A Comparative Typology of Student and Institutional Expectations of Online Faculty

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Abstract

Online faculty must uphold institutional expectations for their performance. Typically, online institutions have specific guidelines for faculty-to-student interactions; yet, student expectations of faculty may not necessarily align with institutional requirements. This study included a typological analysis of institutional requirements for online faculty in terms of student engagement. Then, student comments regarding faculty performance expectations were compared. Based on the findings, there are substantive differences which should be considered by institutions to ensure online student satisfaction with faculty is maximized. Recommendations for further study include replicating this with a purposeful sample of online students and doing a quantitative study of the relationship between faculty outcomes after implementing student performance expectations.

Introduction

Online education has seen unmatched expansion between 1993 and 2013, and universities and colleges across the country have expanded to meet consumer demand for online programs (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Institutional leaders are challenged to identify and uphold instructional best practices that meet the expectations and needs of students, while not being overly arduous for faculty, who often serve many institutions through adjunct work (Coalition on the Academic Workforce, 2012). With student retention closely tied to student satisfaction, studying online faculty practices that enhance student experience, engagement, and enjoyment in the online academic setting can have important consequences for better understanding student retention.

This research study arose after numerous discussions with online faculty who shared institutional expectations of performance, which often differed from the literature on student perceptions of quality faculty performance. Student experience is an essential element that should drive faculty mentoring approaches; especially in the context of developing a positive relationship (Izadina, 2016). Yet, there appears to be a gap in the literature about the role of student experience as a driver of faculty expectations.

To ensure standards of faculty performance, many institutions dictate expectations that faculty must meet on a regular basis such as grading timelines, online course engagement, and student communication practices. Online faculty members are often expected to comply with these expectations as a condition of continued employment. What remains unclear is if the expectations of the institution regarding faculty-to-student engagement align with what students expect from faculty. In this research study, a typology was developed whereby institutional expectations for online faculty-to-student engagement were grouped into themes. Then, an analysis of qualitative student feedback regarding their expectations for online faculty was sorted into those typologies to add rich experiential depth to the typology.

The research questions undergirding this study were:

1. What are some institutional expectations for online faculty-to-student engagement?
2. What are some student expectations for online faculty-to-student engagement?
3. What differences exist between institutional and student expectations of faculty-to-student engagement?

Theoretical Framework

Engagement Theory was used as the theoretical lens through which the data were evaluated. Engagement Theory was developed as a framework for technology enhanced teaching and learning (Kearsley & Schneiderman, 1998). As such, it is particularly relevant to the online setting. For meaningful learning to occur, students must be engaged in activities and interaction with others throughout the learning event. Technology facilitates engagement in ways that may not be accomplishable through other modes of communication (Kearsley & Schneiderman, 1998). Engagement Theory relies on the experience of students interacting with technology-based systems to draw conclusions about the role of engagement in learning (O'Brien & Toms, 2008). Engagement Theory often requires relational components such as communication and social skills (Miliszewska & Horwood, 2004). This aspect of engagement theory that most aligns with this research, as the faculty-to-student engagement in online education depends on relational components.

Literature Review

There is great interest among many higher education stakeholders regarding the factors that influence online student success and satisfaction. While higher education leaders are expected to produce and administer policies that increase student success (Johnsrud & Banaria, 2004), instructors are typically responsible for conveying instructional content, engaging students, and evaluating student work. In distance education environments, students rely on faculty engagement in either written, audio, or video formats to guide them toward improvement. Often, faculty must develop new skills and practices to effectively engage students (Gallien & Oomen-Early, 2008). Faculty members are presented with unique challenges to teaching in online settings (Anderson et al. 2011) including ensuring faculty-to-student communication supports learning outcomes and student satisfaction.

Student Satisfaction in Online Courses

Student perceptions of effective instructor engagement are an important consideration for educators. Student satisfaction is positively correlated with instructor communication, responsiveness, encouragement, accessibility, and professionalism (Bolliger, 2004; Kauffman, 2015). In a study of student perceptions of effective instructor engagement, researchers found that gentle guidance, positive, constructive comments, timeliness, and future orientation were important feedback considerations (Getzlaf et al., 2009). Further, Garrison et al. (2000) developed a community of inquiry framework, linking student engagement to cognitive, social, and teacher presence. Effective faculty feedback and engagement is correlated to positive outcomes for students. Students

showed greater levels of satisfaction with the instructor and performed better academically when they received personalized interactions from the instructor on assignments (Gallien & Oomen-Early, 2008).

Student satisfaction has become a high priority among college administrators (Noel-Levitz, 2014). Students who report high satisfaction, defined in large part by their opinions of faculty teaching, tend to persist to graduation, which improves institutional outcomes and contributes to student satisfaction (Noel-Levitz, 2014). Faculty characteristics and behaviors, particularly faculty actions that engage students in distance environments, can directly contribute to student satisfaction (Kuh & Hu, 2001). Because student satisfaction is correlated with several outcome measures—such as persistence (Tinto, 2010), course quality (Moore & Kearsley, 2011), and student success (Noel-Levitz, 2014)—taking steps to improve how faculty engage with students in their online courses has a clear and direct benefit to the institution.

