional experience is required to complete a goal, students are asked to also include future learning strategies in their paper.

STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON THE LEARNING CONTRACT ASSIGNMENT

To gauge student perspectives on the value of the learning contract and the role it plays in student learning, student testimonials were collected via Student Evaluations of Teaching (SETs) from fall 2017 through fall 2019. Students are asked to complete SETs for every credit-bearing class in the final weeks of the class. The assessment process is managed by the university's Institutional Research department and is completed entirely online, a paper option is not available. The SET for undergraduate classes consists of 21 Likert scale questions in three categories: fourteen questions regarding the instructor, five questions on the course materials and tests/assignments, one question on the overall effectiveness of the instructor, and one question on the expected grade in the class. In addition to the Likert scale questions, there are two open-ended questions on the SET. Students have the opportunity to provide feedback on "What worked particularly well for you?" and "What suggestions for improvement do you have?" It is important to note instructors do not have access to the SET results until after the university's Central Registrar's Office has closed grading for the marking period. Student completion rates for the SETs in the internship classes are high, typically in the 90-100% range.

Overall, student feedback focuses on the value of the learning contract as a means to put focus on internship activities and the help it provides for the three key parties (student, site supervisor, and faculty) to agree on the most important student learning to take place during the internship. Student comments such as "*in this class I loved the learning contract, it allowed me to have certain things to focus on while at work. It was honestly a good outline*" and "*the learning contract goal worked well for me in this course. It helps me to identify my goal in the internship and measure my achievement in the end of the course*" support the value of the contract as a self-directed learning tool.

Weekly journals, whether written or verbal, also allow students the opportunity to reflect on the progress they are making towards accomplishing learning contract goals. Students responded: "*the journals worked well as they allowed for me to track my goals and keep an eye on how many hours I accumulated*" and "*the assignments were helpful in aiding me analyze my internship and push me harder to learn as much as I could during the 15-week internship.*" Faculty feedback on weekly journals helps to guide students throughout the semester. Many students comment on the benefits of regular and consistent faculty feedback. Said one: "*[I] enjoyed the constant feedback on progress made throughout the internship.*" In addition, weekly journals provide students a way to measure goal progress, and are also sources they use to develop

their end of semester reflection papers. As one student notes: “*journals were helpful in preparing me for the final paper, and great ways to track what I had accomplished at my internship.*”

EMPLOYER RESPONSES TO THE LEARNING CONTRACT AND EVALUATIONS OF INTERNS

A final gauge of how well students performed to the learning contract goals, and in their overall performance in the internship experience, is provided by a site supervisor evaluation. MGMT 490 students are evaluated by their internship site supervisors informally during the mid-term site visit and formally via an end of course quantitative evaluation. Faculty discussions with supervisors at the site visits reveal that a majority of them find the learning contract a useful tool to help them to understand and to support the educational experience during the internship beyond the expectations of the student’s day-to-day workplace responsibilities. Periodic progress checks on the goals in the contract also provide means for the employer and faculty to address any weaknesses or challenges the student is experiencing in the “real time” of the internship rather than only at mid or end of experience reviews via formal evaluations.

The site supervisor, student, and faculty member can also agree to modify the learning contract during the internship, particularly if a new project or responsibility is available. This often happens after the site visit when progress on the contract is reviewed. New goals in the learning contract allow for the employer to observe how well the intern can adapt to changing priorities while remaining focused on day-to-day responsibilities and the other goals articulated in the contract.

Often, learning contract goals focus on building the soft skills that employers consistently report are challenges for entry-level employees: teamwork, communication, and problem-solving. As noted in the sample learning contracts explained above, the intentional inclusion of academic, leadership & teamwork, professional, and personal goals assures that interns work to develop a broad range of competencies necessary for success in the immediate context of the internship, but also toward career development and life-long learning.

Employers also provide an end of term evaluation of interns by assessing students’ proficiency in the nine competencies which comprise the university’s Excellence System (see Appendix). The university describes the Excellence System as “student learning outcomes that demonstrate professional competencies necessary for graduates to engage in life-long learning and succeed in their chosen profession.” Interns are evaluated on each of the nine Excellence System competencies via the site supervisor evaluation using the following scale:

- 1 = ‘*Very Low Proficiency*’
- 2 = ‘*Low Proficiency*’
- 3 = ‘*Moderate Proficiency*’
- 4 = ‘*High Proficiency*’
- 5 = ‘*Very High Proficiency*’

Faculty email the end of term evaluation to site supervisors in week 12 of the semester with an expected return date in week 13. The faculty then forward the completed evaluation in its entirety to the student. This timing allows students to incorporate feedback from their site

supervisors into their final reflection paper. In addition to the Likert scale items on the Excellence System competencies, site supervisors provide feedback on the university's internship process. At the end of the evaluation, site supervisors can share any additional information in the open comments section.

A summary of internship site supervisor scores on Excellence System competencies for all college of business, technology, and arts & sciences interns from 2016 through 2019 with the subset of MGMT 490 interns as comparison is shown in Table 7. The scores indicate that all university interns perform generally well in the nine competencies, most often in the '*High Proficiency*' to '*Very High Proficiency*' range. However, while not showing a statistically significant difference in scores from their peers, the MGMT 490 interns have produced consistently higher means than the overall university intern population for the last several years.

These consistently higher scores are very likely attributed to the intentionality of soft-skill focus in the required learning contract goals as well as the amount of intentional reflection built into the sequence of the assignments in the MGMT 490 course. Also, similar to the process and outcomes Miller and Maellero (2016) describe in their root cause analysis reflective assignment, students who repeatedly engage in the kind of analytical activities which the learning contract represent are better able to "deepen understanding of the observations they [make] about their own thinking and acting" and support "more practical plans for the application of learning" (p. 171). These actions can positively impact their internship performance and the subsequent evaluations of site supervisors about their level of proficiency in soft skill competencies. In addition, as development of a leadership & teamwork goal is an explicit requirement of the learning contract, analysis of scores for this overall competency, and its component outcomes, reveals some specific benefits to the mandatory inclusion of this competency in the learning contract.

Broadly stated, the Excellence System leadership & teamwork competency says that students "understand how to build, direct and facilitate groups in order to utilize members' talents to meet attainable goals." Looking more closely at the specific outcomes which comprise this competency (see Table 8) the data reveal that MGMT 490 interns score higher than the overall competency mean for all interns on leadership & teamwork outcomes 1, 2, and 4 related to providing assistance, constructive feedback, and reinforcement of other team members. Other important Excellence System competencies often articulated in the learning contract, such as professional communication, are also ranked highly by employers at 4.43/5.00, which for MGMT 490 interns is a 0.07 higher score versus the total pool of university interns.

One significant area for improvement and potential focus in the learning contract assignment involves an Excellence System competency consistently ranked by the university's internship site supervisors as lowest performing: analysis & problem solving. Scores for MGMT 490 interns are 4.36/5.00 and 4.24/5.00 for all university interns, respectively. Applying the same intentionality to this competency as to leadership & teamwork in the learning contract has promise for improving ranking in this area as well.

CONCLUSION

As universities look for ways to meet the needs of employers for workplace ready talent prepared to employ life-long learning strategies, it is incumbent on them to continue to develop experiential course and assignment models which allow for student engagement in their own

learning processes. The ongoing revision of the learning contract and other interconnected assignments in the MGMT 490 internship course has resulted in year-over-year consistently high rankings by employers of students in key workplace readiness skills such as teamwork and communication. In addition, the dialogue created around the progress on contracts, as well as their revisions, has assisted faculty and administrators to stay closely connected to emerging workplace needs for both hard and soft skills.

Properly contextualized for the institutional environment and its employer base, and clearly interconnected with other course reflective activities and assignments, we believe that the learning contract assignment will continue to be an effective tool in building workplace readiness skills through internships and other types of experiential education. This work is sure to remain an ongoing desire among all key players—students, faculty, and employers.

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APPENDIX

Table 1
Academic Goal of Sample Learning Contract

GOALS/OUTCOMES <i>Academic Goal</i>	ACTIVITIES	ASSESSMENT/MEASURES
<p>To apply my COMM 120 experiences as well as my MGMT 211 knowledge in conducting monthly branch quick starts to conduct brand enhancement for the investment center.</p>	<p>Attend 3 branches in a month to go over referral opportunities and better ways to approach customers and ask questions comfortably.</p>	<p>Starting at the beginning of February introducing monthly topics. Schedule the quick starts with each branch manager a week in advance, give a brief overview of what is being talked about. This will be evaluated by tellers as a survey monkey and then evaluated by my site supervisor/co-workers who attend.</p>

Table 2
Leadership & Teamwork Goal of Sample Learning Contract

GOALS/OUTCOMES <i>Leadership & Teamwork Goal</i>	ACTIVITIES	ASSESSMENT/MEASURES
<p>To host one of the staff leadership meetings held weekly.</p>	<p>Job shadow my site supervisor and observe how he prepares for a meeting, tips on how to set an agenda, and how to conduct the leadership and team meeting.</p>	<p>For at least one weekly update meeting: schedule the meeting, prepare the agenda, and take the leadership role in conducting the meeting. This will take place by the end of the semester and be evaluated by my supervisor.</p>

Table 3
Professional Goal Needing Revision

GOALS/OUTCOMES <i>Professional Goal</i>	ACTIVITIES	ASSESSMENT/MEASURES
<p>To understand the following: basic financial concepts such as reading a P&L sheet and using the information to inform ordering and scheduling decisions, a balance sheet and how it informs business health, basic accounting procedures and bookkeeping systems, basic QuickBooks knowledge and bill paying, and basics of business banking and cash flow/cash drawer.</p>	<p>Attend monthly meetings with my supervisor and the store accountant including a review of the year end store Inventory. Perform bank runs, change orders, and management of cash flow/drawer management per shift per week.</p>	<p>Participate as an informed assistant manager in at least 1-2 meetings by the end of the internship as evaluated by my supervisor.</p> <p>Maintain management of basic business banking and cash flow in the drawer as checked by my supervisor.</p>

Table 4
Revised Professional Goal

GOALS/OUTCOMES <i>Professional Goal</i>	ACTIVITIES	ASSESSMENT/MEASURES
<p>To understand the following: basic business banking and cash management.</p>	<p>Attend monthly meetings with my supervisor and the store accountant including a review of the year end store Inventory. Perform bank runs, change orders, and management of cash flow/drawer management per shift per week.</p>	<p>Demonstrate an understanding of business banking and cash management by reading P&L sheets and using the information to make ordering and scheduling decisions as approved by my supervisor.</p>

Table 5
Initial Professional Goal of Sample Learning Contract

GOALS/OUTCOMES <i>Academic Goal</i>	ACTIVITIES	ASSESSMENT/MEASURES
To learn more about forecasting and planning from my BUSN495 class to be able to apply it in the leadership role.	Create a JDI project to forecast how many calls are taken regarding an agent's account and put in a plan for a possible solution.	Present call calculations of call volume via forecasting and present plan on lowering call volume (training additional staff members to update accounts).

