Traditional and Non-traditional Students in the Same Classroom? Additional Challenges of the Distance Education Environment

Tracy A. Skopek, Ph.D
University of Wyoming
Dept. 3197, Laramie, WY 82071
Telephone: 307-766-2260
Email: tskopek@uwyo.edu

Robert A. Schuhmann, Ph.D
University of Wyoming
Dept. 3197, Laramie, WY 82071
Telephone: 307-766-6484
Email: schuhman@uwyo.edu

Introduction

The new reality of higher education contains a fundamental shift in student demographics. More non-traditional students are seeking educational opportunities and traditional students are seeking out and expecting alternative modes of curriculum delivery. Students, especially older, non-traditional ones seek course delivery through distance education formats such as online or videoconferencing that meet the needs of their lifestyle that includes career, family and other responsibilities. As a result, Universities are moving to meet the needs of this growing contingency of new atypical student populations.

Increasing demand and falling university revenues are also helping to drive interest in off-campus program delivery. While not a new phenomenon, distance education offerings are on the rise at universities across the country. Graduate programs are no exception to this growing demand, especially programs that offer specific career development such as Master of Public Administration (MPA) and Public Affairs programs. In fact, over 22% of 4-year institutions report offering distance education courses at the graduate level (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003) and there has been a 14% increase during the last 10 years in MPA programs that include some component of distance education (Rahm, Reed and Rydl, 1999). As bachelor's degrees become the new high school diploma, many mid-career professionals find themselves interested in, or in need of, additional credentials. MPA programs, once the domain of traditional pre-service students fresh out of their undergraduate experience and seeking to start to a career in public service, are now finding themselves in classrooms inundated by mid-career, non-traditional students. Practitioners pursuing continuing education are not usually well accommodated by traditional delivery methods such as residential programs because they are typically "site bound" often the result of career and family obligations. As colleges and universities continue to expand their offerings via distance education, this influx of nontraditional students is likely to continue.

A study by Durant and Taggart (1985) found that an influx of mid-career students was perceived to have a detrimental affect on classroom learning by pre-career students. However this study was based on a survey of traditional classroom instruction. What then, if any, are the implications of the new mix of traditional and non-traditional students in the distance education classroom? Does the same chilling effect reported in the regular classroom also appear in the distance education classroom when the two student types converge? We explore this possible tension between traditional and non-traditional students in a distance education format. Understanding the possible dynamic between this mix of students is

important as part of the new reality of curriculum offerings. We examine this potential dynamic with a survey of MPA students conducted over two years at the University of Wyoming. Based on the literature, this increasing mix of student types is regarded as beneficial for socialization and career development (see Carriuolu, 2002; Tschirhart and Wise, 2002). However, much of the literature on mixing traditional and non-traditional students focuses on the regular, on-campus classroom. We explore this concept in distance education and seek to determine whether a different classroom setting (i.e., distance education) creates a proprietary interest in the learning for non-traditional students. In addition, we explore whether this possible negative classroom dynamic can be minimized through the use of a blended or hybrid type of distance education program that includes both distance education and an element of in-person instruction.

Traditional/Non-traditional Dynamic

A pre-service or traditional MPA student is typically defined as a recent college graduate that has never been employed in their chosen career field (White, 2000; Durant and Taggart, 1985). Mid-career or non-traditional MPA students by contrast, tend to be older, have been out of school for at least 5 or more years and are employed in a professional capacity, although they might currently be undergoing a career transition (White, 2000). While the mixing of traditional and non-traditional students is not new itself, the mixing of these two students types in graduate distance education courses, largely considered the domain of the non-traditional student, is a relatively new phenomenon in many MPA programs. This student typology does point to differing motivations for entering a graduate program and the expectations once enrolled.

As distance education technology becomes more sophisticated and more programs are choosing to deliver a substantial portion of their MPA curriculum off-campus, blended or hybrid programs are likely to become more prevalent. Due to lower costs and increased faculty shortages, programs will offer their traditional on-campus instruction, along with newer off-campus offerings, allowing students to choose the mode of delivery most suited to their needs – with the ability to combine institutional resources to support programmatic goals. One would assume traditional, pre-service MPA students would be attracted to typical residential instruction while non-traditional, mid-career students would prefer distance learning. However in today's economic reality, one is instead likely to find increased crossover between the two modes of delivery resulting in a curriculum that includes both distance and on-campus classes.

