



Addressing Students' Preferences Towards Online Learning: The Role of An Online Campus within a Multi-campus College System

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Abstract

Online education, its outcomes, impact, and validity are among the most researched topics in higher education, both as the interest of individual researchers or as a topic selected by graduate students pursuing master's and doctoral degrees [1, 2, 3]. In the last two decades, several metanalyses have validated this practice. The flexibility, convenience, and focus on individualized education afforded by online eLearning make it the ideal modality for students to pursue a higher education credential as they juggle multiple responsibilities. For at least a decade, students' increased interest has been documented in studies such as the Sloan-C reports (2012-2019) and the CHLOE reports (2017-2020), showing a continuous growth trajectory. TCC Connect Campus is the online campus of Tarrant County College in Fort Worth, Texas, established eight years ago in 2014 [4]; the college serves a student population of almost 100,000 students every semester. While much of students' preferences to select online learning may be attributed to the Pandemic [5, 10], it is also dependent on the availability of online learning at an educational institution [6]. In the case of TCC Connect Campus, this availability with a focus on quality and rigor of academic offerings is supported by student services that include success coaches and advising that occurs at the students' time.

Moreover, it focuses on reducing the time towards graduation, which may also influence students' decision to enroll in the modality. The campus offers multiple terms to accommodate students' schedules, ranging from 16 weeks to 4 weeks in length. Students are supported via online student services, including online advising, success coaches, online tutoring, and an online career tool. The campus touts a 76% success rate for all the offered terms. In this paper, the author discusses the strategies employed by an online campus to support a college system and address students' learning needs that have voiced a preference for online learning.

Keywords: e-Learning, Online Learning, ICT in Education, Teacher Professional Development

1. Introduction

Online education has experienced steady growth during the last decade and a more accentuated one over the previous three years [6]. Online education, its outcomes, impact, and validity are among the most researched topics in higher education, both as interest of individual researchers or as a topic selected by graduate students pursuing master's and doctoral degrees [1, 2, 3]. In the last two decades, several metanalyses have validated this practice. The flexibility, convenience, and focus on individualized education afforded by online eLearning make it the ideal modality for students to pursue a higher education credential as they juggle multiple responsibilities. TCC Connect Campus (CN Campus) is the online campus of Tarrant County College (TCC) in Fort Worth, Texas, established eight years ago in 2014 [4]; the college serves a student population of almost 100,000 every semester. The campus offers 37 fully online degrees in Business, Information Technology, and Office Technology via eLearning, weekend college, and accelerated schedules.

2. Operating an Online Campus/Online Learning at TCC Connect Campus

The TCC Connect Campus is an online/virtual campus and, as written in the college's policy [7], has the sole responsibility to offer courses and programs via eLearning and a Weekend College in a centralized manner. This approach allows us to be more responsive to student and employer needs while infusing the practice with planning, quality assurance, student services, faculty development, and available technology that increases student success.

The online campus operates entirely at a distance, and all services and transactions for students, faculty, and staff are mediated through technology. By developing an Annual Work Plan (AWP), the author of this paper leads and operates a campus of 29,000 students, of which 8,400 attend the college only online. The campus invests heavily in planning and provides bi-monthly reports on the progression of initiatives listed in the AWP [11, 12]. While much of students' preferences to select



online learning may be attributed to the Pandemic [5], it is also dependent on the availability of online learning at an educational institution [6]. In the next section, I discuss the strategies employed by an online campus to support a college system and address students' learning needs that have voiced a preference for online learning. The students interested in enrolling in online courses and programs start by completing a Readiness Assessment. This assessment measures their aptitude toward the modality in various technical areas.

3. Addressing Students' Preferences

Today's college student has many options to pursue higher education; however, it is also true they face many more challenges and hold more commitments than before. Before the COVID-19 Pandemic, online learning was mainstream and growing sustainably [6]. The CN Campus growth trajectory also reflected similarities to the national growth, with approximately 10% annual growth (Table 1). For fall 2021, the growth has been 20% at 25,748, and for Spring 2022, student enrollment has reached 30,348 students, a 22% increase from the previous spring semester.