Table 6
Revised Academic Goal of Sample Learning Contract

GOALS/OUTCOMES <i>Academic Goal</i>	ACTIVITIES	ASSESSMENT/MEASURES
To learn more about forecasting and planning from my BUSN 495 class to be able to apply it in the leadership role.	Create a JDI project to forecast how many calls are taken regarding an agent's account and put in a plan for a possible solution.	Present call calculations of call volume via forecasting and present plan on lowering call volume (training additional staff members to update accounts). The data will be presented first to the supervisor(s) and then escalated to the director of operations for approval.

Table 7
Site Supervisor Scores on Excellence System Competencies

Excellence System Competency Scores N = 487 (All Interns) N = 110 (MGMT 490 Interns)	Means for All Interns	Means for MGMT 490 Interns
Civic & Social Responsibility	4.49	4.56
Information Technology Proficiency	4.47	4.56
Ethical Reasoning & Action	4.40	4.45
Global & Intercultural Competence	4.39	4.44
Professional Communication	4.36	4.43
Leadership & Teamwork	4.35	4.39
Written Communication	4.30	4.41
Critical & Creative Thinking	4.27	4.41
Analysis & Problem Solving	4.24	4.36

Table 8

Site Supervisor Scores on Components of the Leadership & Teamwork Competencies

<p style="text-align: center;">Leadership & Teamwork Competency Outcome-Level Scores</p> <p style="text-align: center;">N = 487 (All Interns) N = 171 (MGMT 490 Interns)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Means for All Interns</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Means for MGMT 490 Interns</p>
<p>1. Providing assistance, information, and support to others, to build or maintain relationships with them</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">4.40</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">4.43</p>
<p>2. Listening and responding constructively to other team members' ideas</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">4.38</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">4.40</p>
<p>3. Recognizing and encouraging behaviors which contribute to teamwork</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">4.38</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">4.36</p>
<p>4. Reinforcing team members for their contributions</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">4.24</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">4.26</p>

The Excellence System

GLOBAL & INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

Graduates understand that working and succeeding in an inclusive, international world involves complex issues present in diverse environments.

CIVIC & SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Graduates recognize the value of civic and social responsibility to empower themselves to make informed decisions and participate in the communities in which they live.

ETHICAL REASONING & ACTION

Graduates recognize that integrity is an essential component of accountability and is required in the evaluation of differing value systems to determine appropriate courses of action.

CRITICAL & CREATIVE THINKING

Graduates develop an appreciation of the importance of context and perspective when identifying and challenging assumptions, ideas, processes, and experiences.

ANALYSIS & PROBLEM SOLVING

Graduates use quantitative and qualitative methods of inquiry to assess and evaluate complex problems.

LEADERSHIP & TEAMWORK

Graduates understand how to build, direct and facilitate groups in order to utilize members' talents to meet attainable goals.

INFORMATION & TECHNOLOGY PROFICIENCY

Graduates identify, access and manage information and technology resources effectively in interpersonal, social, and professional settings.

WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

Graduates recognize the potential impact of written documents and effectively adapt the necessary skills to produce appropriate documents in a variety of interpersonal, social and professional settings.

PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION

Graduates understand and demonstrate professional demeanor, presentation and communication skills in a variety of interpersonal, social and professional settings.

**A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF DISSERTATIONS ON BUSINESS TOPICS:
A QUANTITATIVE STUDY**

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ABSTRACT

Dissertation research methodology choices, page lengths, and research topics have not been studied extensively. Few studies have explored the differences and similarities between researcher-oriented and practitioner-oriented dissertations. This study examined dissertations written on business topics in the recent ten years using content analysis to address these gaps. This study found from the years 2015 to 2020, there was an increase in the number of qualitative dissertations compared to that of the year 2010. Mean page length of dissertations was longer for PhD programs compared to practitioner doctoral counterparts. Mean page lengths of quantitative dissertations were shorter than qualitative dissertations.

INTRODUCTION

There has been some research on the document content and form of dissertations in the field of education, but dissertations on business topics have not received the same attention (Banerjee & Morley, 2013; MacLennan et al., 2018). Ongoing discussions on the differences in the focus of research-oriented dissertations, typically culminating in PhD degrees, and practitioner-oriented dissertations, culminating in degrees such as the EdD (Doctor of Education), and their dissertation processes have taken place for over a century (Nelson & Coorough, 1994; Walker & Haley-Mize, 2012).

Traditionally, PhD programs focused on research excellence, and EdD, DBA (Doctor of Business Administration), and other practitioner doctoral programs prepared students as scholar-practitioners (Banerjee & Morley, 2013; MacLennan et al., 2018; Nelson & Coorough, 1994; Walker & Haley-Mize, 2012). Scholarly consensus exists that PhD and practitioner doctoral programs have become more similar than different (Banerjee & Morley, 2013; MacLennan et al., 2018; Nelson & Coorough, 1994; Sarros et al., 2005; Walker & Haley-Mize, 2012).

Nelson and Coorough (1994) created a foundational dissertation content analysis in the literature. The authors reported differences and similarities between PhD and EdD dissertations (Nelson & Coorough, 1994). Other authors since then have studied the trends in education dissertations on a smaller scale (Krueger, 2018; Lunde, 2017; Lunde et al., 2019; Walker & Haley-Mize, 2012). Following this development of dissertation content analysis, MacLennan et al. (2018) conducted PhD and DBA dissertation content analysis in the business field.

MacLennan et al. (2018) suggested further research in business dissertations, especially in DBA dissertations, because DBA and EdD degrees share many attributes. Both DBA and EdD degrees were created at Harvard University because this institution decided not to offer PhD degrees from their professional schools (Harvard Business School, 2020; Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2020; MacLennan et al., 2018; Nelson & Coorough, 1994).

MacLennan et al. (2018) and Nelson and Coorough (1994) found that there are many similarities between practitioner doctorate degrees such as EdD, DBA, and other practitioner doctoral programs. They are generally intended for business and educational leaders who have significant industry, leadership, consulting, and teaching experience before entering their doctoral education programs (Banerjee & Morley, 2013; Johnson, 2005; Sarros et al., 2005).

Although the present study explores the general differences and similarities between PhD and practitioner dissertations, it does not focus closely on specific and individual differences among various degrees such as PhD, EdD, DBA, and other practitioner doctorate degrees such as Doctor of Information Systems (DIS), Doctor of Information Technology (DIT), Doctor of Public Health (DPH), Doctor of Psychology (PsyD), Doctor of Nurse Practitioner (DNP), and Doctor of Judicial Science (DJS) that are analyzed in this present study and their methodology choice, research rigor, and other dissertation research characteristics. Regardless of degree program types, many students decide to conduct their research on business topics (such as educational leadership and management, effective teaching in business schools, or marketing of college programs)

(Digital Commons Network Business Commons, 2020; ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, 2020). For this reason, we intended to explore the trends in dissertations written on business topics over the last ten years.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

PhD programs are geared toward the training of academic researchers. EdD, DBA, and other practitioner doctoral programs aim to develop practitioner leaders in various fields where business is a relevant research topic (Banerjee & Morley, 2013; MacLennan et al., 2018; Nelson & Coorough, 1994; Sarros et al., 2005; Walker & Haley-Mize, 2012). The lack of comprehensive understanding of trends in dissertations on business topics calls for further study to explore what and how students decide to study when they engage in their dissertation phases (Dunn & Kniess, 2019; MacLennan et al., 2018; Pansiri, 2009).

Studies suggest that PhD and practitioner doctoral training (EdD, DBA, and other practitioner doctorate degrees) gradually became more similar than different over time (Banerjee & Morley, 2013; Caboni & Proper, 2009; Cleary, 1992; Deering, 1998; Nelson & Coorough, 1994; Sarros et al., 2005; Walker & Haley-Mize, 2012), and DBA and EdD training share many characteristics (MacLennan et al., 2018). There is limited research in the literature to understand the differences and similarities between PhD and DBA business dissertations in current years (MacLennan et al., 2018).

Many dissertations from various degree types (PhD, EdD, DBA, and other practitioner doctorate degrees) focus on business topics as their research area (Digital Commons Network Business Commons, 2020; ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, 2020). More studies are needed to understand what and how current students are deciding to study for their dissertations (Banerjee & Morley, 2013; Caboni & Proper, 2009; Cleary, 1992; Deering, 1998; MacLennan et al., 2018; Nelson & Coorough, 1994; Sarros et al., 2005; Walker & Haley-Mize, 2012). There are many gaps as to what students decide to study, what research methodologies they use, and the extent to which they explore their dissertation topics (Banerjee & Morley, 2013; Caboni & Proper, 2009; Cleary, 1992; Deering, 1998; Digital Commons Network Business Commons, 2020; MacLennan et al., 2018; Nelson & Coorough, 1994; Sarros et al., 2005; Walker & Haley-Mize, 2012). As a result of this research gap, we have identified the following research questions to guide our study.

RQ1: What are the trends in business topics chosen for dissertations over the last ten years?

RQ2: What are the research methodology choices (quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies) of dissertations on business topics?

RQ3: What is the relationship between dissertation page lengths and methodology choices for dissertations on business topics?

RQ4: Are there significant differences in business topics, methodologies, or page lengths when comparing PhD to practitioner dissertations (from EdD, DBA, and other practitioner doctorate degrees such as Doctor of Information Systems (DIS), Doctor of Information Technology (DIT), Doctor of Public Health (DPH), Doctor of Psychology (PsyD), Doctor of Nurse Practitioner (DNP), and Doctor of Judicial Science (DJS) and so on)?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Content analysis is a research methodology used to categorize and identify trends in messages or communication, whether in documents, videos, images, or speech (Krippendorff, 2018; Neuendorf, 2016). The foundational content analysis of dissertations by EdD and PhD programs was conducted by Nelson and Coorough (1994), who assessed 1,007 PhD and 960 EdD dissertations from 1950 to 1990. Since then, content analysis of dissertations has been used to understand the current trends and emphasis within topic areas and disciplines. There are content analyses of special education dissertations (Walker & Haley-Mize, 2012), faith-based universities' dissertations (Lunde et al., 2019; Lunde, 2017), and DBA and PhD dissertations in business (MacLennan et al., 2018).

