

Student Satisfaction with a Distance Learning MPA Program: A Preliminary Comparison of On-Campus and Distance Learning Students' Satisfaction with MPA Courses

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## Abstract

One undeniable pattern in graduate public affairs education is the migration from traditional on-campus course offerings to distance education. This movement continues despite reservations that online MPA education may negatively affect academic quality, retention rates, and student satisfaction. This study explores preliminary data collected from on-campus and distance learning students to determine if there is a difference in the satisfaction levels of students in these two different learning modes. Data are collected from on campus and distance learning students who are enrolled in the same class with the same instructor. The equivalency of the courses focuses attention on the possible impact that online instruction may have on student satisfaction levels. Initial findings indicate that there are few important differences in the satisfaction levels of distance learning and on-campus students. Rather, the directionality of the differences appears to be more a function of the instructor rather than the method of content delivery.

A common issue of contention in public affairs education is the tension between expanding educational access and maintaining academic quality and rigor. There are certainly important benefits and externalities associated with expanding access to undergraduate and graduate level public affairs education. These benefits accrue not only to the prospective students entering public affairs programs but to the greater societal good as well. If we are to heed the call of DiIulio and Kettl (1995) to “rediscover government”, civic education initiatives must be the cornerstone of such an endeavor.

However, while few question the virtue of expanding access to public affairs education, some academics and practitioners alike fear the possible erosion of academic quality that may accompany such expansion. Brower and Klay (2000) caution public affairs programs against putting new innovations to work without considering the implications for the future. Specifically, they warn us that a rush to use new technologies can create substandard programs that may actually detract from academic quality.

Distance learning public affairs programs have thus found themselves at a crossroads. As new technologies develop that greatly facilitate the creation and delivery of public affairs education, programs must proceed cautiously in creating programs in response to the educational needs of the profession rather than merely responding to market factors. Despite these warnings, the pace toward distance learning public affairs education has quickened. The number of MPA programs that utilize distance learning as a mode of delivery has grown steadily over the past decade from 12% in the early 1990s to 43% in 1996. Today, a cursory review of MPA programs uncovers over 70 programs with a distance learning component to their curricula. In fact, the NASPAA website currently lists no less than 20 programs that deliver the entire MPA curriculum (or a significant portion thereof) via distance learning technologies.

It appears that, despite reservations from some faculty, distance learning has become a rather well-entrenched aspect of public affairs education at the graduate level. However, distance education should not be discussed in monolithic fashion. Instead, distance education can (and does) encompass a variety of media and modes of delivery. For example, Goodsell and Armstrong (2001), in their review of a state public policy course, describe the use of multiple modes of delivery and learning. These modes include weekly televised class meetings, small group discussions, field experiences, asynchronous video delivery, and in-person sessions. The authors describe this as a “converged” approach to distance learning instruction. Scheer (2001), in one of the first truly quantitative reviews of the distance MPA education,

examined the three dominant methods of delivery: traditional on-campus delivery, video courses, and online instruction. These methods themselves may be multi-dimensional and may include a variety of different approaches. For example, online delivery may be synchronous or asynchronous. An asynchronous method of delivery may utilize a platform such as WebCT or Blackboard as a posting board for asynchronous communication with students. More synchronous delivery modes include the use of web conferencing, virtual chat, or web cams to provide for real-time interaction between instructor and students or between learning sites. Likewise, video delivery may consist of asynchronous, semi-synchronous, or synchronous methods. The delivery of self paced videotapes and the use of fiber optic technologies are usually categorized as video delivery methods.

While the delivery methods differ, as new technologies emerge programs tend to migrate from asynchronous or semi-synchronous approaches to platforms that provide for more real-time interaction between participants. That is the experience of the MPA distance learning program at California State University, Long Beach. This paper reports the preliminary observations related to the new delivery mechanism utilized in the California State University, Long Beach MPA Distance Learning program (CSULB-MPADL). In Fall, 2004, the CSULB-MPADL program replaced its fiber optic broadcasts with a new synchronous computer assisted learning platform (Centra Symposium). This paper examines the satisfaction levels of distance learning students with the education that they are receiving with this new technology. Specifically, the study compares the satisfaction of distance learning students who receive their primary instruction using this new platform with on-campus students in a traditional classroom setting. The findings, while preliminary, do provide a basis for drawing preliminary conclusions regarding the use of this new platform.

