Abstract: Nationwide, both online and blended learning enrollments are causing a paradigm shift in higher education as courses continue to shift from face to face (or traditional) formats to totally online or blended formats. The University of Wisconsin Colleges mirrors national trends in its increases in adult student enrollments, online enrollments and blended course enrollments. However, unlike most universities, UW-Colleges has tracked accelerated blended course enrollments making research possible. The purpose of this study was to determine the motivations and perceptions of UW-Colleges students having participated in accelerated blended learning.

There are several observations that may be drawn from this study. Students were very satisfied with a wide variety of teaching strategies, online activities gave them the opportunity to learn in different ways than they do in face-to-face classes, and indicated they would enroll in another accelerated blended course. ‘Time’ was an overwhelming factor in their decision to participate in blended courses. As higher education becomes more competitive and faces increasingly strong competition for students with less traditional funding available, it becomes imperative to understand the motivations and perceptions of accelerated blended learners.

Introduction

In the fall of 2002, slightly more than 1.6 million students took at least one online course at U.S. degree-granting institutions. By the fall term of 2005, higher education institutions taught nearly 3.2 million online students. The overwhelming majority (over 80%) are studying at the undergraduate level (Allen and Seaman, 2006).

Author Jeff Seaman expressed frustration as online enrollments are captured in literature while blended learning enrollments are more elusive as very little data are being systematically collected at most colleges and universities. The lack of mechanisms for identifying blended courses in college databases creates a situation in which a large-scale study becomes difficult to conduct and vulnerable to misinformation (as cited in Picciano & Dziuban, 2007, p. 10). Consequently, there is a dearth of empirical research on the effects of blended learning. While early research indicates that blended learning can be as successful as either online or face to face instruction, Vignare states there is a great need for more study on its effectiveness (as cited in Picciano & Dziuban, 2007, p. 37).

There appears to be two population segments driving the shift towards blended learning. The first segment is adult students, of which there were approximately seven million in 2006, and it is projected there will be eight million in 2010. While the number of students of all ages enrolled in college courses has doubled over the last 30 years, the number of adult students has tripled during the same time period (Aslanian, 2006). More than half of today’s postsecondary students are financially independent; more than half attend school part time; almost 40 percent work full time; and 27 percent have children themselves (NCES, 2002). Additionally, most adult learners are highly motivated and task-oriented (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Adult students, greatly pressed for time, willingly enroll in blended learning courses and programs.

The second segment, the Millennial population, has a preference for online learning over that of face to face learning. This generation is very comfortable using technology. The learning
and communication style of the Millennial generation is through multi-media. Born between 1981-2001, the Millennials are the most computer literate of the generations to enter the workforce. Learning for them has moved into web-based tools such as web-ct, online journals, and iPod downloads. Online courses and tele-courses are part of their flexible learning options.

Overall, the Internet-based learning styles ascribed to Millennial students increasingly apply for many people across a wide range of ages, driven by the tools and media they use every day (Dede, 2005).

In addition to online learning, another trend in higher education is that of accelerated learning. By definition, accelerated learning programs are structured for students to take less time than conventional (often referred to as traditional) programs to attain university credits (Wlodkowski, 2003). Again, there appears to be modest research completed in this area of study.

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**Results**

The population for this study was UW Colleges students having participated in accelerated blended learning in autumn or spring 2009-2010. The instrument used was a survey (Appendix B), and it was distributed to 651 students (N=651) through Checkbox, a Web-based tool. The survey was active for approximately a three-week period during which four e-mail messages containing the survey link were shared with students. Additionally, there were three e-mail messages requesting instructors remind their accelerated blended learning students to participate in the survey. There were 83 students (n=83), or 12.74%, having completed the survey. The response was low; however, it was felt that a three-week survey activation period was sufficient.