Hallinger (2011) reviewed three decades worth of dissertations, using the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS) (Hallinger, 1990; Hallinger et al., 1996; Hallinger et al., 2010) as a survey instrument to assess principals' educational leadership and student learning. Hallinger (2011) reported the reviews by educational leadership and management scholars that were produced over the past five decades. About 25 years ago, the authors observed that school leadership scholars used instructional leadership as their primary perspective. The authors also noted that PIMRS was the most utilized instrument by school leadership researchers.

Hallinger (2011) found that more than 110 dissertations used the PIMRS instrument in the school leadership literature. This research aimed to explore and examine the methodological approaches and research process created in those instructional leadership studies. Hallinger (2011) further discovered that the interest in instructional leadership among researchers remained high during the period the author's dissertation content analysis was performed. Finally, he critically evaluated those dissertations and reported that students' weak knowledge accumulation was revealed by the author's citation analysis, which found limited citations of other scholars.

Nelson and Coorough (1994) studied PhD and EdD dissertation content to assess the difference between PhD and EdD training because PhD programs are said to create researchers, and EdD programs are designed to produce practitioners. The authors compared PhD and EdD dissertations relative to their design and research methodologies. The authors surveyed PhD and EdD dissertations from 1950 to 1990, and their sample sizes consisted of 1,007 PhD and 960 EdD dissertations.

Walker and Haley-Mize (2012) conducted a content analysis of PhD and EdD dissertations in the special education concentration. The authors surveyed PhD and EdD dissertations from 1997 to 2010 in special education. Walker and Haley-Mize's (2012) study assessed research design and other variables that Nelson and Coorough (1994) analyzed. The author also found that PhD dissertations used more sophisticated statistical analysis with theoretical frameworks than did EdD dissertations.

Augusto (2009) conducted case studies of EdD and PhD dissertations in educational leadership and administration. The authors reported that the field of educational leadership uses degree programs to prepare both scholars and practitioners (Augusto, 2009; McClintock, 2005). The author aimed to conduct dissertation content and case studies to understand how faculty describe the characteristics of quality dissertations (Augusto,

2009). Augusto's (2009) study examined differences and similarities between PhD and EdD dissertations.

Augusto (2009) reported that the author's study is primarily based on Lovitts' (2007) work regarding faculty perspectives on dissertations. Lovitts examined the quality of dissertations from the perspective of mentors who guide and evaluate students' dissertations (Augusto, 2009). This empirical work also found that faculty perceived the aim of dissertations as a process and a product and that dissertations should reflect the training students received to show their critical, analytical, and writing skills produced during their programs (Augusto, 2009).

Melendez (2002) performed a dissertation content analysis on 192 higher education dissertations from 1977 to 1997. The author reported that the dissertations represented 14 doctoral programs. The author identified several differences in higher education dissertations. The author found that between 1977 and 1997 dissertations, the study noted an increase in female doctorate degree recipients, an increase in the use of the conceptual framework, a change in methodology used from quantitative to qualitative, and an increase in mean dissertation page length from 199 to 218 pages. Regarding the balance between theory and practice, the author reported that the integration of both theory and practice is encouraged in both 1977 and 1997 dissertations.

DBA and PhD Dissertations

The practitioner-focused Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) degree is Harvard University's primary business doctorate degree (Harvard Business School, 2020a; MacLennan et al., 2018). It was first created in 1953 by Harvard Business School to offer a degree other than the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree, which has been only offered through the College of Arts and Sciences (Harvard Business School, 2020a). Similarly, Harvard University started to offer the practitioner-based Doctor of Education (EdD) degree in 1922 (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2020a; Levine, 2007; MacLennan et al., 2018). Since then, many students earned EdD degrees from various programs in the U.S. (Krueger, 2018; Lunde et al., 2019; Lunde, 2017; Nelson & Coorough, 1994; Walker & Haley-Mize, 2012). Currently, Harvard University offers research-focused PhD programs from Harvard Business School as well as Harvard Graduate School of Education in addition to the practitioner-based DBA and EdD programs (Harvard Business School, 2020a, 2020b; Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2020a, 2020b).

In the United States (U.S.), there are three accrediting bodies for business programs including the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB International, 2020), the Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP, 2020), and the International Accreditation Council for Business Education (IACBE, 2020). In theory, the curriculum of doctoral business programs in DBA and PhD should be noticeably different from each other; thus, the accrediting bodies would treat DBA and PhD programs differently, and the dissertations of DBA and PhD students should significantly differ also (MacLennan, et al., 2018). Yet, the authors reported that their study did not support this theory; MacLennan et al. (2016, 2018) found that the distinction between the two degrees, DBA program for applied practitioners and PhDs for academic researchers, does not produce a clear separation.

The authors then asked whether or not an essential difference could be found in their dissertation process, and they tested their question with 147 DBA and 151 PhD dissertations in business published from 2006 to 2016 (MacLennan et al., 2018). The authors found that the difference between DBA and PhD dissertations differ significantly by Carnegie classification (Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, 2020; MacLennan et al., 2018), the

majority of PhD programs belong to R1 and R2 classifications and DBA programs primarily belong to R3 and unclassified categories. There is a clear distinction between DBA and PhD programs, as PhD programs tend to have higher research activity, and DBA programs have lower research activity; but there are exceptions to the rules as well (MacLennan et al., 2018). There are PhD programs with lower research activity (R3) and DBA programs with higher research activity (R1) (Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, 2020; MacLennan et al., 2018).

Banerjee and Morley (2013) reported that professional doctorates in management had seen significant growth in two decades, particularly in Australia and the United Kingdom. The authors reviewed the development of professional doctorates in business education and the contributions of practitioner-based doctoral education, regarding the Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) degree. Professional doctoral programs are developed in response to the criticism on the relevance of PhD research and practice and the changing content and context of knowledge in the new global market.

Banerjee and Morley (2013) suggested that the expectations of what is involved in professional practice research need more understanding. The authors state that currently, there is no clear separation between PhD and DBA research. Though DBA is focused on practice, the DBA dissertations still tend to be assessed by their theoretical and empirical approaches. This is because there is no clear guidance on alternative methods to evaluate research.

Banerjee and Morley (2013) reported that there are more DBA than PhD programs that are coursework doctorates with limited research components. However, the literature suggests that a majority of DBAs are comparable to research degrees. A distinctly different concept of a practitioner-based research dissertation does not exist in the current time (Banerjee & Morley, 2013). EdD and DBA dissertations share more in terms of their scholar-practitioner-focused dissertations (Banerjee & Morley, 2013; Johnson, 2005; MacLennan et al., 2018; Nelson & Coorough, 1994; Sarros et al., 2005; Walker & Haley-Mize, 2012).

Limited studies are available on dissertation methodology choice and the factors that influence such methodology choice in students' dissertations (Lunde et al., 2019). A quantitative study is based on positivism and statistical analysis; a qualitative study is based on constructivism and interpretivism (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lunde et al., 2019). The mixed methodology incorporates quantitative and qualitative research components (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lunde et al., 2019). Lunde et al. (2019) used educational leadership dissertations to predict student dissertation methodology choice.

To understand the current trends in PhD and EdD dissertation methodology choice, Lunde et al. (2019) and Lunde (2017) studied 398 dissertations (both PhD and EdD) in the state of Virginia. The authors used the intersectionality theoretical framework and assessed whether biological gender, ethnicity, age of students, and religious affiliation could predict candidates' dissertation methodology choice (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methodologies). The authors found that there was no statistically significant relationship among the variables the authors studied and the dissertation methodology choice (Lunde et al., 2019).

To further understand the current trends in PhD and EdD dissertation methodology choice, Krueger (2018) conducted a trend content analysis of dissertation methodology

choice in Virginia in the field of education in 2007, 2012, and 2017. The author analyzed 130 dissertations in education (both PhD and EdD) from 2007 to 2017. Findings suggest that more students sought EdD degrees, and fewer candidates pursued PhD degrees.

Lunde et al. (2019), Lunde (2017), and Krueger's (2018) studies on education dissertation (both PhD and EdD) methodology choice in Virginia helps scholars understand the trends in recent PhD and EdD dissertation methodology choice in the U.S. These authors' findings can help future students who are considering pursuing PhD or EdD programs in education (Lunde et al., 2019; Lunde, 2017; Krueger, 2018). More studies on PhD and EdD dissertation methodology choice in the U.S. is needed to understand whether Lunde et al. (2019), Lunde (2017), and Krueger's (2018) findings are generalizable to the U.S. PhD and EdD dissertation methodology choice.

Research Methodologies in Business

Discussion on the divide between quantitative and qualitative methodologies in business research has occurred since social science research began several decades ago (Antwi & Hamza, 2015; Onwuegbuzie, 2005). The authors found that in the 1980s, quantitative and qualitative scholars each debated that their approach was better than their counterparts' approach and why. This literature concludes that both quantitative and qualitative methodologies offer unique findings from different paradigms and interpretative frameworks. Similarly, research suggests that mixed methodologies combine both methodologies with their strengths in business research.

Hanson and Grimmer (2007) reported that more business marketing studies use quantitative methodologies than qualitative. The authors found that quantitative methodologies were used because of their capacity to offer a generalizable trend of larger samples. The authors assessed that the justification for using qualitative methodologies was the ability to provide a deeper understanding of specific phenomena under study. According to the authors, which method to use for marketing research is critical for scholars. The authors reported that content analysis allows sampling of a large number of published articles to assess the explanation for the dominance of quantitative methodologies over qualitative or mixed methodologies.

McKim (2017) explored the perceived value of mixed methodology for graduate students. The author's study examined the effect of a passage's methodology on students' perceived value in the quantitative phase. The author found that the students viewed the mixed methodologies passage as more valuable than those passages on quantitative or qualitative only methodologies. The author found that students view mixed methodologies as rigorous research methods that can provide the complex and deeper meaning of the phenomenon. McKim's (2017) findings revealed that students value quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies differently.

Birkinshaw et al. (2011) also argued that since global business research has focused on quantitative methodologies, there were missed opportunities that could have been approached by qualitative methodologies. According to the authors, because grounded and more detailed approaches by qualitative methodologies were neglected, knowledge exchange and technology transfer in the global business landscape has been misunderstood, misrepresented, or overlooked as contextual analysis appropriate to each situation was lacking.

Birkinshaw et al. (2011) stated that conceptual abstraction in global business research is prevalent. However, it can also create challenges in interpretation and application. For instance, in cross-cultural research, global business scholars reduced contextual differences such as *Kaizen* (continuous improvement) in the Japanese business context. However, when multiple individuals from multiple cultures attempt to transfer and co-create cross-cultural concepts, the aggregate

constructs start to completely break down (Birkinshaw et al., 2011; Yamamoto et al., 2019a; Yamamoto & Lloyd, 2019b, 2019c).