#### The Impetus for Developing Distance Learning Programs

A great deal of literature exists regarding the benefits and potential advantages of migrating toward distance education in undergraduate and graduate education. Much of this discussion has certainly already been covered in other venues by more skillful hands. Essentially, one of the primary benefits of distance education is the expansion of access to education that it affords to students. This expanded access may mean the erosion of existing geographical barriers. For example, Schuhmann (2000) cites the absence

of institutions of higher education in Wyoming as a major impetus for the development of the MPA distance learning program at the University of Wyoming.

The expansion of distance education may also reduce non-geographic barriers to access. It carries the potential of increasing the access for students with physical disabilities by eliminating or reducing the need for these students to travel to on-campus sessions. In the CSULB-MPADL program, two students have recently joined the program for this very reason. Distance learning programs also usually afford more flexibility in scheduling for students thus assisting full-time employees in obtaining the MPA degree. Depending on the modes of delivery utilized in a specific program, students may have the option of completing assignments early and attending asynchronous sessions at a more convenient time than in a traditional on-campus setting. Since many fully employed MPA students travel as part of their official duties, on-campus classes may not be practical options for them. Distance learning courses that utilize computer learning platforms may allow these students to log into the virtual classroom from any remote location and participate in the class.

Distance learning may also enhance the amount of participation in class sessions. The relative anonymity provided through virtual chats and email may benefit students who are reticent to participate in a traditional classroom setting (Jewell, 2005, Reagan, 2004). While few question the importance of active learning in public affairs education, the amount of active learning that occurs is contingent upon the approach employed in the virtual classroom (Hung, 2005). The design of the virtual classroom, types of questions used, and amount of participation encouraged in the classroom are all important determinants of the amount of interaction in asynchronous discussion boards (Hung, 2005, Du, 2005, Yang, et al, 2005). Even with a carefully designed classroom environment, student satisfaction with asynchronous discussion board classrooms is also a function of the attitude and effort of the student (Richardson, 2005). The best laid faculty plans may be obstructed by a distance learning student who does not exert the requisite effort to succeed in the course.

From an administrative perspective, there is great monetary appeal for increasing the number of courses provided through distance learning. As many public universities struggle with access issues and enrollment levels increase, classroom space becomes a precious commodity. Obviously, virtual classrooms help alleviate these concerns, potentially increasing enrollments and revenue. Depending on the mode of

delivery utilized in the distance learning program, the marginal costs of delivering the program will vary greatly. While the initial fixed costs may be prohibitive (e.g. purchasing equipment, securing site licenses for software), marginal costs may decrease over time thus leading to large net profits for programs and colleges. Therefore, during poor fiscal times, programs may feel the pressure to migrate more courses into a distance learning delivery mode.

### Criticisms of Distance Learning Programs

Many criticisms of distance learning public affairs programs emanate from concerns over academic quality. Brower and Klay (2000) lament the loss of personal contact that may occur in a distance learning environment. Specifically, they express concern about the impact that this lack of personal contact may have on the professional socialization of students. Of course, the amount and type of contact between instructors and students is contingent on the type of technology that is employed. Some synchronous modes of delivery do provide more opportunities for personal contact and professional socialization than asynchronous methods.

Some critics cite the high dropout rates in many distance learning programs and attribute these attrition rates to low levels of student satisfaction. However, several authors counter this assertion by illustrating that distance learning and traditional students share similar levels of satisfaction with program quality and course content (Biner, et al, 1997, Hiltz, 1990, Phelps, 1991, Ritchie and Newby, 1989). Again, it is possible that high dropout rates may be endemic to certain programs and are most probably associated with the specific design of the program. The CSULB-MPADL program is a cohort based program where students enter the program together, complete all coursework as a cohort, and usually graduate in the same semester. Dropout rates in the CSULB-MPADL program are relatively low. Five out of 54 students (9.2%) who enrolled in Fall, 2004 and Fall, 2005 have subsequently withdrawn from the program. One of these individuals was dismissed for violating the terms of academic probation.

As the sophistication of distance learning technology increases, there is a heightened concern that this increase in technology will actually reduce access. Students may need more sophisticated computers and learning resources and, therefore, some segments of society may be precluded from enrolling in these courses (Brower and Kray, 2000). Students in the CSULB- MPADL program are required to have a

computer with Windows 2000 or newer, a sound card, broadband Internet access, and a headset and microphone. The only requirement that has presented an obstacle for some students in the program has been the broadband Internet connection. While a dial-up connection can be used, audio and video streams are facilitated with broadband connections. At least in the case of the CSULB MPA-DL program, these technological requirements have not prohibited any students from participating in the program.