The respondents included 54 females and 29 males. Birth dates ranged between 1960 and 1991 with the mean birth year being 1983 or age 27. Fifty-nine (71%) of the respondents were full time students and the remaining 24 students were part time (taking fewer than 12 credits). Although accelerated blended courses were offered at seven campuses, 83.2% of the respondents attended courses at UW-Fond du Lac, UW-Fox Valley and UW-Washington County, all campuses within the greater Fox Valley or central eastern Wisconsin region. Thirty-seven (45%) of the respondents took courses from UW-Fond du Lac. It was possible there was a higher response rate from UW-Fond du Lac as the researcher works at UW-Fond du Lac, knows the UW-Fond du Lac faculty and they may have encouraged greater participation from their students.

The survey was divided into three categories: pedagogical aspects, social aspects, and logistical aspects. Within the pedagogical aspects category, 69 (83%) respondents indicated they agreed or strongly agreed that accelerated blended learning can be as effective as face-to-face learning in the classroom. Sixty-seven (81%) indicated they agreed or strongly agreed that sufficient time was given to complete assignments. Seventy-two (87%) respondents indicated they agreed or strongly agreed that their instructor used a wide variety of teaching strategies while sixty-seven (81%) agreed or strongly agreed that online activities gave them the opportunity to learn in different ways than they do in face-to-face classes.
Within the social aspects category seventy four (89%) of respondents indicated they strongly agreed or agreed that they feel comfortable posting comments on D2L yet 38 (45%) indicated they strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, ‘I am more comfortable putting my thoughts on D2 versus voicing them in class’ and 33 (40%) respondents indicated they neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. Lastly, twenty eight (34%) strongly agreed or agreed that ‘in an accelerated blended course there is a greater feeling of community with fellow students’ to which 40 students (48%) neither agreed nor disagreed.

Finally, logistical aspects indicated that 61 (73%) of the respondents considered themselves fairly skilled in technology, while 17 (20%) considered themselves power users and only five (6%) identified themselves as novices in technology. Twenty-one (26%) respondents participated in an orientation prior to starting their class and the orientation was provided by either student services (10 respondents) or the course instructor (10 respondents) and one ‘other’ response. Of those having participated in an orientation, thirteen (62%) felt it was helpful and the remaining eight students were divided among neither agreed nor disagreed, disagreed or strongly disagreed. Of those not participating in an orientation, twenty-nine (48%) of the respondents indicated they were not aware of an orientation being offered.

Thirty (36%) respondents found out about their course through a website. Twenty-four (29%) respondents found out from an advisor. Twenty-two (27%) respondents found out about their course through ‘other’. Sixty-five (78%) of the respondents indicated they enrolled in an accelerated blended course because ‘it fit my schedule’. Students overwhelmingly preferred classes be held on Mondays through Thursday nights with the preferred class meeting times being 6:00 p.m. and 5:00 p.m. followed by 4:00 p.m. and 10:00 a.m. Lastly, seventy four (89%) the respondents indicated they would enroll in another accelerated blended course.

Qualitative analysis was used with two open-ended questions that asked respondents about both the positive aspects of accelerated blended learning and the challenging aspects of accelerated blended learning. These responses gave the researcher a far deeper insight as to the perceptions of the students.

Students overwhelmingly listed ‘time’ as being a positive aspect of participating in an accelerated blended course whether it be less course time, completing class work at a convenient time, freeing up time for other activities including family and work, less wasted time, and doing everything on one’s own time. Two other trends noted included being better able to fulfill family obligations when participating in this method of instruction, and students liked being responsible for their own learning.