Krivokapic-Skoko and O'Neill (2011) reported that mixed methodologies are becoming increasingly popular because they provide quantitative and qualitative perspectives on what is under study. The authors suggest that mixed methods can transcend the divide between quantitative and qualitative distinction. They also note that mixed methods can be applied in a range of sophisticated approaches and designs to provide insight into the business and management research areas.

Piotrowski (2015) and Piotrowski and Guyette (2014) studied students' research interests in business by conducting dissertation content analysis. From the dissertation content analysis literature, Piotrowski (2015) selected social media topics related to business research as an example of students' dissertation business topics. The author conducted a keyword search on the term, social media, and analyzed 662 studies found from *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses* (2020) database. Based on the content of the study's abstracts, the author explored the most studied topics within the domain of social media. The social media topics that graduate students showed the most interest in studying for their dissertations in business were K-12 educational applications, consumer behavior, brand management, healthcare management, crisis management, organizational performance, higher education, advertising, marketing, and social and political movements (Piotrowski, 2015).

As another example of dissertation business topic selection, Piotrowski and Guyette (2014) assessed the topics in business ethics that students decided to research for their dissertations out of many other business topics that they can choose to study. According to the authors, research on business ethics education during doctoral training is limited. Piotrowski and Guyette (2014) conducted a similar study about business ethics that Piotrowski (2015) performed on social media. The authors explored graduate students' research interests in business ethics by surveying dissertations in *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses* (2020) database. From 2003 to 2012, the authors found 263 dissertations on the business ethics domain: business instruction, corporate social responsibility, ethical climate, moral business education, and moral development (Piotrowski & Guyette, 2014).

METHOD

This section illustrates how this research project was carried out so other scholars can replicate this study. This study used content analysis as the research approach to assess dissertations on business topics found in an open access research repository, *Digital Commons Network Business Commons* (2020).

Research Questions

The hypotheses derived from the research questions are as follows:

Hypothesis 1 (H₁): There is a relationship between years (2010, 2015, and 2020) dissertations were completed and the methodologies selected (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methodologies) by students who researched business topics.

Hypothesis 2 (H₂): The mean page lengths of dissertations on business topics and methodologies these students selected (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methodologies) are different in years (2010, 2015, or 2020).

Hypothesis 3 (H₃): The mean page lengths of PhD and practitioner dissertations on business topics and methodologies these students selected (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methodologies) are different in years (2010, 2015, or 2020).

Research Design: Content Analysis

The research design and conceptual framework used in this study is the content (document) analysis of dissertations on business topics found in an open access dissertation database (Digital Commons Network Business Commons, 2020). Krippendorff (2018) and Neuendorf (2016) illustrate that content analysis is a systematic document research process. The authors state that content analysis is a replicable research process, and it can be approached quantitatively, qualitatively, or both. Similarly, the authors note that content analysis can be used to study various written materials such as articles and videos. The authors state that content analysis can be used to study visible (such as pictures or countable messages) components of content as well as subtle content (such as implied meanings of content).

Krippendorff (2018) notes that content analysis is a conceptual framework, which is intended to serve three purposes: prescriptive, analytical, and methodological, where the prescriptive purpose guides the design of the content study. According to Krippendorff (2018), the analytical purpose enables the evaluation and comparison of documented dissertation content, and the methodological purpose allows applying the content analysis principles. The author explains that content analysis utilizes the body of text as the data for an analytical effort and to validate the evidence found in dissertations.

Data Collection and Sampling

Data collection and sampling of this study used the following procedure:

- 1) Dissertation topics were determined by the dissertation database, *Digital Commons Network Business Commons* (2020) “Discipline” link for dissertations published on various business research topics.
- 2) Student dissertation topics in business were recorded for the years 2010, 2015, and 2020 by clicking on a given discipline type.
- 3) Student dissertation publication year was recorded from the “Publication Year” link in *Digital Commons Network Business Commons* (2020).
- 4) Student dissertations were recorded from the “Publication Type” link in the *Digital Commons Network Business Commons* (2020) database, in the “Theses and Dissertations” link. Only recorded published doctoral dissertations (and not undergraduate Capstone projects or Master’s Theses) were added to into a spreadsheet one by one until all dissertations were recorded for all available *Digital Commons Network Business Commons* (2020) disciplines in business for publication years 2010, 2015, and 2020.
- 5) Student dissertation methodology choice was recorded from the *Digital Commons Network Business Commons* (2020) database. Their dissertation methodology choices were determined by evaluating the student dissertation abstracts and the methodology sections of their dissertations.

- 6) Student dissertation page lengths were found in the *Digital Commons Network Business Commons* (2020) database. Their dissertation page length for this study was counted from the beginning of Chapter One of a student's dissertation to the last page of Chapter Five (or whichever chapter a given student stopped writing their text). This study did not count the front content (the title page, the table of contents, abstract, and other pages that come before Chapter One of a student's dissertation) or the content, which comes after Chapter Five (or whichever chapters that are the end of a student's research writing), such as the references and appendices.
- 7) This study used the dissertation title page to ascertain its degree type (PhD, EdD, DBA, or other practitioner degrees).
- 8) After all dissertations on business topics in 2010, 2015, and 2020 were recorded from *Digital Commons Network Business Commons* (2020), the random number generator was used to select 150 dissertations from each of the three years.

Data Analysis

Data analysis of this study used the following process:

- 1) Descriptive statistics (medians, means, and standard deviations) of dissertation page lengths were calculated. This data analysis allowed the study to understand the general trends for the entire sample of dissertations as well as for dissertations with different methodology types (quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies).
- 2) Since dissertation methodology choices and business topics are not numerical data, tabulations for these categories that were converted to percentages of the total number of dissertations in 2010, 2015, and 2020 were performed.
- 3) It is commonly assumed that quantitative dissertations are shorter and qualitative dissertations are longer in page lengths (Randolph et al., 2014). The trends in dissertation methodology choice and page length were evaluated.
- 4) The trends in business topics over the ten years from 2010 to 2020 were assessed for the entire sample dissertations from the years 2010, 2015, and 2020.
- 5) Differences and similarities between PhD and practitioner dissertations in methodology choice, page length, and business topic were assessed.
- 6) Inferential statistical analysis (Chi-square test of independence, one-way ANOVA, post-hoc Tukey HSD test, and independent unpaired t-test) were used to determine statistical significance in a relationship between PhD and practitioner dissertation methodology choice and completion years; between PhD and practitioner dissertations completed with research methodologies (quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies); page lengths of dissertations and methodology selection (quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies); the number of dissertations that were completed in 2010, 2015, and 2020; and various business research topics represented in the *Digital Commons Network Business Commons* (2020) database as needed.

LIMITATIONS

A primary limitation lies in sample selection of dissertations. The scope included business topics from only one academic open-access database, *Digital Commons Network Business Commons* (2020). This study uses the *Digital Commons Network Business*

Commons (2020) database because it offers a pre-selected business topic dissertations and theses category where other academic dissertations and theses databases did not (ProQuest Theses & Dissertations, 2020).

Moreover, the *Digital Commons Network Business Commons* (2020) database yields a more significant number of dissertations on business topics than other academic dissertations and theses databases (ProQuest Theses & Dissertations, 2020). Although this study is designed to use only the *Digital Commons Network Business Commons* (2020) database, using multiple academic dissertations and theses databases on business topics could lead to a larger sample of dissertations, which can lead to more generalizable results.

The second limitation is the sampling of dissertations from the *Digital Commons Network Business Commons* (2020) database over an interval of recent ten years; selecting only three years in 2010, 2015, and 2020 to determine the current trend over the most recent decade in dissertations on business topics limits the scope of the study. This study aimed to discover the trend of document content in dissertations on business topics completed by students from 2010 to 2020. Therefore, using a longer sampling time frame would yield a more extensive dissertation trend content analysis.

RESULTS

The aim of this study was to explore students' business research topic and methodology selection in their dissertations in recent ten years (using data collected in the years 2010, 2015, and 2020).

RQ1 Results:

Throughout 2010 to 2020, Business Administration, Management, and Operations; Human Resources Management; Organizational Behavior and Theory; Finance and Financial Management; and Marketing were the top five selected research topics by both PhD and practitioner doctoral students. Business Analytics is the new research topic, which emerged in 2020 (*Digital Commons Network Business Commons*, 2020). Business Analytics as a research topic is a companion to the top five most selected business research topics as well as the rest of business topics. (Baker, 2019; Claudia, 2019; Khatri & Samuel, 2019; Linzey, 2019; Marler & Boudreau, 2017; Ozimek, 2010; Pinga, 2015; Wedel & Kannan, 2016).

In 2020, a new business research topic, Business Analytics, emerged in the *Digital Commons Network Business Commons* (2020) open-access academic database. According to the results, a small number of PhD and practitioner doctoral students decided to research Business Analytics for their dissertations in 2020. With technological advancement in recent years, it is expected that more scholars and students will research Business Analytics as their topics (Aydiner et al., 2019; Chang et al., 2019; Conboy et al., 2020; Hsinchun et al., 2012; Iacobucci et al., 2019).

In 2010, almost all students (about 97%) graduated with PhD dissertations, and only about 3% of students published practitioner dissertations in the *Digital Commons Network Business Commons* (2020). This trend was disrupted in 2015 and 2020, with more students graduating with practitioner dissertations (above 30% for both 2015 and 2020). PhD dissertations are still the majority consisting of less than 70% in 2015 and 2020. The results of this study show that more students are now choosing to pursue practitioner doctorate degrees such as EdD, DBA, and other

variations (such as Doctor of Information Systems (DIS), Doctor of Information Technology (DIT), Doctor of Public Health (DPH), Doctor of Psychology (PsyD), Doctor of Nurse Practitioner (DNP), and Doctor of Judicial Science (DJS) and so on) than ever over recent the ten years. This finding also concurs with Krueger's study (2018).

RQ2 and Hypothesis 1 Results:

This study shows that in 2010, students selected quantitative research methodology most of the time (about 80%) to complete their dissertations, and only used qualitative methodologies about 19% for their dissertations. However, in 2015, students used qualitative methodologies about 30% of the time, and about 70% used quantitative methodologies for their dissertations. To continue the trend in using qualitative methodologies, in 2020, about 40% of students selected qualitative methodologies, and about 60% of students chose quantitative methodologies to research for their dissertation projects. Mixed methodologies were used the least in all years and did not appear to become popular in the future dissertations.