Concerns regarding academic dishonesty have also been cited as problems associated with distance learning programs. While it is true that it may be difficult to monitor academic dishonesty for timed examinations conducted online, random variation of examination questions can partially mitigate concerns over cheating and plagiarism. Student specific, task oriented assignments require students to apply specific situation from their organizations and experiences to the assignments thus further mitigating concerns over academic dishonesty.

Finally, distance learning education may have negative impacts on a variety of aspects vital to public affairs programs. For example, poorly designed distance learning programs may threaten a program's accreditation as well as its efforts to engage in meaningful assessment practices. While NASPAA has been reluctant to promulgate many specific requirements for distance learning programs, departments seeking to gain or maintain accreditation must demonstrate an equivalency between the instruction offered in distance learning and on-campus courses. One of the biggest obstacles to achieving this equivalency is the recruitment of full-time faculty members to teach distance learning classes. Distance learning directors need to appeal to both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators to induce full-time faculty participation in delivering distance learning programs. Once recruited, these faculty need to be encouraged to develop creative approaches to their classes that may require shifting away from old paradigms (Travis, 2005). This shift from older paradigms places a premium on faculty preparation before participating in distance learning programs (Kidney, 2004). For example, California State University, Long Beach provides an additional \$2,200 stipend for faculty who develop online courses to offer in the distance learning program. Every full-time faculty member has, or will, participate in teaching courses in the program. All seven core classes and two of the five elective courses are taught by full-time faculty member and ten of the 12 courses are taught by faculty who hold terminal degrees.

While many of the aforementioned criticisms are certainly valid points to consider in developing

distance learning programs, they may not necessarily preclude the increasing use of distance learning instructional modes in public affairs education. A vital method of assessment consists of comparing the experiences and satisfaction levels of on-campus and distance learning students enrolled in similar classes with similar instructors. Since the CSULB MPA-DL program is offered concurrently with a traditional on-campus program, and many of the distance learning instructors also offer the same classes in a traditional on-campus version, the program offers an excellent source of preliminary information on the experiences and satisfaction levels of on-campus and distance learning students.

### The Traditional MPA Program

The Graduate Center for Public Administration and Policy (GCPPA) currently offers a traditional on-campus MPA program as well as a distance learning MPA program. The student populations enrolled in the programs are distinct and it is rare that the GCPPA will allow an on-campus student to enroll in distance learning classes. The traditional on-campus program was established in 1973 and is NASPAA accredited. The traditional program also offers an Option in Public Works and Urban Affairs as well as several certificates in areas such as Public Finance and Non-Profit Administration. The past five years have marked continued growth in the student population and, as of Fall, 2005, there are 252 students enrolled in the traditional on-campus program and an additional 20 students in the Public Works and Urban Affairs Option Programs. The majority of traditional MPA students are female (58.7%) and 93.1% of students are in good standing. The remaining 6.9% are on probation and must maintain a 3.0 GPA to return to good academic standing.

The curriculum consists of 36 units: 21 required units and 15 elective units. Required courses include an introductory course as well as courses in public budgeting, human resource management, organization theory, policy analysis, research methods, and a final directed research course that serves as a capstone for the program. Students must then choose five elective courses to complete their degrees. In Fall, 2001, the GCPPA initiated a new portfolio graduation requirement to replace the existing written comprehensive examination. In order to graduate, students must complete a four part portfolio, the cornerstone of which includes examples of their "best" work from all of their required courses. Since the inception of the portfolio requirement, graduation rates have increased from 50% to 67% and the GCPPA

graduates approximately 60-90 students per year from its traditional on-campus program.

#### The Distance Learning Program

In 1998, the GCPPA began a distance learning MPA program. The program is designed on a cohort model in which students begin the program as a cohort and progress through the program together. The fifth distance learning cohort began classes in Fall, 2004 and will complete coursework in August, 2006. The sixth distance learning cohort began its studies in Fall, 2005 and will complete the scheduled program of classes in August, 2007. This marks the first time that two cohorts are completing coursework concurrently and the combined enrollment between the two cohorts is 50 students. The program is designed to take 22 months to complete and consists of the same required courses as the traditional MPA program. Due to logistical necessity, distance learning students are not able to select their five elective courses. Rather, these "pre-selected" electives are constructed by the Distance Learning Director and all students in the cohort take the same elective courses.

