



Blended Learning: Institutional Frameworks for Adoption and Implementation

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Abstract

Blended Learning in education is the future for higher education. The rapid changes in technology combined with a demand for a more agile environment is transforming the traditional classroom and challenging learning models. Higher education has been adapting by moving classroom time into purely online environments. However, the literature suggests the new wave of learning is extracting the best practices from traditional and online models and infusing them into a blended environment. The agility and use of technology allows the non-traditional student to balance a professional career and life demands while still gaining the benefits of face-to-face time in the physical classroom. Universities also benefit from these models by staying competitive in student recruitment and the ability to increase class demands by forfeiting classroom space. The definition of blended learning for this study was combination of face-to-face instruction (25-75%) with online (various technological) self-guided modalities. The purpose of this study was to analyze frameworks for blended learning adoption and implementation among United States business schools that are accredited through the AACSB and ACBSP. The goal was to understand the overall blended learning framework of US business schools and the maturity of these options. A quantitative data collection instrument was adapted from the qualitative BLAF study by Graham et al. [1] and administered to a total of 814 AACSB or ACBSP accreditation business schools during the summer of 2016. The total response rate was 55% and after omitting incomplete responses, a sample size of 227 was analyzed. The overall results indicated that BL is available throughout various levels within business schools, however due to lack of institutionalization; the respondents lacked the knowledge to gauge the maturity of BL options within their university. Finally, results from the study demonstrate an emerging trend and confirm that before assessing BL maturity, institutions should adopt a common framework for comparison to other institutions as a way to measure success and growth.

Keywords: blended learning, institutional frameworks, higher education.

1. Background

This article emerged from the dissertation by Duarte titled *Blended Learning: Institutional Frameworks for Adoption and Implementation* [2]. Universities are challenged to incorporate blended learning (BL) formats as an innovative combination of face-to-face (f2f) classroom teaching and online learning. Research in BL has its limitations, often reflecting that university personnel review individual BL projects rather than overall models [3]. Concerns abound regarding the lack of proper theory, statistical analysis demonstrating significant results, and quality-based universally adopted institutional standards for the creation of BL formats as noted by Frey et al. [4] and Manninen [3]. Monteiro [5] stressed that there is an underutilization and focus on quality and effectiveness in the area of BL. Terms are used interchangeably (*blended learning, hybrid, flex, and mixed-modes*) and add confusion in the literature and in practice when defining learning styles and practices [6]. A literature review of the evolution of BL revealed the most widely accepted and high-level understanding of *blending learning* is the combination of f2f instruction and computer mediated instruction [7]. For the purpose of the dissertation research, the definition of BL is *a combination of face-to-face instruction (25-75%) with online (various technological) self-guided modalities* [2].

The entrance of the millennial generation into the college environment has greatly impacted the traditional, brick-and-mortar schools that have been and still are the standard in business education and is noted by Afip [8], Fry [9], and Sweeney [10]. Institutions must adapt to new trends in the delivery of education or risk becoming obsolete in the near future. Society demands faster, more agile, more creative, and more flexible educational solutions. Many universities have adapted by implementing institution-specific BL models, though research is undeveloped in this area, which is

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causing variations in how much of these programs instructors offer face-to-face versus online [1]. Research is limited regarding institutional guidelines or policies that govern the design, implementation, and execution of BL programs. Garrison & Kanuka [11] echoed these concerns by noting that clear institutional direction and policies are critical for adoption of BL initiatives within universities. Employers, in particular, have a stake in strong graduates from business degree programs, which if delivered using a BL format, mimic the business environment, which is characterized by both f2f and virtual interactions on a daily basis. Employers want graduates who are accountable, responsible, have strong critical thinking skills, are agile, are highly skilled in the use of technology, and have strong communication skills in virtual and f2f interactions. The BL environment could be considered on-the-job training insofar as the transition from the academic to the professional setting.

The exhaustive literature review revealed a clear lack of research about the usage of a consistent framework in the creation and use of BL programs/courses. As the demand for BL opportunities spreads and blended offerings increase across institutions, it will be important to be able to rely on some framework for consistency, quality assessment, and comparative analysis to demonstrate quality. Blended research continues to be formative in nature, and this research attempts to comprehend and explain the gap in the literature for BL programs by using a basic research approach versus applied research approach [12].

2. Results

The purpose of this study was to analyze frameworks for BL adoption and implementation among United States business schools. The goal was to understand the overall BL framework of US business schools and the maturity of these options.