There were statistically significant results from the Chi-Square test for independence of variables used to test the association between dissertation completion years in 2010, 2015, and 2020 and students' methodology selections (quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies). These are significant at [$\chi^2 (4, N = 450) = 24.493, p < 0.001$]. This result indicates that students selected statistically significantly different research methodologies in the years 2010, 2015, and 2020. Students selected qualitative methodologies more frequently and quantitative methodologies less frequently in 2015 and 2020 than in 2010.

RQ3 and Hypothesis 2 Results:

Qualitative dissertations in the years 2010, 2015, or 2020 show statistical significance when comparing the means of the dissertation page length of methodology choice (quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies) using the one-way ANOVA for 2010 qualitative dissertations, 2015 qualitative dissertation, and 2020 qualitative dissertations, [$F (2, 118) = 8.029, p = 0.001$]. The one-way ANOVA showed that a statistically significant mean page lengths difference of dissertations on business topics and methodologies these students selected (qualitative methodologies) in years 2010, 2015, or 2020 exist [$F (2, 118) = 8.029, p < 0.001$]. The post-hoc Tukey HSD test revealed statistically significant differences between 2010 qualitative dissertations and 2015 qualitative dissertations [Tukey HSD = 45.981, $p = 0.004$]; and between 2010 qualitative dissertations and 2020 qualitative dissertations [Tukey HSD = 52.160, $p < 0.001$].

RQ4 and Hypothesis 3 Results:

A statistically significant difference was found between PhD and practitioner dissertation page lengths and qualitative methodology in 2020 [$t (56) = 2.745, p = 0.008$]. Also, in 2015, a statistically significant difference was found between the page lengths and methodology selection for qualitative methodologies of PhD and practitioner dissertations [$t (39) = 2.896, p = 0.006$]. Differences in all other combinations of page lengths and methodology selections in 2010, 2015, or 2020 were not statistically significant. In 2020

and 2015, PhD students who conducted qualitative dissertations wrote significantly more than practitioner students who used qualitative methodologies for their dissertations.

DISCUSSION

This study was designed to discover students' research topics and methodology choices in dissertations on business research topics. This section examines the implications for administrators, faculty, and prospective students based on the results reported in the Results section. The study then makes suggestions for future research based on the findings.

Interpretation of Results

Interpretation of RQ1 Results:

It is expected that scholars and students who continue to study these mainstream business topics will study data-driven analytics as part of their research (Conboy et al., 2020; Soldić-Aleksić et al., 2020). Business Analytics can be applied to Business Administration, Management, and Operations; Human Resources Management; Organizational Behavior and Theory; Finance and Financial Management; and Marketing. Management Analytics, Human Resources Analytics, Human Resources Information Systems, Financial Analytics, and Marketing Analytics are becoming more popular topics in business research (Claudia, 2019; Khatri & Samuel, 2019; Linzey, 2019; Pinga Pinga, 2015; Baker, 2019; Marler & Boudreau, 2017; Ozimek, 2010; Wedel & Kannan, 2016).

Interpretation of RQ2, RQ3, and RQ4 and Hypothesis 1, Hypothesis 2, and Hypothesis 3 Results:

Qualitative methodologies offer a deep and meaningful understanding of selected participants, while quantitative methodologies offer more shallow tendencies of larger samples (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2017). Mixed methodologies combine both aspects of qualitative and quantitative paradigms and produce both deep and personalized understanding of participants while gaining broader and more generalizable trends using statistical analysis (Bhattacharjee, 2012; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As more students chose to use qualitative methodologies in their dissertations in 2015 and 2020, this trend to select qualitative methodologies for business research in dissertations is expected to continue.

The dissertation page length and methodology choice results showed that students write longer in qualitative methodology dissertations compared to quantitative dissertations. Students tend to write the longest for mixed methodology dissertations compared to both qualitative and quantitative dissertations. This result may be explained by the fact that qualitative research tends to require more documentation than quantitative studies (Bhattacharjee, 2012; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2017).

In qualitative research, scholars often interview multiple participants and document and code the interview responses to find common themes (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In quantitative research, scholars collect numeric data from surveys, databases, and other sources, then perform statistical analysis, which tend to require less documentation than

qualitative research counterparts (Bhattacharjee, 2012; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Mixed methodology studies combine both aspects of qualitative and quantitative research, so naturally, the documentation is the longest of all methodologies (Antwi & Hamza, 2015; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The results indicate that students in PhD programs also tend to write more than practitioner doctoral programs in their dissertations. This may be because PhD degrees are more research-focused than practitioner doctoral programs. Both faculty and students at R1 and R2 institutions may expect that dissertations to be exceptionally well-researched, thorough, and well-documented compared to other online doctoral programs and R3 institutions that are not as focused on research excellence because their focus is practitioner scholarship development (Scott, 2016).

Implications for Doctoral Program Administrators and Faculty

Administrators and faculty who develop the dissertation process for students can benefit from this study's findings. Administrators and faculty should understand that students are interested in studying both traditional business topics such as Business Administration, Management, and Operations; Human Resources Management; Organizational Behavior, and Theory; Finance and Financial Management; and Marketing (Digital Commons Network Business Commons, 2020), but they are also developing interest in Business Analytics as an emerging research topic.

Business Analytics as an Emerging Business Research Topic

Administrators and faculty need to respond to developing scholar and student interest in researching business analytics by recommending prospective students who enter doctoral programs take business analytics or data analytics coursework prior to starting their doctoral education. While students take doctoral coursework, they could take additional business analytics coursework to prepare them for dissertation projects involving data-driven business analytics in various business administration, operations, human resources, finance, or marketing research topics of students' choice.

Administrators and faculty can also suggest prospective students and current doctoral students take additional business analytics or data analytics training on their own. There are various online and self-paced data analysis courses and books written on data analytics. For instance, students can learn advanced Microsoft Excel (Microsoft, 2020), SPSS (IBM, 2020), R (The R Foundation, 2020), Python (Python Software Foundation, 2020) software as a preparation for their doctoral education or while they are taking doctoral coursework so students have sufficient data analysis and data visualization skills and knowledge to complete their dissertations on business analytic research topics that are linked to mainstream business research topics such as business administration, operations, human resources, finance, or marketing and so on.

Qualitative Research Methodologies

Although students are still interested in using quantitative methodologies in their dissertations, more students are now interested in using qualitative methodologies for their dissertation than since 2015. Administrators and faculty who educate students and advise dissertations need to be proficient in qualitative methodologies to lead students to complete

their dissertations successfully (Hill & Conceição, 2020; Krivokapic-Skoko & O’Neill, 2011; Lim et al., 2019; Vickers, 2016).

Traditionally, most students used quantitative methodologies for their dissertations. Now, about 30 to 40% of students choose to use qualitative methodologies for their dissertations. To address this shift in students’ growing preference to choose qualitative methodologies for dissertation projects, administrators and faculty can design a doctoral program curriculum to include additional advanced qualitative research methodology coursework for those students who conduct qualitative dissertations. From early on in students’ doctoral program stages, students can practice using qualitative research skills in scholarship projects in their courses with faculty’s guidance.

Additionally, students need excellent writing skills to successfully complete qualitative dissertations (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Students who plan to conduct qualitative dissertations can prepare themselves by developing strong writing skills before and during their doctoral coursework.

Practitioner Doctoral Programs

Sizeable numbers of students are now choosing to study in practitioner doctoral programs as opposed to PhD programs. Administrators and faculty may consider adding practitioner doctoral program in addition to PhD programs if their institutions only offer PhD degrees. Those who already offer practitioner doctoral programs can expect that students will continue to seek practitioner doctorate degrees to develop professionally while remaining in their established professions.

Administrators and faculty should take prospective students’ professional experience into account when designing their PhD or practitioner doctoral programs and their dissertation processes. Students who have professional work experience can benefit from practitioner doctoral programs and use this additional education to seek promotion or higher-level leadership roles in their fields.

The trend of increasing practitioner doctorate degree seekers may be due to the popularization of online doctoral education (Krueger, 2018). Traditionally students needed to relocate physically to pursue research-oriented PhD degrees at R1 or R2 institutions. Doing so requires students to give up their existing or established careers, live away from family and friends, and face the uncertainty of possibly not completing PhD programs that they initially started.

Practitioner doctoral programs tend to be shorter than PhD programs to complete (Krueger, 2018). The fact that practitioner doctorate degrees are shorter to accomplish may be one reason students with work and family responsibilities tend to choose practitioner doctoral education and not R1 or R2 PhD programs (Flaherty, 2019; Krueger, 2018; Scott, 2016). Admission counselors may recommend practitioner doctoral programs to students who are interested in completing their doctoral education quickly while gaining relevant practitioner-focused scholarship skills.

Implications for Prospective Doctoral Candidates

Prospective students can be helped from the findings of this study. Future students will benefit from conducting thorough research of their doctoral programs of interest. Prospective students need to understand doctoral programs’ requirements and demands on their already busy lives if they are working professionals with family responsibilities. Future students need to assess whether the new doctoral program requires them to relocate, require in-person residencies, or

permit online and virtual residency attendance (Flaherty, 2019; Krueger, 2018; Scott, 2016). Future students also need to be aware that they will conduct qualitative or quantitative dissertations and to reflect on their future research interests and how the doctoral degree might help their careers in the future (Dunn & Kniess, 2019; Flaherty, 2019; Krueger, 2018; Scott, 2016).

Preparation for Doctoral Research

Students interested in pursuing business research topics for dissertations because business administration, management, leadership, finance, or marketing topics are relevant areas for their careers can start to research their prospective doctoral programs and speak to admission counselors, administrators, faculty, and students in those programs. Through conducting informational or informal interviews with future doctoral programs even before applying to doctoral programs will help students solidify their research interests in business topics for their future dissertations.

As future students learn about what they wish to research for their dissertations on business topics, they can continue to seek guidance from administrators, faculty, and students of their prospective doctoral programs to better prepare themselves for doctoral coursework that they may soon start to enroll in. As business analytics, data analysis, and statistical skills are used more in business research in various topics such as business administration, human resources, finance, and marketing, future students can continue to develop their knowledge and skills in their research interest areas before they enter doctoral programs and prepare for successful completion of their dissertation projects. Prospective students can read and take courses on business analytics, data analysis, and qualitative research skills before they enter doctoral programs.

Since there is growing interest in more qualitative dissertation research than ever before, future students can conduct qualitative scholarship projects before they enter doctoral programs. Future students may seek guidance from doctoral program faculty on qualitative research opportunities. Future students may not be ready to design qualitative research on their own, but they can still participate in qualitative scholarship projects with existing faculty and doctoral students to become better prepared for their future doctoral coursework and qualitative dissertations they may work on.