Semester	Number of Sections Offered	Enrollments
2022 Spring	1,148	30,348
2021 Fall	957	25,748
2021 Summer	342	8,696
2021 Spring	888	23,073
2020 Fall	886	23,518
2020 Summer	758	19,824
2020 Spring	952	23,812
2019 Fall	877	22,786
2019 Summer	700	18,101
2019 Spring	932	23,621
2018 Fall	779	20,503

Table 1. Enrollments at TCC Connect Campus

During the pandemic, the college moved to Emergency Remote Teaching; some called that phase online learning, but it is not the same [9]. The online campus of TCC continued operating as a virtual campus and shared its processes, infrastructure, expertise, and staff by making them available to the five face-to-face campuses to assist the students attending those locations. These included: professional development for faculty to teach online courses, online advising for students, sessions on special topics, coaching of faculty, and course development assistance. Four groups of professionals were made available to support these activities: Director of Academic Affairs, Online Advisors, Online Faculty, and Instructional Designers in Fall 2020 and 2021, the college conducted surveys to explore how students were enrolling in courses at TCC. Approximately 2,200 (5% of the 42,000 students who received the survey) responded. The results showed a preference for online learning. (Table 2).

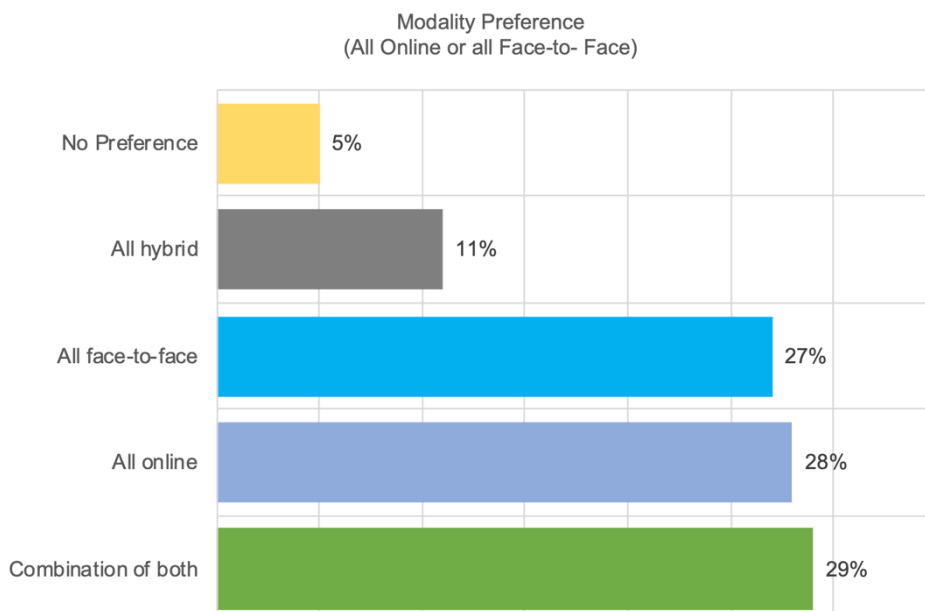




Table 2. Student's' Preference of modalities

This preference for online learning has been challenging to pinpoint and forecast how long it will last. However, the TCC Connect administrative team hypothesizes that it is a remnant of the pandemic's triggered abrupt change and that TCC students rediscovered the convenience and benefits of online learning (Table 3). Also, during this time, the college was transitioning to a new Learning Management System, Canvas. Due to the change, a new creation of student success modules was developed for students, and this attributed to the preference for the virtual classroom.