As noted earlier, the term blended learning refers to a mixing of traditional, residential instruction and distance education delivery methods. Most blended learning formats consist of some type of face-to-face classroom instruction and online learning formats (Tallman and Fitzgerald, 2005). We suggest there is an additional variation to these types of blended learning formats that combines real time compressed video/interactive television (ITV) with face-to-face interaction through an in-person weekend class format. Courses consist of on-campus students attending class at the classroom site with the instructor and remote students attending the same course via interactive television from other locations. All students then converge at a central location for the weekend classroom instruction on designated dates. We note that this variation of the blended learning model appears to be more conducive to the needs of graduate programs that prefer a more traditional seminar style classroom setting but yet desire the outreach ability, location flexibility, and diversity of a distance learning component. This is in keeping with not only the mission and goals of a professional graduate degree program but also allows for those students unable to attend the main campus in person, on a regular basis, to participate.

Although this cross-over between programmatic modes of delivery is a seemingly more economical and often more practical solution for students and faculty, it is not without problems. While pre-service students are typically on-campus students and are more likely to enroll in distance learning courses because of some measure of convenience, the converse is not necessarily true as it is more costly, time consuming and inconvenient for off-campus students to travel to the main campus for weekly classes.

This mixing of off-campus and on-campus programs appears to create several pedagogical and programmatic questions that invite exploration. First, does the integration of these two student groups create issues of classroom dynamics such as lack of student interaction, intimidation factors, and perceptions of unequal attention associated with distance education? Additionally, a second question

deals with the issue of whether there is a problem or lack of professional socialization in off-campus distance learning delivery. Specifically, distance education appears to offer very little opportunity for professional socialization, in fact students can often find themselves alone at remote sites.

Issues in Distance Education: Interaction, Intimidation, and Neglect

Many studies on distance learning and distance education focus primarily on broad measures of effectiveness, such as student performance (i.e., test scores), student satisfaction rates, and attitudes toward learning through particular distance education delivery modes, such as online (Merisotis and Phipps, 1999). There appears to be little in the literature regarding empirical research on student interaction and the effects on classroom dynamics within these various delivery modes, especially with interactive television (ITV). We focus on ITV because it is considered to most closely approximate the traditional classroom instruction environment. Again, much of the research associated specifically with ITV, for example, tends to center around student satisfaction with instruction and the technology. But what about the classroom dynamic among these varying groups of students? Distance learning is typically understood as "learning that takes place when a teacher and student are separated by physical distance and technology is used to bridge the instructional gap" (Martin, 2005, 398). This 'distance,' scholars argue, is actually psychological as well as physical due to the lack of face-to-face interaction utilized in on-line learning (Wynia, 2000). However, some see the distance gap being bridged by other technology such as videoconferencing that allows for real-time television interaction (Martin, 2005). Even this technology is not without issues. Students at remote sites are sensitive to the lack of physical face-to-face interaction with instructors and fellow classmates (Wynia, 2000; Forster and Washington, 2000; Wagner, 1997; Freitas, Myers and Avtgis, 1998). Students and instructors both lose those visual cues and nuances only found in a traditional classroom setting (Schuhmann et. al., 2000).

There is also some indication that the ITV technology itself causes some discomfort and intimidation among certain student groups. Wynia's (2000) study found that those physically in the classroom with the instructor felt a higher level of intimidation due in large part to the technology such as microphones and television cameras, than those at the remote locations. Additionally, other studies (Thomerson, 1995; Wynia, 2000) report that students find the cameras and microphones generally intimidating. Again, it is difficult enough for instructors to engage students in meaningful discourse in a traditional environment, but in mediated environments this becomes even more difficult when one adds speaking into a microphone and appearing up close on the television screen. Students at all course sites must "key in" a microphone each time they wish to speak and are often shy about talking on screen (here, all eyes turn to them and they are "on"). In addition, because it is difficult through ITV to catch the body language and subtle visual cues that indicate someone wishes to speak, students will often not "key in" for fear they are going to interrupt someone at another site.

Other studies add to this finding and further argue that distance education through ITV cannot only widen the communication gap between instructors and students at remote sites but that these students are also more likely to feel frustration and isolation at their distance from other students in the class (Anderson and Kent, 2002). Further, studies report that students enrolled in remote TV classrooms had lower satisfaction rates than others in the study, due primarily to a perceived lack of communication outside of class; thus, furthering the notion of isolation (Wynia, 2000; Anderson and Kent, 2002). These findings are supported by a similar study by Rahm and Reed (1997) arguing that many students were uncomfortable being featured on TV screens. This is different than findings for on-line courses that report overall high student satisfaction.