The distance learning courses are offered in an accelerated format. Each course is six weeks in duration with a three hour on-campus meeting during the first week and a three hour on-campus meeting during the last week of classes. In addition to these two on-campus sessions, cohorts one through four also received instruction through one synchronous and one asynchronous session per week. The synchronous session consisted of a television broadcast utilizing fiber optics technology. Instructors broadcasted their lectures to various worksite locations throughout Los Angeles County. Students would share a microphone at each worksite that would allow limited communication with the instructor. This synchronous session would then be followed later in the week by an asynchronous session utilizing the Blackboard learning platform. Students would participate in an asynchronous discussion board posting session. This afforded students the flexibility to complete assignments and postings during the week and did not mandate that they remain at their worksite for these asynchronous sessions.

Beginning with cohort five in Fall, 2004, the broadcast sessions were replaced with a synchronous session utilizing a computer assisted instructional platform (Centra Symposium). The new Symposium technology produced a virtual classroom where students have real-time interaction with the instructor. Each student can communicate with the professor and his/her classmates through audio or text chat. The

Symposium platform allows students to indicate their desire to speak and then allows the instructor to open student microphones to facilitate discussion. Symposium is currently being used in both cohorts five and six.

Student enrollment has increased steadily in the program over the past three years. Cohorts five and six currently have 26 and 24 students respectively which represent cumulatively a 400% increase over cohort four.

The demographic profile of the students in the distance learning program is relatively similar to the profile of on-campus students. The average distance learning student is 37.2 years old as compared to an average age of 36.5 for on-campus students. Most distance learning and on-campus students hold an undergraduate degree in the social sciences. Specifically, 43.3% of distance learning students majored in a social science discipline as compared to 59% of on-campus students. The second most frequent undergraduate major is business among distance learning students (23.3%, 15.3% for on-campus students) followed by liberal arts and engineering (16.7% each, 18.2% and 2.3% respectively for on-campus students). As expected, the distance learning students enter the program with above average undergraduate point averages (Mean = 3.27) and only two students hold another advanced degree. The on-campus student undergraduate point average is a bit lower (3.1). The student population is evenly distributed on the gender variable and the average years between earning an undergraduate degree and entering the MPA program is 7 years, 10 months. Many of the students have used this time to rise to management level positions in government agencies. All of the students are currently employed in full-time positions with either government agencies or non-profit organizations. 46.7% hold management positions and most (46.7%) work for county agencies and departments. 33.3% work for city governments or city government organizations. 6.7% are federal employees and 13.3% are employed in non-governmental/non-profit organizations. This is comparable to on-campus students as 30% hold management positions and the 30.6% are city employees while 23.1% work for county government. Therefore, there are few differences between the average distance learning and on-campus student.

#### The Method

As discussed earlier, the purpose of this paper is to compare the satisfaction of students enrolled in

the MPA-DL with the satisfaction of their counterparts in the traditional on-campus MPA program. One of the most vexing problems in distance learning research is the lack of comparability between the courses offered in distance learning and traditional MPA programs. While many programs have distance learning MPA programs and compile satisfaction indicators for students enrolled in these programs, it is usually not possible to compare equivalent classes across the two student populations. The CSULB MPA-DL program's curriculum is nearly identical to the curriculum offered to traditional on-campus students. Specifically, the core courses are identical and are often taught by the same instructors. This study explores the student satisfaction scores for four (4) core courses that are offered in both the distance learning and on-campus programs. These courses include an introductory/foundations course, a course in public budgeting and finance, a course in research methods, and a policy analysis course.