FUTURE RESEARCH

First, future scholars can use multiple academic databases and not just one database to collect dissertation data for analysis to offer more comprehensive results. Second, this study only considered dissertations that were written in the English language. Future scholars who are proficient in multiple languages can study dissertations written in English and other languages such as Spanish. Third, this study was unable to compare PhD and practitioner dissertations in equal numbers because there were far more PhD dissertations than practitioner dissertations in the samples. Future researchers may collect equal and large enough samples of both PhD and practitioner dissertations for better comparability of the two sample groups. Fourth, this study used solely *Digital Commons Network Business Commons* (2020) to analyze 35 business research topics studied by students in

their dissertations. Future studies may use multiple business research databases to examine what business topics students select to research for their dissertations. Fifth, it is not understood why more students are electing to use qualitative methodologies for their dissertations rather than quantitative methodologies. Future research can examine why many more students in PhD and practitioner doctoral programs choose to use qualitative methodologies for their dissertations by designing qualitative studies. Through in-depth interviews with student participants, scholars may discover why more students than ever before are selecting to use qualitative methodologies over quantitative counterparts. This trend may be due to students' shift in research interests or access to quantitative research data to carry out quantitative dissertations.

Sixth, business research topics are relevant for not only business program students, but also to many other students who are studying various subjects such as leadership, administration, information management, and many others. Many students choose dissertation projects that are relevant to their future career goals and aspirations. Future scholars can design a qualitative study and interview students to explore why and how students choose business-related dissertation topics even though they are not business students themselves.

Seventh, a statistically significant difference was found between PhD and practitioner dissertation page lengths and qualitative methodology in 2020 ($p = 0.008$). In 2020, PhD students who conducted qualitative dissertations wrote significantly more than practitioner doctoral students who used qualitative methodologies for their dissertations. Future research could explore why PhD students write significantly longer qualitative dissertations than practitioner doctoral students by designing a qualitative study.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to future students' and existing administrators' and faculty' understanding of the trends in dissertations conducted on business research topics. Business research topics are diverse and are applicable to many disciplines and not just to business programs. This study found dissertations from leadership and public administration, education, healthcare, engineering, music, natural and physical sciences, and other social sciences (psychology, economics, social studies, and liberal arts) that are on business research topics represented in the *Digital Commons Network Business Commons* (2020).

More research in dissertation content analysis focusing on business topics is needed to address the dissertation content analysis literature gaps. Future scholars are encouraged to use future research suggestions to continue to examine dissertations from the past and present to inform those that need to understand the trends in dissertation research on business topics. Future students and current administrators and faculty need this new knowledge to plan their future doctoral journeys and better serve future candidates to become competent business research scholars.

There are many more open-access research outlets than ever before. Thus, future scholars have an excellent opportunity to conduct a content analysis on dissertations on business topics. Many existing dissertation content analysis literature gaps need to be addressed by future scholars; so that university administrators, faculty, and students can understand the trends in current dissertation research topics, methodologies, and page length characteristics to continue to thrive in today's dynamic doctoral programs.

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STUDENT SUCCESS AND ENGAGEMENT: UNDERSTANDING ONLINE BUSINESS EDUCATION THROUGH STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

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ABSTRACT

To analyze the quality of online business education, it is important to investigate various areas that may impact learning outcomes (Nguyen, 2015). In this paper, the researchers examined the quality of online business education beyond outcomes. Both Moore's 1989 Concept of Interaction and Mehrabian's (1967) Concept of Immediacy were considered to determine how student interaction and immediacy influence learning outcomes. Student engagement was also included, as it has a direct impact on student achievement and success (Lei, Cui, & Zhou, 2018). It can be argued that online business environments can provide learning outcomes similar to those of traditional brick-and-mortar classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

In this modern age, higher education has evolved through the adaptation of technology and digital community with online learning. Online courses play a significant role in education, especially at the university level (Jo, Kim, & Yoon, 2015), and have become an indispensable part of educational delivery (Ciabocchi, Ginsberg, & Picciano, 2016). With the immediate impact and growth of online business education, today's researchers, educators, and administrators are provided with the opportunity to potentially impact students with a similar quality education as their face-to-face classroom environment. Due to the popularity and continued growth of online education, Allen and Seaman (2016) believed that there was a need to ensure that student engagement and student success were the same for students enrolled in online programs compared to students enrolled in traditional face-to-face programs.

ONLINE BUSINESS EDUCATION

Online business courses have exemplified low course completion rates, which is a growing concern for faculty and administrators (Murphy & Stewart, 2017). It has been found that students in online business courses often feel isolated and disengaged with course content (Madland & Richards, 2016). Therefore, it is extremely important that instructors become more innovative to ensure that the students enrolled, in these online courses, experience a sense of social interrelation with the learning environment (Madland & Richards, 2016), which is an important part of behavioral engagement (Kahu, 2013).

As students transition from the traditional classroom setting to an online learning platform, such as CANVAS, Moodle, Blackboard or even through ZOOM, the students need guidance from the instructor for meaningful online interaction to experience academic success (Annamalai, 2018). The interaction between students in class may not be organic, so students must be taught to interact in effective ways by being given specific guidance, have adequate expectations set by the instructor, and have access to appropriate tools in the provided online learning systems (Green et al., 2017). Currently, this is more instructor dependent. Annamalai (2018) asserted that the online interaction environment is extremely new for students to work collaboratively. The researcher suggested the interactions between students in the classroom setting must be mediated by the instructor (Annamalai, 2018). Annamalai (2018) found that online interactions between students that are not supervised by the instructor are not significant and do not lead to better student learning outcomes.

CONCEPTS OF INTERACTION & IMMEDIACY

Moore (1989) defined the concept of interaction as the center of any learning experience. Ayçiçek and Yelken (2018) mentioned that interaction was chosen as a linkage to the concept of engagement, and engagement is an important predictor of student success (Lei et al., 2018). In addition, the lack of interaction in a classroom is a barrier to learning specifically due to the impact of interaction on student engagement (Purarjomandlangrudi, Chen, & Nguyen, 2016).

Moore (1989) proposed three types of interactions: Learner-Content, Learner- Instructor,

and Learner-Learner. These three interactions have been found to have a positive impact on student engagement (Nguyen et al. 2018; Moore, 1989) Nguyen and her colleagues (2018) identified that two forms of interaction, Learner-Learner and Learner-Instructor were predictive of increased engagement. Bonafini et al. (2017) determined that students who interacted with course lectures exemplified an increase in engagement. Moore (1989) interpreted distance education as a transaction and believed separation of the student and instructor led to misunderstandings and a gap in communication. The researcher also alluded that the more a student and instructor interacted, the more the perceived distance between them was diminished (Moore, 1989), and technology was a means to close the gap (Kreie, Johnson, & Lebsack, 2017).

Mehrabian (1967) defined immediacy as communicative behaviors that enhance closeness between individuals and reduce the distance between those individuals. Gilchrist-Petty (2017) alluded that immediacy was chosen as it was positively correlated to engagement. Instructors who illustrated highly immediate behaviors had an increase in student learning (Gilchrist-Petty, 2017). Immediacy was originally developed within the context of interpersonal communication but has been used in instructional communication research (LeFebvre, & Allen, 2014).

According to Mehrabian (2017) immediacy can have verbal and non-verbal forms and is not limited to the interpersonal interaction (Gardner, Anderson, & Wolvin, 2017). Non-verbal immediacy represents the psychological closeness that comes from facial expression, eye contact, posture, proximity, and touch (Mehrabian, 1971). Verbal immediacy represents the closeness that comes from word selection, cadence, tone, asking questions, using humor, addressing individuals by name, initiating discussion, and sharing personal examples (Mehrabian, 1971). Gardner, Anderson, and Wolvin (2017) alluded that it is possible for instructors to exemplify highly immediate behaviors in online courses and show the same increase in student engagement (Gardner et al., 2017)

Interaction between students and professors is changing due to the evolution of online education (Ng, 2018). It was found that student-student interaction and with their professor were predictive of increased student engagement (Nguyen, Cannata, & Miller, 2018). Due to the high volume of online education and the important role college professors play on engagement in the classroom (Roorda et al., 2017), Nguyen's (2015) recommendation of examining the role of online education beyond grades is extremely important. Additionally, research in student engagement in the context of online learning has produced complex questions, which require further research (Czerkawski & Lyman, 2016). Objective engagement can be difficult to measure (Lei, Cui, & Zhou, 2018), and perceptions of engagement are just as important (Fulford & Zhang, 1993). Furthermore, engagement could be active or passive and change across delivery systems (Nguyen, Cannata, & Miller, 2018). The purpose of this study is to illustrate (probe, describe) the current gap in the existing literature by understanding the effectiveness of student learning outcomes and perceptions regarding the quality of engagement in online business education. This paper will explore conceptual frameworks and student interaction in the online environment to understand online business education and its outcomes.

Both Mehrabian's Concept of Immediacy and Moore's Concept of Interaction served as a foundation for this study. These concepts were essential to understanding the importance of student engagement in the online business educational setting (Ayçiçek & Yelken, 2018). LeFebvre and Allen (2014) stated that understanding the positive effects of immediacy for the college or university ultimately benefits the students. These two researchers suggest that immediacy can increase the likelihood of student effectiveness for the subject, greater understanding of material

learned, institutional integration, and most importantly degree completion. In a shorter perspective, higher affective learning enhances the popularity of the subject matter and increases student enrollment and involvement (LeFebvre & Allen, 2014).

Kuo and Belland (2016) asserted that instruction is presented in a social context, and educators should focus on social dynamics, or immediacy, by promoting student engagement, which is important in the learning environment. Due to the importance of including student interaction/engagement and immediacy in the classroom setting, LaRose and Whitten (2000) utilized the social cognitive theory to develop a more unified framework structured on interaction and instructional immediacy. With this framework, LaRose and Whitten (2000) illustrated three sources of immediacy: a) Teacher immediacy, which are the interactions between students and instructors; b) Student immediacy, which are the interactions between students in a classroom; c) and Computer immediacy, which are the interactions between the students and computer technology utilized within the course. These three sources of immediacy closely resembled the interactions that Moore (1989) assembled, and merged together to compose instructional immediacy (LaRose & Whitten, 2000). Student learning outcomes in online business courses are as good as those of traditional face-to-face business courses (Nguyen, 2015).