The ITV technology then appears to cause some concern for interaction in the classroom setting, namely an inequity between those in the classroom with the instructor and those at remote sites. This appears to point to a possible second concern with student interaction, mixing traditional and non-traditional students in distance learning programs. Again, most traditional students are pre-service, on-campus students that are used to more conventional face-to-face classroom interaction. White (2000) suggests that mixing traditional and non-traditional students "creates a diverse and exciting student mix" (p. 69). However, other research (Durant and Taggart, 1985) finds that these two groups of students learn and interact differently. Could the use of distance learning as a medium for curriculum delivery cause a change in classroom dynamics between these different groups of students and contribute to disaffection

and dissatisfaction with the academic experience? There is some suggestion in the research that the mixing of these two types of students requires a need for collaborative learning environments where interaction is the key (White, 2000). Traditional distance learning makes this solution to the challenge somewhat problematic.

While overall student satisfaction with distance education may generally be favorable, some research suggests that students tend to perceive a great degree of instructor neglect both overall and especially when there are students at the proximate site with the instructor (Pool, 1996; Brower and Klay, 2000). Again, while the use of ITV is closest to the traditional classroom environment and promotes the most student interaction, perceptions of neglect by the instructor still persist. According to Wynia (2000), ITV originating students (those at the transmitting site with the instructor) report higher levels of satisfaction regarding their level of communication and feedback from faculty. It is also suggested that some instructors tend to perceive distance education itself negatively due in large part to diminished contact with students (Allen et. al., 2004). Instructors and students cite a lack of interaction before and after class when questions are answered and general conversations occur. Even with ITV use, distance learners still report lower satisfaction rates regarding their level of communication outside the classroom experience (Wynia, 2000). Because students at the proximate site with the instructor are more likely to be able to engage in face-to-face communication such as office hours, their perception of overall attention is usually quite high. Off-campus students, on the other hand, in traditional distance education programs are more likely to use telephone and email as a way to communicate with the instructor and will most likely be unable to meet in-person with instructors.

Socialization Dimension

Universities, and graduate schools in particular, play a large role in the socialization of students and MPA programs are no exception. Arguably, the presence of non-traditional students in a classroom of traditional students plays a significant role in fostering this socialization process. Brower and Klay (2000) raise some very important questions regarding the role of distance learning in this socialization process, including questions regarding the "social dimensions of learning" as well as possible neglect of socio-emotional needs of distance learning students (p. 216). They suggest that graduate students need to learn professional values in addition to facts and methods (Brower and Klay, 2000; 217). Students require face-to-face interaction that develops socialization and instills particular values, all of which are seriously limited by distance learning, even interactive television (ITV). In addition, some literature (Carriuolu, 2002) suggests that the academic community itself (such as a college/university campus) can provide some socialization opportunities for students that distance learning does not. DeLeon and Killian (2000) suggest that distance education students often do not experience important social integration because they typically do not have the opportunity to physically meet other students or the instructor. Students tend to feel more isolated without face-to-face interaction often resulting from geographic distance (deLeon and Killian, 2000). It is also suggested that given a choice, students would prefer live, face-to-face instruction through either traditional classroom settings or with the instructor live in their class for ITV (Lyons, MacBrayne and Johnson, 1994).

The use of cohort groups in MPA teaching is an important aspect of learning as well. Tschirhart and Wise (2002) note in a study of group dynamics that some public administration programs structure their curriculum to foster the creation of cohort groups by setting specific admission times and a set sequence of courses. This helps form a cohesive small group that is indeed beneficial and conducive to learning and socialization. There is some indication that distance learning hampers this student interaction and the formation of cohesive groups. It is our hypothesis that a blended program can help alleviate this learning problem and create a more cohesive group of students.

A Blended Learning Model

The University of Wyoming is the only provider of bachelors and graduate education in the state. As part of its overall mission, the University is asked to serve all residents of the state at the lowest possible cost. Complicating this mission, the state's population, while slightly less than half a million, is spread out over 100,000 rugged square miles. And because the University is located in Laramie, near the southeast corner of the state, it is not centrally located. Due in large part because of its outreach mission and

geographic isolation, the University has created the Outreach School which maintains nine Outreach Education Centers across the state located at various facilities such as community colleges or public secondary schools. Each of these Outreach centers is equipped with compressed video classrooms as well as audio teleconferencing technology and is connected via the Wyoming Video Conferencing Network (WVCN).