To ensure comparability of content, the syllabus for each of these courses is examined to assess several factors that could threaten the comparability of the courses. First, the syllabi are examined to determine the number and type of assignments used. Each of these classes utilize essay based examinations, practical exercises, and a portfolio assignment that requires students to integrate salient aspects of the course into a practical assignment. The length of the assignments is equivalent between all four classes. Second, the syllabi are examined to determine the amount of reading required of students. Each course requires two textbooks and the weekly required reading is approximately 100 pages. Third, to determine the style of content delivery, the researcher chose to observe and/or participate in the distance learning versions of three of the four courses. Each course is a primarily lecture based course that affords ample opportunity for student participation. The comparability is also assured through informal interviews with the instructors to determine their assessment of the equivalency of the distance learning and on-campus versions of the course. The primary differences between the distance learning and on-campus class offerings include the medium of delivery and the accelerated nature of the distance learning class. While on-campus courses encompass 15 weeks of instruction, distance learning courses involve only 6 weeks of direct instruction. Given the demographic equivalency of the distance learning and on-campus student populations and the equivalency of the course material and instructors, it is highly likely that any differences in student satisfaction between distance learning and on-campus students will be attributable to either the method of instruction native to distance learning or the manner in which the instructor uses of the Symposium and

Blackboard technology.

Once the equivalency of the courses is established, each distance learning class is then compared to two equivalent on-campus sections of the same course offered by the same instructor in the same semester. Data are collected from student evaluation of instruction surveys that are routinely distributed during the last two weeks of each class. The surveys used in the study were conducted in Spring semester, 2005 and Fall semester, 2005. The survey questions are listed in Appendix A and B. The first eight questions are university required questions and appear on both the distance learning and on-campus surveys. These questions measure student satisfaction of various aspects of the course including clarity of course objectives, consistency of grading, usefulness of assignments, reasonability of instructor expectations, instructor preparation, instructor effectiveness in presenting content, instructor availability, and a measure of the overall effectiveness of the instructor. The optional questions (normally questions 9-13) differ between the distance learning and on-campus evaluations. Question 9 on the distance learning survey measures the effectiveness of the Symposium software used in the weekly synchronous, interactive sessions. Question 10 measures student satisfaction of the Blackboard software that is used in the weekly asynchronous sessions. Question 11 assesses the usefulness of the course in improving a student's understanding of concepts in the field. This question appears as Question 9 on the on-campus survey. Question 12 measures the students' assessment of the instructor's knowledge of the course subject. This question appears as Question 10 on the on-campus survey. All of the questions with the exception of the question regarding overall teaching effectiveness (Question 8) are scored on a Likert scale with a score of 5 indicating "Strongly Agree" and a score of 1 indicating "Strongly Disagree". Student satisfaction with the overall teaching effectiveness of the instructor is also measured with a Likert scale with a score of 5 indicating "Excellent" and a score of 1 indicating "Poor" for the on-campus surveys and a score of 5 indicating "Most Effective" and a score of 1 indicating "Least Effective" for the distance learning surveys.

The surveys are not required and students may opt out of submitting the survey. The on-campus student response rate is 82% (124 out of 151 possible respondents completed the survey). The distance learning student response rate is 44% (42 out of 96 possible respondents completed the survey). This difference in response rates is primarily attributable to the method of survey administration. For on-campus courses, instructors distribute the hard copy of the survey during the last two weeks of classes. According

to university policy, instructors may not be present while evaluations are completed and a proctor seals and signs the envelope before returning it to the GCPPA Office. Beginning in Fall, 2004, distance learning students complete their student evaluation surveys on-line. The Distance Learning Director creates the evaluation form using the survey function in Blackboard. Students then log into the Blackboard site to complete their survey during the two weeks between courses. The self-directed nature of completing the distance learning surveys may certainly contribute to the lower response rates among distance learning students. However, the distance learning students are still assured anonymity and confidentiality of responses.

#### Caveat

Obviously, given the relatively small sample sizes reflected in Tables 1-8, statistical significance is difficult to achieve. The data are analyzed with descriptive statistics as well as t-tests for independent sample means with unequal variance. While the tables note the levels of statistical significance of the t-values, caution should be used in asserting statistical significance given these sample sizes. These results should be viewed as exploratory in nature and represent an initial glimpse into the satisfaction levels of distance learning and on-campus students enrolled in equivalent courses. No attempt is made in this study to measure learning outcomes. The focus is merely to identify any important differences in the satisfaction levels of students enrolled in these two programs but not to assert statistical significance in any of the findings. The t-values are merely reported for illustrative purposes only.