The Importance of Faculty Training on Institutional Expectations

Faculty interaction and student satisfaction are key predictors of student achievement and success (Astin, 1984; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Tinto, 2010). Faculty members can have a critical influence on the students' academic experience (Gibson & Blackwell, 2011). Faculty described the online environment as positive with regard to faculty-to-student communication, which is a key indicator of student satisfaction (Bolliger, 2004); yet, many felt underprepared to teach online (Johnson et al., 2015). Institutions offering online courses may provide training for faculty, and most offer a set of faculty expectations to be followed regarding faculty-to-student engagement. Training for faculty is usually required to help ensure instructional quality (Meixner et al., 2010) and is often a primary concern for any higher education leader desiring to maximize student learning. Institutions must work to integrate faculty into the broader academic culture through training and support to ensure instructional quality (Fagan-Wilen et al., 2006). Faculty who are well trained per university norms perform better overtime (Green et al. 2009). For distance education faculty, universities that focused on professional development, effective communication, fostering balance, and forming relationships tended to have higher student retention and satisfaction (McIntyre Jazzar, 2010).

Methodology

The design used in this study was a qualitative typology. Institutional expectations for online faculty were gathered from publicly available websites. Expectations for faculty-to-student engagement were grouped per themes and then sorted to create a typology. As noted by Kluge (2000) "Every typology is the result of a grouping process: An object field is divided in some groups or types with the help of one or more attributes component" (para. 1). Then, narrative feedback was gathered from online students using an open-ended questionnaire. The instrument was field tested by five professionals with extensive online education experience. Amazon's Mechanical Turk was used to distribute the instrument to volunteer participants. Participants were compensated $1.00 for participation. Potential participants were asked several screening questions to ensure they had been online students at the undergraduate, graduate, or doctoral level. These students were questioned about their expectations for faculty-to-student engagement. Results were compared with the typologies identified from institutional faculty expectations. Based on the findings, recommendations were made regarding the types of expectations institutions should have for online faculty to maximize student satisfaction with faculty engagement.

Study Sample

There were two types of participant samples used in this study. First, institutions were identified with published, publicly available online faculty expectations. Second, online students who have signed up with Amazon's Mechanical Turk to complete research surveys were queried to determine their perceptions of faculty-to-student engagement best practices. These two types of participants were required to juxtapose institutional and student expectations of faculty-to-student engagement.

A keyword search of the phrase "Online Faculty Expectations" yielded a list of publicly available websites that included that phrase.Search results that were for a higher education institution website, included faculty performance expectations, and were tailored specifically for online faculty were included in the study. The first 15 results that met these criteria were used to create a typology. Many of the institutional expectations were similar and thus, the researchers believe these typologies are transferable across many institutions. Only faculty-to-student engagement expectations were included in this study. Based on this distillation, a typology was developed where these results were grouped by theme and each theme represented a type.

Using Amazon's Mechanical Turk, current and former online student volunteers were queried regarding their expectations of faculty-to-student engagement. A questionnaire allowed 22 current and previous online students to share their expectations for faculty performance around engagement. This sample size provided data saturation around the questions posed as evidenced by the homogeneity in responses. The student responses were sorted into the typology themes identified through the institutional faculty expectations analysis. For the student data gathered from Amazon's Mechanical Turk, students were only included if they were at least 18 years old, had completed at least one online course, and agreed to the informed consent for participation in the study.

Results and Discussion

The design used to answer the three research questions in this study was a typology. Institutional websites were reviewed to determine faculty expectations for online engagement. These findings were sorted into themes, which were used to create a typology. Then, students were questioned about their expectations of this engagement. Based on the themes that emerged from student questionnaires, the results were compared.

Research question 1: What are Institutional Expectations for Online Faculty-to-Student Engagement?

The themes identified in the institutional website reviews for online faculty expectations included the following:

1. Substantive feedback
2. Timelines and
3. Course expectations.

Below are examples of comments by typology type.

Substantive Feedback

- Institutions require faculty to provide detailed feedback on student assignments noting strengths and weaknesses.
- Institutions require personalized comments provided to each student on all graded course activities.
- Institutions require faculty to provide comments to students on any rubric criterion not fully met.
- Institutions want faculty to share opportunities for academic growth based on comments provided to students.

Timeliness

- Institutions require faculty to grade student assignments on stated timelines.
- Institutions specify frequency requirements for LMS logins.
- Institutions specify timelines within which faculty must respond to student inquiries.
- Institutions require faculty to post grading within specific timeframes after the semester or term ends.

Course Expectations

- Institutions require faculty to post content in the course such as a weekly announcement or faculty biography.
- Institutions require faculty to interact with students on specific activities such as first week student introductions or weekly discussions.
- Institutions require faculty to post contact information for students in the course such as a phone number or alternative contact like office hours.