The University of Wyoming's Masters of Public Administration (MPA) program offers students the opportunity to pursue their degree through distance education as part of its own programmatic mission. One goal of the MPA program is to deliver a program that takes into account the differing educational backgrounds and occupations of Wyoming's citizens. In addition, the program is committed to a proactive recruitment program that attracts a diverse student body. Without a distance education program, a significant portion of the mission would be unobtainable. The blended learning model incorporated by the MPA at the University of Wyoming offers a large component of its curriculum through what we consider an off-campus distance education format that embraces a significant face-to-face component. While the program continues to offer a portion of its curriculum through traditional on-campus methods, its core curriculum and many elective courses are delivered through distance education that is accessible to both on- and off-campus student populations simultaneously. The MPA program began experimenting in this blended learning format during the mid 1980s, utilizing weekend classes and teleconferencing or audio interaction as its delivery method, which was the best technology available at the time. As technology changed and improved, the program began including interactive video instead of audio which linked up the off campus sites and allowed students to interact visually as well as orally with their counterparts across the state and on the University of Wyoming campus.

This blended learning model has the ability of allowing students across the state to take classes without being present on campus on a regular basis. A typical course consists of five-3 hour videoconferencing sessions that utilize real-time face-to-face video instruction among students at various locations across the state. The instructor is located on campus in a compressed video classroom and can have anywhere from zero to ten students at the originating site (sometimes more). The remaining students, often up to fifteen, are interacting via compressed video with the instructor and all the other on-campus students from as many as nine locations across the region. Total enrollment is limited to less than 25 to allow for more attention and interaction between instructors and students (just as we would a traditional classroom setting).

In addition to the compressed video sessions, students are required to attend two "intensive" weekend sessions per class. Each course typically begins the semester with an introductory video session to discuss the syllabus and familiarize students with the technology, followed by an intensive weekend session a few weeks later. The intensive weekend component creates an additional logistical element to distance education learning. Students are required to converge on a central location for each weekend class usually based on the geographic distribution of the course's enrollment. The weekend class generally begins on a Friday evening and extends through Saturday afternoon and mimics a seminar style classroom discussion. The emphasis during the intensive weekend sessions is on student interaction, collaborative learning, and faculty-student interaction.

Having embraced this model for twenty years, we realized that our experiences with distance education often varied from that experienced by other distance education programs, albeit programs that lacked intensive weekends. Our distance education classes "felt" very similar to our traditional on-campus classes and our level of student interaction was often greater in a distance education class than in our on-campus seminars. Although not without their own challenges, we failed to hear feedback from our students that we had often read about in the education literature. As a result, we sought to uncover whether our blended learning model was successful in bridging gaps reported by other distance education programs.

Methodology

Data for this research was developed through a twenty-six question survey completed by sixty-one MPA students at the University of Wyoming over a two-year period from 2005-2007. The questionnaire was designed to test a variety of dimensions of student satisfaction with both distance education itself and

also the blended learning format. Students in six different courses were chosen to complete the survey and all were given the instrument by the faculty during an in-person class (i.e., during a weekend class). All surveys that were distributed were completed; thus, the return rate was 100 percent. Anonymity was assured and students were asked to answer questions based on their own educational experience in our program rather than their beliefs about distance education in general. Only current students working their way through the program were included. Each student who responded to the survey must have completed at least one class or three credit hours of coursework in order to be eligible and no student completed the survey twice.

Of the respondents, 39.3% are full-time graduate students while 60.7% considered themselves part-time. In addition, students were asked to identify themselves as traditional or non-traditional students. Here, a traditional student was defined as someone who recently completed their undergraduate degree and has not yet entered the professional workforce or is in an entry level position (White, 2000). As noted earlier, a non-traditional or in-service student is considered to be, on average, older and has substantial workforce experience in the profession (White, 2000).

The average number of years worked by respondents was 9.5 and their average age was 36. In addition, 53% of respondents were female and 47% male. In keeping with the overall demographics of the state of Wyoming, 90% of the respondents reported Caucasian as their race with another 5% Native American (the remainder did not answer the question). The number of credits toward graduation ranged from 6 to 39, with a mean of 23.2 credit hours. Thus, students responding to this survey were generally at least half-way through the completion of their MPA degree when the questionnaire was completed.