Conversely a challenge identified with accelerated blended learning was identified as students being responsible for their own learning. A few examples of such responses included, “Our professor literally left the learning up to us,” “having to rely on yourself to answer your questions,” and “learning the material on your own instead of having a teacher lecture it to you.” The issue of time arose again as students mentioned getting assignments done ‘on time’ when having ‘less time.’ Students also repeatedly mentioned the words ‘fast paced’ in describing the challenges of accelerated blended courses. As one student commented, “Very fast pace, you have to get your game face on!”
Discussion

There are several observations that may be drawn from this study. Seventy-two (87%) respondents indicated they agreed or strongly agreed that their instructor used a wide variety of teaching strategies while sixty-seven (81%) agreed or strongly agreed that online activities gave them the opportunity to learn in different ways than they do in face-to-face classes. This supports the basic principles of adult learning theory and movement away from the often used transmission model of instruction. Research shows that learning is deeper and more meaningful when students are actively involved in the learning process rather than passively receiving information (as cited in Beckwith, Cunniff, 2009). Furthermore, this type of instruction may offer more students academic success as it takes advantage of using multiple intelligences.

Although 69 (83%) respondents indicated they agreed or strongly agreed that accelerated blended learning can be as effective as face-to-face learning in the classroom, it is interesting to note 18 (22%) respondents strongly agreed or agreed, 43 (52%) neither agreed nor disagreed and yet another 22 (26%) respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement ‘I have learned more in accelerated blended classes than in regular face-to-face classes.’ Perhaps this suggests that while accelerated blended learning can be as effective, students do not perceive they learn more than in a face-to-face courses. This supports research that online education can be at least as effective as traditional classroom instruction. (as cited in Bonk, Kim, 2006).

In responding to the open ended questions about both the positive aspects and challenges of accelerated blended learning, ‘learning the material on your own’ was a response frequently provided as a challenge of accelerated blended learning. As students must take more ownership in their learning, versus attending a course where lecture may be the norm, it may be helpful at the onset of a course for instructors to explain to their students that learning is deeper and more meaningful when students take an active role in the learning process. This may alleviate student feelings of abandonment by the instructor and that the instructor is not doing his or her job.

While the vast majority of respondents 74 (89%) indicated they feel comfortable posting comments on D2L it is interesting to note that only 38 (46%) feel more comfortable putting thoughts on D2L versus voicing them in class.

Of the 70 responses to the open ended question, ‘What are the positive aspects of participating in accelerated blended learning?’ 34 respondents (49%) included the word ‘time’ in their answer. Specifically they appreciated courses taking less time (7 weeks) versus semester long courses, the opportunity to focus on one course at a time, and less time in the classroom meant more time for homework assignments. Time was such a strong theme repeatedly identified by students that this may be an effective word if used in the promotion of accelerated blended courses (printed materials, websites, etc.).

The overwhelming majority of students (78%) indicated they enrolled in accelerated blended learning courses as ‘it fit my schedule.’ Given the importance of time to these students and having courses available that accommodate their schedules suggests accelerated blended courses need to be offered at times based upon the needs of the students. Students want their courses offered with face-to-face sessions on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays with Tuesdays being the most preferred (Table 2). The preferred course times were 6:00 p.m. followed by 5:00 p.m. and tied for third place was 10:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m.

From this study it was anticipated the researcher would learn the expectations and attitudes of accelerated blended learners. This information will be of value to both administrators and faculty as is assessed student satisfaction of accelerated blended learning. As there is a
**Conclusion**

Several of these survey responses mirror and confirm the research conducted by others. Overall it appears students were satisfied with their accelerated blended course experiences and 74 students (89%) indicated they would enroll in another accelerated blended course. This exceptional level of student satisfaction may be something the UW Colleges will want to use in future promotion of accelerated blended learning.

As higher education becomes more competitive and faces increasingly strong competition for students with less traditional funding available, it becomes imperative to understand the motivations and perceptions of accelerated blended learners. Most importantly, and as stated previously in this research, was the fact that unlike most universities, UW-Colleges had tracked accelerated blended course enrollments and this research was made possible. It appeared the UW-Colleges are experienced rapid enrollment in the accelerated blended courses and given the satisfaction levels as evidenced by the survey respondents, this growth will continue.

**References**


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