Research Question Two: What are Student Expectations for Online Faculty-to-Student Engagement?

In order to understand the user's experience, student questionnaires were gathered and reviewed for similar themes. Of note, while the same themes from the institutional website reviews were used, additional trends emerged from the students' perspectives of quality faculty performance and engagement. The differences will be explored in response to research question 3. The following emerged as critical examples for faculty-to-student engagement.

Substantive Feedback

- Students want instructors to provide consistent feedback on assignments and clearly state what the student did incorrectly.
- Students do not want 'canned' feedback from faculty.
- Students want the same level of detail in feedback for great papers as they do for ones that need improvement.
- Students want faculty to minimize feedback on writing and formatting and emphasize feedback on content.
- Students want faculty to share feedback on their expertise.

Timeliness

- Students want instructors to follow or exceed institutional expectations for assignment grading.
- Students want comments on previous work before another assignment is due, so they can make improvements needed.

Course Expectations

- Students want courses that are relevant, updated, and well-functioning.
- Students want consistency in course structure so that navigation is predictable.
- Students want faculty held to the same expectations across courses.
- Students want helpful answers and guidance from faculty on content in the course.

Research Question Three: What Differences Exist Between Institutional and Student Expectations of Faculty-to-Student Engagement?

After the institutional and student expectations were compared, some substantive differences were noted. Specifically, students found additional areas of importance for faculty engagement. Students commented more frequently on consistency, feedback types, and the desire to engage with faculty on their areas of expertise above the content of the course. While institutions had specific requirements for faculty engagement, students were less concerned with specific prescriptive approaches to timelines, feedback, and course expectations as they were with consistency, personalization, and faculty adherence to policies. These qualitative comments further substantiate the subtle differences in the findings of the findings.

Table 1.
Typology of Institutional and Student Expectations of Online Faculty

Theme	*Institutional expectations*	*Student Expectations*
Substantive Feedback	• Detailed feedback • Personalized comments • Rubric utilization • Focus on academic growth	• Detailed feedback on work regardless of quality • Consistent and clear feedback • Personalized, not *canned* feedback • Feedback on content, not formatting • Share expert knowledge
Timeliness	• Grading timelines • Frequency of LMS log in • Responsiveness requirements • Final grade timelines	• Follow or exceed institutional expectations for timelines • Grades returned on previous work before next work is due
Course Expectations	• Required posted content • Required student interaction • Required contact and/or office hours	• Relevant, updated and well-functioning courses • Consistence across course structures • Consistent expectations of faculty across courses • Guidance on course content

Consistency

Students appreciated course consistency in terms of navigation and consistency in the quality of faculty support provided across courses. Students generally felt that some instructors were more effective than others and that the institution should do more to promote a more standardized experience for the student in terms of faculty engagement, expectations, and grading practices. Students clearly indicated that all instructors should be held accountable to the same high standards.

Faculty Accessibility

Students appreciated faculty accessibility and responsiveness. While institutions did state requirements for timeliness of responses from faculty to students to certain triggers, such as questions posted in the course, accessibility of faculty seems to be a more elusive theme than is currently captured in those requirements. Students desire faculty who are prompt in their responses, but also who tailor their responses to student assignments and needs. Students also indicated that because of the nature of online education, they want faculty to be available outside of the typical academic schedule. They want access to faculty during 'off hours.'

Course Content

Student responses imply they expect faculty to have total management over the content of online courses. Students expect their courses should function correctly with active links, current resources, and navigable structure, this theme was less of a focus for institutions. It is possible that instructional designers or master course shell development teams are seen as owning this aspect of engagement as perceived within faculty purview by students. In addition, students indicated they want content updated regularly, yet many institutions have scheduled times for course revisions that may require a shelf-life of 24 months or longer for current online offerings.

Conclusion

It is hoped that this brief study will open a conversation about the differences between institutional requirements and student expectations in terms of faculty engagement and how we, as faculty and administrators, can work together to close any gaps between the two. Typically, online institutions have specific guidelines for faculty-to-student interactions, yet student expectations of faculty do not necessarily align with institutional requirements. This potential gap can have serious consequences for mission fulfillment in terms of achieving effective faculty engagement and successful student outcomes. This study was informed by a questionnaire of online students to detect patterns about the user experience of faculty-to –student engagement. While this study included a small sample of institutions and students, it is believed that this information may be transferable across institutions offering online degree programs and to online students because of the literature supporting the findings overall. This study included a typological analysis of institutional requirements for online faculty in comparison with student expectations. Based on the findings, recommendations for further study include replicating this research across a broad group of online institutions, using a purposeful sample of experienced online students, including interviews with students, and compiling a quantitative study of the relationship between faculty outcomes after implementing student performance expectations. Finally, further research might include specific analytics measurements that can be used to identify and track issues with faculty engagement.

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