Findings

Overall, as noted in Table 1, results show that students appeared satisfied with the blended learning distance education model. When respondents were asked the question whether "distance education has excellent educational value," 96.7% either "agreed" or "strongly agreed." In a second question we asked whether students felt that "distance education is an appropriate medium for graduate education." Here, 90.2% of students agreed or strongly agreed.

Table 1: Student Satisfaction with Distance Education

	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
I feel distance education has excellent educational value	72.1%	24.6%	1.6%	1.6%
Distance education is an appropriate medium for graduate education	29.5%	60.7%	6.6%	3.3%

In addition, because this is cited as one of the most problematic aspects of distance education we were interested in students' satisfaction with faculty attention. The survey asked two questions regarding this issue (see Table 2). First, we sought to determine whether students at remote sites perceived instructors giving preferential treatment to on-site students, i.e., those students actually physically present in class with the instructor. Here, 68.9% of respondents disagreed with the statement that remote students were neglected by the instructor. Because we gave the survey to students in a variety of courses that included each of the program's faculty, any differences in the effect of an individual instructor's ability to engage students at remote sites was minimized. In addition, as shown in Table 3, the survey included a follow-up question that asked students to gauge their overall level of satisfaction with attention received from faculty. Here, all students indicated some level of satisfaction with 85.2% of students noting that they were either "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with attention received from faculty.

Table 2: Preferential Treatment

	strongly agree	Agree	disagree	strongly disagree
On-site students (those in the same room with instructor) receive preferential treatment over those students in off-site or remote locations.	4.9%	24.6%	49.2%	19.7%

Table 3: Attention from Faculty

	not satisfied	somewhat satisfied	satisfied	very satisfied
When I take distance education classes, I am _____ with the level of attention I receive from faculty.	0.0%	14.8%	47.5%	37.7%

Our third major area of exploration was the issue of student socialization. We looked at responses to two questions focused on student interaction and student participation. As shown in Table 4, all students reported that they believed they engaged in "average" or "frequent" participation (in keeping with our expectations of graduate education). Gauging levels of participation is also part of understanding a student's level of intimidation with the technology. If a student is intimidated by the ITV classroom format, for example, it is believed that they will participate less. Further, we asked students to comment on their level of interaction with their student peers. Interestingly, 79.1% reported little or no interaction with other students (see Table 5).

Table 4: Class participation

Question	little or none	average	Frequent
How would you characterize your level of class participation?	0.0%	39.3%	60.7%

Table 5: Peer-to-Peer Interaction

Question	none	a little	frequent	a lot
How much interaction do you have with your fellow graduate students?	18.6%	60.5%	16.3%	4.7%

Traditional vs. Non-traditional Student Satisfaction

In addition to general levels of student satisfaction with distance education, we further explored the issues posed in the literature more fully by breaking down respondents into traditional and non-traditional student groups. A comparison of these two groups will help us shed light on important dimensions of a blended learning model that may alleviate some of the problems associated with distance learning programs and the potential tensions that may exist in those programs as the lines of traditional classroom learning and distance education become increasingly blurred.

We asked students to respond to the question of whether "distance education has an excellent educational value" using a Likert-type scale. Here, when broken down by student type (as shown in Table 6), 5% of traditional students disagreed with the statement while only 2.4% non-traditional students disagreed. Importantly, most students agreed that distance education was an excellent educational value.

Table 6: Student Satisfaction – Traditional vs. Non-traditional

	Traditional	Non-traditional	Total
Agree	95.0% (19)	97.6% (40)	96.7% (59)
Disagree	5.0% (1)	2.4% (1)	3.3% (2)
	100% (20)	100% (41)	100% (61)

In an additional attempt to understand the utility of including different ages and experiences in a distance education classroom, we next asked a series of questions about their preferences for, and utility of, including different ages and career experiences in the same distance education classroom. All respondents agreed or strongly agreed that "mixing traditional, pre-service, and mid-career students enhances the educational experience." When broken down by student type, a smaller percentage of traditional students "strongly agreed" than did their distance education counterparts (see Table 7). Here, among all traditional students, 50% strongly agreed while 92.7% of non-traditional distance education students strongly agreed ($p<.001$).