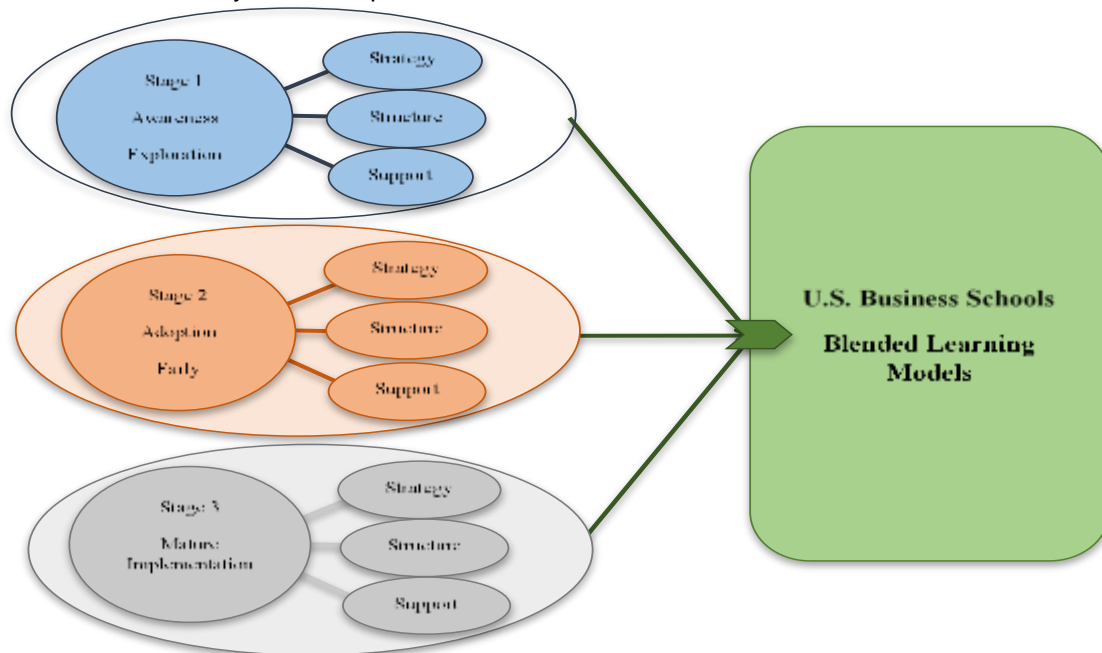


Figure 1. Research conceptualization for standards in blended learning models.

A reconceptualization of standards in BL models and basis for a quantitative data collection instrument was created from the work of Graham et al. [1] and is presented above in Figure 1. It was adapted from the qualitative Blended Learning Adoption Frameworks (BLAF) study by Graham et al. [1] and administered to a total of 814 business schools during summer 2016. The overall results indicated that BL is available throughout various levels within business schools, however due to lack of institutionalization; the respondents lacked the knowledge to gauge the maturity of BL options within their university. Finally, results from the study demonstrate an emerging trend and confirm that before assessing BL maturity, institutions should adopt a common framework for comparison to other institutions as a way to measure success and growth.



3. Conclusions

A key conclusion from the dissertation research was that there is no evidence of adherence to a common framework for BL adoption and implementation [2]. However, BL is making inroads in the business disciplines, and non-traditional students who chooses to continue education while working in the business industry may influence this. BL is available throughout all degree levels and across major disciplines, but has not been institutionalized even though some programs have graduates. The lack of institutional policy at most levels and in most of the nine areas depicted in Figure 1 is indicative of a trend that is still in its infancy stages even though BL has been around for many years [13]. Following the lack of policy guidance, policies on performance standards would also suffer since it is difficult to identify a level of performance in the absence of policy guidelines. The BLAF is a good start and results revealed that BL has not yet taken a strong foothold in accreditation business programs even though there seems to be a high level of activity.

4. Limitations

The main limitation for this study was lack of a valid survey instrument. The literature on BL does provide past studies regarding student perception, faculty perception, and outcomes, but quantitative studies specific to BL adoption and implementation is minimal. The only study available was by Graham [1] but used qualitative methods. The researcher attempted to translate the qualitative elements into data collection measurements but had no indication if the statements fit within the correct of the matrix without first applying an internal consistency test.

Another limitation of this study was the data collection methods. The researcher unsuccessfully attempted to engage accreditation agency presidents for assistance. Without the help of the presidents, the researcher located dean/assistant dean's emails for accredited business schools. The tools could have been outdated and provided incorrect data, or the emails on each website could have been inaccurate. In addition, emails could have been sent into a spam folder and never viewed.

Final responses were completed by a variety of individuals (secretaries, students, and adjuncts) for whom the data collection instrument was not originally intended. The researcher had no way of controlling who the dean or assistant dean allowed to take the data collection instrument on their behalf. This may have skewed the responses, because the respondent may not have direct knowledge of the BL options within their university.

5. Recommendations

The results of this research may assist with recommendations for institutional policies and procedures in the creation, execution, and assessment of BL programs and courses. Future researchers may consider reorganizing the statements within the BLAF matrix and retesting to meet the internal consistency reliability test and construct validity. This may take several iterations to ensure an adequate sample size across institutions is captured. A retest of the data collection instrument should leverage the affiliation of accreditation agencies to better engage accredited business schools within the US. Engaging the research departments, if available, with each business accrediting body may capture more participants and avoid emails being filtered out. Future researchers may also want to include phone calls for participants to take the survey on a live call, or as a simple reminder to complete the survey link via email.

The data collection instrument utilized in this study was administered with an attitudinal response scale of *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree* for items contained within the BLAF matrix. Because reliability testing did not reveal major issues with the grouping of items within each stage and related to each construct, perhaps an alternative iteration of the data collection instrument in which respondents were asked to identify the statement which best describes their institution would be more illuminating as to the maturity of BL in business degree programs. The data collection could also be conducted in other disciplines and other program or specialty accreditations.

Finally, future researchers may consider engaging quality organizations such as Quality Matters (QM), the Online Learning Commission (OLC), the Commission on Higher Education Administration (CHEA), or the US Department of Education (USDE) to further support and carry the study to other institutions.



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