Data Utilization

Supporting the students' preferred way to attain college has been dynamically approached, and it is grounded in data. Before the pandemic, many CN Campus sections filled within an hour of publishing the schedule. However, during the academic year 2021-22 has been steady and more widespread. This continued growth has required us to add additional section of courses and despite the additions students are still enrolling. Moreover, TCC Connect Campus administrators increased their monitoring of section capacity and through this monitoring, data was collected which informed continued section building [12].

Reasons why Online is ranked as the preferred modality by 28% of Students

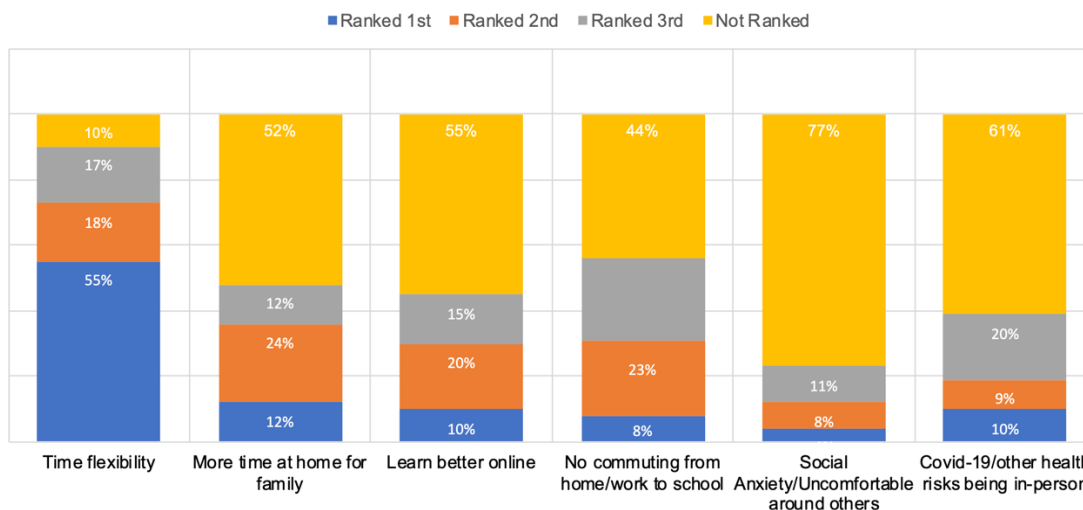


Table 3 Student preferences for online courses

Faculty Development

As online learning is centralized at TCC, processes and protocols, have been developed to align the mandate stated in colleges' policy with the operational responsibilities of quality assurance, rigor, and certified faculty. The CN Campus mandates that all faculty interested in teaching online obtain the Online Instructor Certification (OIC). The faculty follows rigorous professional development in several aspects of online pedagogy, online presence, course development, and online classroom administration to keep the academic offerings of high quality. Online course development follows a centralized approach that results in the design of a master course [8,14] allowing faculty to concentrate on teaching the subject rather than on course design; a team of instructional designers provides that service [13]. This is a training program developed at the campus where aspects of online pedagogy, online presence, basic instructional design, course development, accessibility, and regular and substantial interaction are covered. This component is essential as it prepares faculty to teach online and directly supports students' preference to enroll in online courses; TCC has made this professional development activity available to all college faculty. Faculty completing the OIC in advance allows us to assign additional faculty as new sections are scheduled and released.

4. Conclusions

The future of education is digital, and its recovery as well. Online learning attributes of flexibility, self-paced, and accommodation have allowed students to continue, advance, or complete their education. These are, in part, reasons why its growth has been steady. The attractiveness of these attributes will



continue to drive its growth. Recognizing that students' preferences may lean more toward a predominantly or entirely online schedule is part of higher education's accelerated change caused by the pandemic, which will be an existence for many institutions to confront. From our experience, successfully addressing students' preferences for online eLearning has increased student enrollments and success rates on campus. A combination of planning, forecasting, and monitoring their degree plans and the schedule was paramount for the successful endeavor.

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