Table 7: Mixing Students Together – Traditional vs. Non-traditional

	Traditional	Non-traditional	Total
Strongly Agree	50.0% (10)	92.7% (38)	78.7% (48)
Agree	50.0% (10)	7.3% (3)	21.3% (13)
	100% (20)	100% (41)	100% (61)

($p<.001$)

Next, we asked students a similar question but in a different way. We asked them whether they preferred to have students of different ages, career experiences, and backgrounds in their graduate class. Again, all respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. However, when broken down by student type, only 57.9% of traditional students "strongly agreed" while a greater percentage of non-traditional students (92.7%) strongly agreed ($p<.01$) (see Table 8).

Table 8:
Do you like mixing students of different ages in the same class? – Traditional vs. Non-traditional

	Traditional	Non-traditional	Total
Strongly Agree	57.9% (11)	92.7% (38)	81.7% (49)
Agree	42.1% (8)	7.3% (3)	18.3% (11)
	100% (19)	100% (41)	100% (60)

($p<.01$)

Intimidation

In an effort to gauge intimidation, we asked students to characterize their level of classroom participation. Here, non-traditional students in greater percentages responded that they were "frequent participants" (73.2%) while only 35% of traditional students reported similar levels of participation ($p<.05$). Further, 26.8% of non-traditional students reported "average" while 65% of their traditional counterparts reported similarly (Table 9).

Table 9: Classroom Participation – Traditional vs. Non-traditional

	Traditional	Non-traditional	Total
Average	65.0% (13)	26.8% (11)	39.3% (24)
Frequent	35.0% (7)	73.2% (30)	60.7% (37)
	100% (20)	100% (41)	100% (61)

($p<.05$)

Socialization

In order to help understand the socialization dimension, we next asked respondents about their level of interaction among their fellow graduate students. Here, only 12.2% of non-traditional students noted that they had "frequent" or "a lot" of interaction outside the classroom, while 20 percent of on-campus students noted "frequent" or "a lot" of interaction. Interestingly, 87.8% of non-traditional students replied that they had "little" or "no" interaction outside the classroom with their peers ($p<.05$) (see Table 10).

Table 10: Student Interaction – Traditional vs. Non-traditional

	Traditional	Non-traditional	Total
Little/None	80.0% (16)	87.8% (36)	85.2% (52)
Frequent/A Lot	20.0% (4)	12.2% (5)	14.8% (9)
	100% (20)	100% (41)	100% (61)

Perception of Faculty Attention

In an effort to explore whether different student groups perceived different levels of attention or treatment by faculty we asked all students whether they perceived on-site students (those attending class on campus but via a distance education class) received preferential treatment over those in off-site or remote locations. Here, as shown in Table 11, overall 30% agreed that on-site students received special treatment while 70% of students disagreed. When broken down by student type, some differences were found. Here, only 15% of traditional students agreed while 37.5% of non-traditional students felt similarly.

Table 11: Preferential Treatment – Traditional vs. Non-traditional

	Traditional	Non-traditional	Total
Agree	15.0% (3)	37.5% (15)	30.0% (18)
Disagree	85.0% (17)	62.5% (25)	70.0 % (41)
	100% (20)	100% (40)	100% (60)

We then asked respondents about their level of satisfaction with the attention they receive from faculty. All students answered that they were either "somewhat satisfied," "satisfied," or "very satisfied." Viewed differently, no students were "not satisfied" with the level of attention they received from faculty. When broken down by student type (see Table 12) 87.8% of non-traditional students were satisfied or very satisfied, while a smaller percentage, 80%, of traditional students felt similarly. In the end, it appears that traditional students are slightly less satisfied with their level of attention they receive from faculty than are their counterparts.

Table 12: Level of Attention by Faculty – Traditional vs. Non-traditional

	Traditional	Non-traditional	Total
Somewhat	20.0% (4)	12.2% (5)	14.8% (9)
Satisfied/Very Satisfied	80.0% (16)	87.8% (36)	85.2% (52)
	100% (20)	100% (41)	100% (61)

Discussion

Our exploratory survey of a blended learning model and its effects on various student types yielded some interesting and useful results. In many ways, these results were in keeping with our own perceptions of student interaction and overall program satisfaction. In keeping with the literature, students were overall generally satisfied with their distance education experience. However, when broken down by student type, more traditional students were less satisfied with distance education than their non-traditional counterparts, although even this difference is small. This result is somewhat surprising as we expected more traditional students to be less satisfied with distance education since those student types are more likely to be familiar with, and prefer, regular classroom instruction. However, this overall level of satisfaction could be the result of a "preemptive" educational process that takes place before students enter our program. That is, because our program does not lend itself completely to an on-campus-only mode of instruction, students embrace or at least accept, prior to admission, the hybrid version of instruction that includes an off-campus component and the associated costs and benefits.