According to Hashim, Chong, Er, Deb, Wong, Lee, and Baloch (2017), student learning outcomes are the same even though student-student and student-teacher online interaction are not equal to face-to-face communication, the inequality in interaction has no negative impact on learning outcomes. Nortvig, Petersen, and Balle (2018) compared face-to-face courses to online courses to determine which delivery system provided the best outcomes for students; they found that the delivery system was less important than other dominant factors. Those dominant factors included educator presence; meaningful interaction between students, interactions between the students and the teacher, interactions between the students and the content; and engaging the student with online and offline activities. Given no statistical difference exists between online and face-to-face courses (Nguyen, 2015), there are no findings to provide evidence that online learning is superior, in regards to GPA and retention, to face-to-face learning (Abuatiq et al., 2017).

Student-teacher interaction is not the only interaction that has an impact on student learning outcomes (Canals & Robbins, 2017; Prabhakar & Zaiane, 2017). Prabhakar and Zaiane (2017) examined student-student interaction during discussion posts in online courses. While students may be initially reluctant to interacting with one another, a careful grouping of students can lead to an increased level of interaction that will play a role in maximizing student learning outcomes (Prabhakar & Zaiane, 2017). Student-student discussion board interactions are not the sole student-student interaction which impacts student learning outcomes (Canals & Robbins, 2017). The number of students enrolled, the number of student teacher and student-student interactions, student engagement, and instructors' experience play a role in student learning outcomes in online courses (Canals & Robbins, 2017).

Student engagement was included in Lei, Cui, & Zhou's 2018 study with course student learning outcomes because of the positive correlation between the two (Lei, Cui, & Zhou, 2018). Having a clear understanding of student engagement is imperative, as student engagement is often a central topic of conversation in academia (Barkley, 2017). According to Lei, Cui, and Zhou (2018) engagement is the process of students being actively involved in their learning. Engagement includes the role the teacher plays in the classroom, and that role has an important part in higher education (Roorda et al., 2017). It is important to note that classrooms in the 21st century can take many forms, including brick and mortar, hybrid, and blended formats (U.S. Department of

Education, 2021). It is the activities associated with the teacher's presence, whether face-to-face or virtually, that can have the most direct and positive influence on student learning outcomes (Rockinson et al., 2016).

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

According to Gilchrist- Petty (2017), perceptions of teacher immediacy are a predictor of student learning and outcomes. Moreover, a combination of verbal and non-verbal immediacy behaviors act as a significant predictor of student learning (Gilchrist-Petty, 2017). In addition, Akers (2017) stressed the importance the student-teacher relationship and the impact it has on student engagement; the researcher also claimed that immediacy and engagement stretch far beyond interpersonal interactions (Gardner et al., 2017)

While specifically examining online courses, Purarjomandlangrudi et al. (2016) argued that the lack of interaction between students, students and instructors, and students and content are barriers to learning due to the impact of interaction on student engagement. Ghassemi (2016) noted student engagement and interaction are inexorably linked, and increasing one increases the others. Ghassemi's (2016) argument aligned with Kim and Lundberg's (2016) findings which provided insight into student-teacher interaction and the direct and indirect positive relationship interactions have on classroom engagement and cognitive skills. Czerkowski and Lyman (2016) developed the eLearning Engagement Design Framework (ELED) to increase engagement in online courses; this framework emphasized interaction with the material and other students. Nguyen, Cannata, and Miller (2018) found that student-student interaction and student-teacher interaction are predictive of increased engagement and student learning. The same benefits of increased student engagement and learning were found by Young, Uy, and Bell (2017) and LeFebvre and Allen (2014)

STUDENT INTERACTION

Student interactions with course content and instructors are both predictors of student satisfaction in online courses (Kuo & Belland, 2016). Further, the belief students have in their own ability to use the internet effectively and efficiently are positively correlated with all three types of interaction associated with Moore's (1989) study (Kuo & Belland, 2016). The role of a student's computer self-efficacy is reinforced by the research of Nandi, Hamilton, Harland, and Mahmood (2015) who found that it is important to ensure that instructors and academic institutions are provided with administrative and technical support early in online programs to ensure students can effectively use technology and are full participants in their online academic journey.

Students in online courses highly valued interventions structured by their instructors to direct and extend discussion activities within the designed discussion boards (Nandi et al., 2015). If the teacher manages online discussion boards effectively, they can improve student-student interaction and knowledge construction (Johnson, 2016). Johnson (2016) described discussion boards in online classes as a tool for students to explore ideas with their peers. This student-student interaction, rather than student-teacher interaction, provides students the benefit of exposure to peer' experiences (Johnson, 2016). However, because an online course has a discussion board

does not imply quality interaction. Quality instruction is exemplified by both the course design and how the course is managed, which serves as a key pillar to student interact and student learning outcomes (Johnson, 2016; Moon, Heum & Scott, 2016; Nandi et al., 2015). Durksen, Way, Bobis, Anderson, Skilling, and Martin (2017) suggest that interaction between students and between student and instructors have a positive correlation with a learning environment and serves as a vital source in an online educational environment.

ONLINE ATTENDANCE

Dalkiran (2018) study illustrated that more than one-quarter (28%) of the variance related to student learning outcomes is related to attendance. Attendance in an online course also has an impact on student learning outcomes (Park, 2017). Despite the time flexibility offered in an online course, a student's regular attendance is a factor that affects the success of an online learning experience (Park, 2017). In fact, students who attend the online courses on a regular basis can overcome a lack of student-student interactions (Park, 2017), which plays an important role in student success (Raspopovic et al., 2017). Louis, Bastian, McKimmie, and Lee (2016) determined that regular class attendance is so critical to student success it can help mitigate the negative impact of a student's poor performance impacting GPA on outcomes.

ISSUES & FACTORS IMPACTING STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

The factors which have an impact on student learning outcomes beyond attendance (Akhtar, Warburton, & Xu, 2017) and engagement (Lei et al., 2018) have been identified to have an even greater impact on student learning outcomes. These factors are identified as 1.) Course Organization, 2.) Time Management, and the inclusion of 3. Real-World Application. Yang and Pakala (2017) mentioned that as students navigate their courses, they become more familiar with course content than navigation. Each student must be aware of syllabus location, readings, and assignments (Adelstein & Barbour, 2016). To include, Robinson and Wizer (2016) asserted that a video introduction and course module introductions of the course are to be digitally recorded via a digital media classroom or screen capture software. This video becomes a valuable tool for students (Robinson & Wizer, 2016). Payne et al. (2017) alluded that students would refer to this video in case they are struggling with concepts that were covered in the introduction module. Instructors can also use zoom conferencing and/or other live-streaming to introduce students to course organizations and navigations. The live-streaming environment supports novice students to learn from their mistakes (Payne et al, 2017).

Secondly, time management is an additional factor that impacts learning outcomes because it allows clear communication and the establishment of an effective learning environment in an online educational setting. Woods and Bliss (2016) study found that there were several methods recommended to assist with time management as an impact to student learning outcomes. The researchers stated that establishing deadlines, providing prompt feedback, and structuring an online course around interesting assignments or projects creates positive student engagement experience to complete task more effectively and efficiently. Woods and Bliss (2016) also found

that student's that meet all deadlines, discovers a self-organization for learning, and visiting the course webpage regularly were contributors to time management.

To conclude, applying innovative real-world application within online course content supports both social constructivism and presence plus experience (Baird et al., 2017). Blumberg (2016) stated that all faculty members, regardless of discipline, can help students to appreciate the value of studying the content by discussion applications to the real world and how that online content could benefit students in their personal lives and futuristic endeavors.

DISCUSSIONS

Online education is not a fad and is a growing part of business education as online courses continue to gain acceptance (Gargano & Throop, 2017). Online courses allow students the freedom to pursue an education around other obligations such as work and family (Jayaratne & Moore, 2017). Colleges and Universities also benefit from using online education to increase enrollment while also reducing cost (Gargano & Throop, 2017). Due to the drastic growth in online education, it is extremely important to understand the impact online courses have on the student population (Nguyen, 2015).

Two areas of interest when considering the effectiveness of online business education are student engagement and interaction (Lei et al., 2018). Instructors who effectively engage students in class not only improve academic achievement, but also increase retention, completion, and continued education (Young et al., 2017). Interaction between students, students and content (Kuo & Belland, 2016), and students and instructors have a positive correlation with learning commitment and participation (Nidzam, Shaharim, & Nizam, 2017; Durksen et al., 2017). Specifically, these interactions are essential to the success of students in online courses (Raspopovic et al., 2017).

As discussed earlier, the importance of attendance as a predictor of student outcomes cannot be overlooked (Dalkiran, 2018). Regular class attendance also has the benefit of increased student interactions (Kassarnig et al., 2017). Additionally, regular attendance has an impact on the withdrawal rates (Suresh, Rao, & Hegde, 2017) and a student's ability to be successful with their futuristic goals and aspirations (Rocque et al., 2017).

Finally, engagement and attendance are not the only factors that impact student outcomes (Simpson, 2006). While there are many factors which influence student learning outcomes (Schneider & Preckel, 2017), not all factors have an equal impact (Simpson, 2006). Furthermore, of the factors which influence student learning outcomes explained in the literary review, only the methods of student engagement change across delivery systems (Nguyen et al., 2018).

IMPLICATIONS

Online business education has increased in popularity as online education has grown (Gargano & Throop, 2017). Online courses provide flexibility and freedom to students, especially those with other obligations (Jayaratne & Moore, 2017). As online education continues to grow, it is imperative to understand the impact that online courses have on the student population (Nguyen, 2015). The data in this paper implies delivery of course content is not a dominant factor compared

to educator presence, meaningful interaction, and engagement with activities (Nortvig, Peterson, & Balle, 2018). It may benefit online business education instructors to host video lectures, engage in online discussions, and organize online office hours to increase their digital presence.

Murphy and Stewart (2017) report that online business courses have low course completion rates, which raises concern for the realm of online business education (Murphy & Stewart, 2017). Researchers imply the importance of innovation on behalf of the instructor to combat low course completion rates (Madland & Richards, 2016). Innovation in online education environment can be facilitated by using technology like simulators or virtual reality tools, structured discussion strategies, and learning style focused tasks.

The results of this paper have identified social engagement as an integral component of online learning outcomes. Evidence exists that supports the idea that engagement can be linked to overall course success (Lei, Cui, & Zhou, 2018). Facilitating social engagement through content focusing on real-world experiences where students and instructors can partake may add value to the online business education experience as engagement and interaction largely impact outcomes (Lei, Cui, & Zhou, 2018). In reviewing the results of this study, improving engagement and interaction in the online business environments appears to be an attainable goal with emergent and innovative practices in place.

