

Chapter 4

Distance Learning Programmes as Alternative Learning: Satisfaction, Experience, and Enrolment of Community College Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to understand the satisfaction and experience of programme-seeking students in a community college in the United States. In order to improve the satisfaction, experience, and teaching and learning procedures of distance learning courses and programmes, it is important to understand the students' feedback and ideas. Based on the case study methodology, the researcher collected data from 1,857 inductive surveys and 11 focus group activities. This research allowed the researcher to gain knowledge and understanding about students' satisfaction, experience, and potential enrolment in degree programmes during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. More importantly, the results provide recommendations to school leaders, instructors, government leaders, and policymakers about current and future college and university development regarding changes in teaching and learning behaviours.

INTRODUCTION

As a long-term educational development, schools, teachers, and government departments always reform the services and delivery means as students may have different demands of learning purposes (Simpson, 2018). For decades, colleges and universities have invested in self-directed learning, independent learning courses, evening courses, vocational learning, and distance learning as alternative means for students with different backgrounds and needs (Simonson et al., 2008). Although these methods have been employed for decades, traditional on-campus programmes are still the major means for students to seek their education, regardless of method or purpose. The alternative means and programmes were

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originally developed to cater to Non-Traditional, Returning, Evening, and Adult students (NTREAs) who could not attend day-time on-campus programmes (Dos Santos, 2020b). However, over the past decade, distance learning programmes have attracted a large number of students with different backgrounds and purposes. In particular, enrolment plans reflect this trend.

According to a recent report (Duffin, 2020), in 2012, about 13.3% of American university students were engaged in some distance learning programmes, while 12.6% were taking their degree completely online. These percentages have gradually increased. As of 2018, 18.7% of American university students were taking some distance learning programmes, while 16.6% were taking their degree completely online. Overall more than 35% of American students took distance learning courses in 2018 (Duffin, 2020). Another report, released by the National Centre for Education Statistics (*Distance Learning*, 2020), indicated that there were nearly seven million American students studying in distance learning courses and programmes at higher education institutions (i.e. those offering associate degrees or higher degrees and participating in Title IV federal aid programmes) during the 2018 academic year in the United States. Table 1 displays the enrolment trends of distance learning courses and programmes.

Table 1. Enrolment plan of distance learning courses and programmes in 2018

Level of the Institution and Types of the Institution	Any Distance Learning Courses and Programmes	Completed Distance Learning Courses and Programmes	Enrolment Percentage of At least One Distance Learning Courses and Programmes	Enrolment Percentage of Completed Distance Learning Courses and Programmes
Level of the Institution				
Undergraduate	3,399,567	2,325,142	20.5%	14.0%
Postgraduate	274,520	932,845	9.0%	30.7%
Types of the Institution				
Public	932,845	932,845	21.7	12.4
Private Non-Profit	418,048	837,479	10.1	20.3
Private For-Profit	102,569	614,126	10.4	62.5

Based on the statistics in 2018, over 20% of American college and university students tried and took at least one distance learning course during their academic voyage. However, although the population is not large, the trend of distance learning education and online education is in-demand (Dos Santos, 2020b). However, the demands and desires of distance learning and online education have rapidly increased during the 2019/2020 academic year.

In early 2020, a large number of colleges and universities decided to switch their on-campus courses to online platforms due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Suddenly, the distance learning and online teaching arrangement was not expected to both students and teachers (Juszkiewicz, 2020). In other words, as most of the teachers and students did not have any experiences of distance learning and online teaching and learning arrangement, some of them are confused (Mozelius & Hettiarachchi, 2017). Although the college and university leadership, government agencies, school staff, administrative supporting department, and faculty members tried their best to arrange and offer the appropriate teaching and learning experiences

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