In addition to levels of satisfaction, we wished to explore the classroom dynamic between the various student types. We looked at two questions regarding the mix of student types in the classroom as part of their distance education experience. We were interested to see whether there was a tension between these

two student types in the classroom. Both questions aimed at this idea yielded statistically significant results and helped to shed light on the classroom dynamic. All respondents felt that a mix of student types in the classroom was valuable for their educational experience; however, in both instances, a smaller percentage of traditional students felt strongly about the utility of mixing student types in the classroom, while most of the non-traditional students felt strongly that it was a good idea. This finding is consistent with the overall level of satisfaction with instruction but appears to indicate again that traditional students are somewhat less satisfied with the mix of classroom types found in blended distance education formats. Traditional students are likely to be younger and might feel overwhelmed or intimidated by more experienced students and/or perhaps do not fully recognize the usefulness of demographic and professional diversity in the classroom.

Further, we asked students several questions in order to explore the socialization dimension which is deemed an integral part of a professional degree program, especially in public administration. Like the level of satisfaction with a mix of student types, we examined student interaction as a means to identify how various students socialize or network with their peers, if at all. What is interesting about our findings is it still appears that, overall, students in distance education – even a blended program – are still not getting the full benefit of interaction with their fellow students. In fact, over 80% of all students in our study, regardless of student type, reported little or no outside interaction with their classroom peers. A slightly larger percentage of traditional students reported frequent or a lot of interaction with peers outside the classroom, which is in keeping with the idea that the isolation created by distance is still the main factor hampering student socialization and networking. The importance of cohort groups and networking among students in a professional graduate program like the MPA is well established, which makes this finding problematic. Even with increased communication technology and several in-person meetings, students in distance education programs still seem disadvantaged by their location and isolation from their peer graduate students.

As expected, non-traditional students report much more frequent classroom participation than their traditional counterparts – 73.2% and 35% respectively. Indeed, this finding is statistically significant and supports the notion that non-traditional students, typically older and with more experience, are less intimidated in the classroom. Classroom participation through discussion and interaction is a component of socialization and as such it appears the two groups of student types still show a disparity in this respect.

In addition to the possible disadvantage of distance students making professional connections outside the classroom, there also appears to be some negative perceptions regarding attention from faculty. We were curious whether a measure of “animosity” existed between traditional and non-traditional students related to the level of attention they received from faculty. It would make intuitive sense that off-campus students might view students at the proximate site with the instructor as getting more attention and feedback. They might feel on-site students are called upon more often during class or that the instructor pays more attention to them overall because of physical proximity to the faculty. However, while our analysis did find that the perception of favorable treatment for on-site (those likely to be traditional) students did in fact exist (30% agreed), when compared by student type, traditional and non-traditional students appeared to agree or disagree in roughly the same proportion. This suggests that a tension does not necessarily exist but instead simply a recognition that on-site students are easier for the instructor to make eye contact with, answer their questions, pick up subtle visual clues, and to socialize with. This is in keeping with the finding that whether students are considered “traditional” or “non-traditional,” they are in fact relatively satisfied with their level of attention in a blended learning model. Interestingly, the percentage of traditional students who were satisfied or very satisfied with faculty interaction is slightly less than for non-traditional students. This indicates perhaps that on-campus students are simply more used to attention by faculty and having to share that attention with students off-site, and the distractions and cumbersomeness involved, is challenging. Or, that simply the distance education environment (i.e., television cameras, microphones, and a unique classroom set up) is less conducive and enjoyable than a traditional graduate school classroom where students have the opportunity to sit around a comfortable conference table.

In the end, we sought to understand whether the characteristics of a blended learning distance education program that incorporates an in-person, classroom experience might minimize any negative potential

classroom dynamic associated with both mixing traditional and non-traditional student types as well as issues of interaction, intimidation and perceived neglect. In large part, our perceptions were validated. Obstacles related to geographical proximity clearly remain for off-site students. They are physically further from faculty, have fewer opportunities to directly interact with faculty, and have fewer chances to engage their graduate school peers. Too, students in both categories perceive that traditional graduate students receive better treatment than their distance education counterparts. These differences, although statistically significant in several instances, are, however, small. In large part, we believe, that the blended learning model can be an important surrogate for the traditional on-campus educational experience. Many of the drawbacks of distance education and student dynamics disappear, or are at least minimized, by bringing students together in a face-to-face learning environment if for only a portion of the entire course. Thus, there may be ways to more closely model the important nuances of the traditional classroom experience in a distance education environment and help create a dynamic mix of student types that enhances the learning experience for all types of graduate students.