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**REDEFINING WORK-LIFE BALANCE FOR BUSINESS FACULTY-
BEFORE AND DURING COVID-19**

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ABSTRACT

The issue of work-life balance has been a subject of considerable debate through the years. In business, this phenomenon takes on an altogether independent connotation since organizations regularly compete for talent by dangling the incentive of work-life balance before their human capital as a cherished commodity. Research was conducted from the session attendee population (N=22) of the 2019 IACBE Annual Conference with a response rate of 31.8%. The following year, the COVID-19 pandemic emerged. This paper will detail the results of the survey administered at the last face-to-face annual conference and then pivot to pondering the question of what work-life balance means now.

INTRODUCTION

For the business dean, program chair, administrator, and faculty member, it remains a vexing proposition to effectively manage time and to allow proper attention to both academic work and to personal/family obligations. In fact, business professionals have examined the concept of work-life balance for many years. Particularly, the topic generates a considerable amount of attention as both an integral facet of human resource management and organizational development. As a result, work-life balance has become an advantageous element of supportive organizational cultures and is most assuredly a best practice.

Over the past several decades the issue of work-life-balance has captured the attention of multiple researchers. McCarthy, Darcy, and Grady (2010) defined work-life balance as “an important area of human resource management which is receiving attention from policy makers, organizations, management, employees and their representatives globally.” Greenhaus, Collins, & Shaw (2003) associated work-life balance with “the extent to which an individual is equally engaged in – and equally satisfied with – his or her work and family role” (p. 513). Lockwood (2003) defined work-life-balance in several contexts, but notably as the “dilemma of managing work obligations and personal/family responsibilities” (p.3).

If work-life balance is so important to leveraging human capital, how are countries doing regarding work-life balance? Buchholz (2019) framed the issue as “the most important aspect for a healthy work-life balance is the amount of time people spend (not) at work.” Based on that parameter, her article unpacked research conducted by the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) which revealed that the United States (6.0) and the United Kingdom (6.4) scored among the worst countries on an index scale of 0 to 10. The top three countries in the survey were the Netherlands (9.5), Italy (9.4), and Denmark (9.0).

BEFORE COVID-19

Given these statistics, an IRB approved series of questions was generated to elicit the perceptions of some of these issues from session attendees annual conference. The first question explored whether individuals work email was synced with their personal email. Plummer (2019) wrote in Harvard Business Review in his article How to Spend Way Less Time on Email Every Day that “overchecking email wastes 21 minutes per day.” With that in mind, it was an interesting reveal that 85.7% of respondents (26.9% response rate) apparently appreciated the dangers of being sidetracked in this fashion since they indicated that they did not sync their work and personal emails.

Second, respondents were asked whether they have protected times when they are unreachable. This question measured the importance of boundaries and sought to ascertain if business deans, program chairs and administrators were successful in implementing boundaries.

The concept of boundaries has been extensively chronicled by the work of Dr. Henry Cloud. Cloud (2013) wrote: What are boundaries? They are made up of two essential things: what you create and what you allow. A “boundary” is a property line. It defines where your property begins and ends.

Along that line, a preponderance of attendees (57.1% with a 26.9% return) stated that

there were times when they were unreachable. Most suggested that unreachable timeframe to be during the hours of 9 PM at night and resuming at 7 AM the next day. However, just as revealing was how high the percentage of attendees who indicated that they are always available (42.9%). Factoring in the 2019 research, it is possible to conclude that the conference cadre involved in business academia had a sizable percentage of challenges in implementing any type of boundary-driven methodology as suggested by Dr. Cloud.

Third, respondents were asked to describe the location where they accomplished work. While there were some subtle nuances expressed in the answers to this question, the respondents were unanimous that work was done – at least in part – at home. Nearly half (42.8%) specifically defined their location as their “home office.” Again, these statistics are noteworthy in light of the fact that the research was conducted well before the COVID-19 era.

Fourth, in a related question, respondents were asked to define their workspace. The answers supplied dovetailed alongside the previous question in that most cited (57.1%) specifically referenced their home office. One attendee listed the fact that they have three offices: two in the academic setting and one at home. Another replied that they sometimes work “on the road” as well. In the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Biemiller (2018) wrote, “On many campuses, offices of all kinds take up 25 to 35 percent of nonresidential space. Faculty offices are typically occupied less than those for administrators – often less than half of the workweek.” Based on the answers to questions three and four, the views espoused by Biemiller (2018) are aligned with the results from business administrators and educators represented at the conference who participated.

The next few questions presented here involve the area of smartphones/cellphones. Attendees were asked if their phone improved, hindered, or impacted their efficiency and effectiveness. A majority (57.1%) answered that phones improved their efficiency and effectiveness. Although none of the respondents indicated that phones hindered their efficiency and effectiveness, a strong percentage (42.9%) conveyed their belief that their phones have no impact on their efficiency and effectiveness.

Continuing with an examination of smartphone use and perceptions, business educators were asked to rate (between 1 and 10 - increasing from no stress to high stress) how much a malfunctioning or missing phone impacted their stress level. An overwhelming majority (85.7%) indicated that not being able to use their smartphone for one of the above reasons causes a stressful situation. In fact, a noteworthy number (28.7%) ranked the issue as one of high stress. Moreover, when asked whether they had been without their cell phone for more than 24 hours at a time, a majority stated that they had been (57.1%), while a strong number suggested that they have never been without their cell phone for that long (42.9%). Such numbers seem to indicate that nearly half of respondents take the initiative to stay in close proximity to their cell phones. Combining the previous two questions, it is reasonable to conclude that it causes stress for these individuals when they are away from these devices.

Respondents were also asked about how difficult it was for them to say “no” when necessary ranking their responses on a scale of 1-10 (from no difficulty to very difficult). The largest proportion of responses (as above 57.2%) suggested that it was difficult or very difficult for them to do so.

Evaluating the specific issue of work-life balance among business deans, program chairs, and business education administrators, two key questions were raised to attendees. First, they were asked whether they believed work-life balance could be achieved. Second, they were asked if their organizational work culture supported work-life balance. Concerning the former question, the

respondents unanimously related that they believed it was possible to achieve a work-life balance. Here are three of the actual answers provided.

- “I think it is possible to put both work and life into perspective and feel fulfilled in both areas.”
- “It is a matter of setting boundaries; saying “no” to some tasks, but committing to helping the person or organization find the best person to perform the tasks.”
- “It takes discipline and a willingness to accept that you aren’t as important as you may think you are. There are no real academic emergencies.”

Concerning the latter question about supportive work cultures, a large majority of respondents (71.4%) stated that they work in an organization that values work-life balance. Here are three of the actual answers provided.

- “It is one of our core values.”
- “Yes and no. It depends on current academic projects. I am never questioned if I need to take a sick or psych day. The bulk of the work for the academic side is during our 9 month contract period, so we tend to pack it full. But we also get lengthy breaks and holidays, so it balances out.”
- “Yes- to a certain extent in that we have 2 days per week telework for professors, deans, academic specialist and other salaried employees...I am learning to set boundaries. It helps not to care about advancement.”

From the aforementioned research finding from 2019, the overarching theme expressed by business educators championed the need for strong work-life balance initiatives. With so many demands placed on educational leaders from various constituents ranging from administration to assessment to accreditation (not to mention meeting the needs of the student population), achieving a true work-life balance has never been more challenging.

DURING COVID-19

Flashing forward to the spring of 2020, academic life has changed in a remarkable way due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Events and conferences were forced to be canceled or to transition rapidly to a virtual format. For the past 9-10 months now, universities have wrestled with the notion of how to provide quality educational offerings in an uncertain and potentially unsafe landscape. Consequently, deans, program chairs, directors, and faculty have been thrust in the untenable position of defending the role of education amidst the bewildering backdrop of a global health crisis.

In the current climate, virtual learning and online delivery systems have flourished. Faculty have had to adjust at a moment’s notice to address both student needs and administrative responsibilities. Where at one time it might at least have been argued that work life and home life were intended to have boundaries, now there appears to be an adversarial relationship between personal time and work duties since remote status and quarantines have dominated environments all across the country.

Like it or not, these trends seem to be here to stay at least in part. Research conducted the Society for Human Resource Management released an article in January, 2021 entitled, “Hybrid Work Model Likely to be New Norm in 2021.” Gurchiek (2021) added:

Given the trends accelerated by the pandemic – the success of remote work on a large scale, the migration of workers to less expensive locales, the redesign of office space to accommodate social distancing – executive leaders need to quickly articulate what working in the office is meant to accomplish. (p. 3)

This new era of working remotely has also created a plethora of challenges. Harvard Business Review released an article near the outset of the pandemic period describing how to overcome “Zoom fatigue.” Further, the Psychiatric Times investigated this phenomenon in a November 17, 2020 article entitled, “A Neuropsychological Exploration of Zoom Fatigue” (Lee, 2020).

CNN Business painted a vivid picture of the new reality. Vasel (2021) explained that new reality:

The pandemic has forced a large segment of the global workforce to go through a remote-work experiment on a scale never seen before – and a lot has changed in the last 12 months. The boundary between our work and our personal lives has become blurred. (para. 3)

In an additional CNN Business article entitled Employees Working from Home are Putting in Longer Hours than before the Pandemic, Jack Guy quoted a business research firm, Wildgoose and their managing director Jonny Edser who added:

With increased workloads and a worrying trend of working through sickness, people’s jobs are becoming ever more blurred with their home lives at a time when it’s crucial the two remain distinct from each other. (Guy, 2021, para.14)

Harvard Business Review explored the intersection of these two worlds – work and home in an article entitled, “What will work-life balance look like after the pandemic.” Thomason and Williams (2020) related:

The COVID-19 crisis has shoved work and home lives under the same roof for many families like ours, and the struggle to manage it all is now visible to peers and bosses. As people postulate how the country may be forever changed by the pandemic, we can hope that one major shift will be a move away from the harmful assumption that a 24/7 work culture is working well for anyone. (para. 2)

CONCLUSION

In light of the new era of how work is accomplished after the inception of the COVID-19 age, the concept of work-life balance should be reexamined. The authors strongly suggest that five questions be considered as recommendations for future research in this area. First, how has academic life changed due to COVID-19? Second, have the issues of COVID-19 resulted in an increase of instances of spillover of work duties with personal lives for business education leaders?

Third, academically speaking, if business deans, administrators, or program chairs could go back in time to the start of the pandemic, would they do anything differently in the performance of their duties? Fourth, since March of 2020, have business educators set additional boundaries to protect certain times from occasions of workplace spillover? Fifth, do business deans, administrators, program chairs, or faculty interpret the term work-life balance differently now than they did prior to March 2020? The answers to those questions may be revealing and also prove beneficial in plotting a future course of action for work-life balance. As we move forward together, as has often been expressed, perhaps it is only a matter of time.

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