References

Allen, M., E. Mabry, M. Mattrey, J. Bourhis, S. Titsworth and N. Burrell. (2004). Evaluating the Effectiveness of Distance Learning: A Comparison Using Meta-Analysis. *Journal of Communication*, September, 402-420.

Anderson, L.P and C.A. Kent. (2000). Student Perceptions of Teaching Effectiveness, with Recommendations. *College Teaching*, 50(2), 67-74.

Brower, R. S. and W. E. Klay. (2000). Distance Learning: Some Fundamental Questions for Public Affairs Education. *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, 6(4), 215-231.

Carriuolu, N. (2002). The Nontraditional Undergraduate and Distance Learning. *Change*, 34(6), 56-61.

deLeon, L. and J. Killian. (2000). Comparing Modes of Delivery: Classroom and On-line (and Other) Learning. *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, 6, 5-18.

Durant, R.F. and W.A. Taggart. (1985). Mid-Career Students in MPA Programs: Implications for Pre-Service Student Education. *Public Administration Review*, March/April, 301-308.

Forster, M. and E. Washington. (2000). A Model for Developing and Managing Distance Education Programs Using Interactive Video Technology. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 36(4), 147-162.

Freitas, F.A, S.A. Myers, and T. A. Avtgis. (1998). Student Perceptions of Instructor Immediacy in Conventional and Distributed Learning Classrooms. *Communication Education*, 47, 366-372.

Lyons, C., MacBrayne, P., & Johnson, J. (1994). Interactive television as a vehicle for the delivery of higher education to rural areas. *Journal of Educational Technology System*, 22 (3), 205-211.

Martin, M. (2005). Seeing is Believing: The Role of Videoconferencing in Distance Learning. British *Journal of Educational Technology*, 36(3), 397-405.

Merisotis, J.P. and R. A. Phipps. (1999). What's the Difference? Outcomes of Distance vs. Traditional Classroom-Based Learning. *Change*, May/June, 13-17.

National Center for Education Statistics. (2003). Distance Education at Degree Granting Postsecondary Institutions: 2000-2001. U.S. Department of Education.

Pool, P. (1996). Teaching Via Interactive Television: An Examination of Teaching Effectiveness and Student Satisfaction. *Journal of Education for Business*, 72(4), 78-82.

Rahm, D. and B.J. Reed. (1997). Going Remote: The Use of Distance Learning, the World Wide Web,

and the Internet in Graduate Programs in Public Affairs and Administration. *Public Productivity & Management Review*, 20(4), 459-474.

Rahm, D., B.J. Reed and T.L.Rydl. (1999). Internet-Mediated Learning in Public Affairs Programs: Issues and Implications. *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, 5(3), 213-223.

Schuhmann, R.A, R. M. Cawley, R. T. Green and A. Schenker. (2000). The MPA and Distance Education: A Story as a Tool of Engagement. *Public Administration and Management: An Interactive Journal*, 5(4), 190-213.

Tallman, J. and M. A. Fitzgerald. (2005). Blending Online and Classroom Learning Environments: Reflections on Experiences and Points to Consider. *Knowledge Quest*, 34(1), 25-28.

Thomerson, J. (1995). Student Perceptions of the Affective Encountered in Distance Learning Courses. *UMU Microform*, 9531182.

Tschirhart, M. and L. Wise. (2002). Responding to a Diverse Class: Insights from Seeing a Course as an Organization. *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, 8(3), 165-177.

Wagner, E.D. (1997). Interactivity: From Agents to Outcomes. In T.E. Cyrs (Ed.), Teaching and Learning at a Distance: What is Takes to Effectively Design, Deliver, and Evaluate. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

White, R.D. (2000). On Pedagogy and Andragogy: Balancing the Learning Needs of Pre-Service and In-Service MPA Students. *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, 6(2), 69-78.

Wynia, L. (2000). How Do Students Really Feel About Interactive Television? *TechTrends*, 44(4), 39-41.