#### Findings

Table 1 presents the mean scores and standard deviations for Course A (an introductory level on-campus class) and the introductory level distance learning course. Both of these courses are taught by the same instructor during the same semester. The mean satisfaction levels are higher among the distance learning students for every question with the exception of Question 4. On-campus student satisfaction with the reasonableness of the instructor's expectations is marginally higher than distance learning student satisfaction. Other than this one exception, distance learning student satisfaction is marginally higher than on-campus satisfaction for all aspects of the course. However, the differences are certainly rather small.

The only sizable difference in satisfaction levels concerns Question 3. Distance learning students express much higher satisfaction levels with the usefulness of assignments than their on-campus counterparts.

**Table 1**

**Mean Student Satisfaction Responses of an Introductory On-Campus (Course A) and an Introductory Distance Learning MPA Course**

Question #	On-Campus n = 18	Distance Learning n = 8	t-value
#1 Instructor Information	4.58 (.61)	4.87 (.71)	.967
#2 Instructor Grading	4.47 (.62)	4.87 (.35)	2.078
#3 Useful Assignments	3.94 (1.19)	4.875 (.35)	3.388*
#4 Instructor Expectations	4.47 (.80)	4.37 (.74)	-.278
#5 Instructor Preparation	4.70 (.58)	4.87 (.35)	.902
#6 Effective Presentation	4.35 (.25)	4.87 (.35)	2.60
#7 Instructor Availability	4.64 (.63)	4.75 (.46)	.474
#8 Overall Teaching Effectiveness	4.35 (.78)	4.87 (.35)	2.629
#9 Understanding	4.38 (.85)	4.87 (.35)	1.678
#10 Instructor Knowledge	4.77 (.42)	4.875 (.35)	.629

\* =  $p < .05$

\*\* =  $p < .01$

\*\*\* =  $p < .001$

Note: Standard deviations appear in parentheses.

Note: The full text of the survey questions may be found in Appendix A.

The same distance learning class offering is then compared to another section of the introductory level on-campus class from the same semester (Course B) in Table 2. Again, the distance learning students express higher satisfaction levels than on-campus students for eight out of the ten questions. The exceptions to this pattern are question 2 (satisfaction with the consistency of instructor grading standards) and question 5 (satisfaction with instructor preparation). However, as is the case with Course A, the differences are all small and distance learning students are at least as satisfied as their on-campus counterparts.

**Table 2**

**Mean Student Satisfaction Responses of an Introductory On-Campus Course (Course B) and an Introductory Distance Learning MPA Course**

Question #	On-Campus n = 11	Distance Learning n = 8	t-value
#1 Instructor Information	4.63 (.50)	4.87 (.71)	.790
#2 Instructor Grading	4.90 (.30)	4.87 (.35)	-.152
#3 Useful Assignments	4.30 (.82)	4.875 (.35)	.772
#4 Instructor Expectations	4.18 (1.07)	4.37 (.74)	.563
#5 Instructor Preparation	4.90 (.30)	4.87 (.35)	-.099
#6 Effective Presentation	4.54 (.68)	4.87 (.35)	1.324
#7 Instructor Availability	4.54 (.68)	4.75 (.46)	.805
#8 Overall Teaching Effectiveness	4.45 (.68)	4.87 (.35)	1.816
#9 Understanding	4.36 (.80)	4.87 (.35)	2.614
#10 Instructor Knowledge	4.72 (.46)	4.875 (.35)	.750

\* =  $p < .05$

\*\* =  $p < .01$

\*\*\* =  $p < .001$

Note: Standard deviations appear in parentheses.

Note: The full text of the survey questions may be found in Appendix A.

Tables 3 and 4 show the student satisfaction means for a research methods course (Courses C and D). The instructor for this course is different than the instructor for Courses A and B. For this instructor, student satisfaction scores are lower among distance learning students for all of the questions on each survey with the exception of Question #9 in both tables. For Question #9 (Did the course increase your understanding in this field?), the distance learning student satisfaction level is marginally higher than on-campus student satisfaction. However, this difference is still very small. In fact, only one of the differences is large in Table 3 (Question #3). On-campus students are much more satisfied with the usefulness of assignments than their distance learning counterparts. However, in Table 4, the differences between on-campus and distance learning students are substantial for six of the ten questions on the survey. While the pattern from Table 3 remains intact, namely that distance learning satisfaction levels are routinely lower

than on-campus levels for this instructor, some of the differences in Table 4 are much larger than they were for the students in Table 3. This is interesting to note as the course remained identical between the two classes.

**Table 3**

**Mean Student Satisfaction Responses of a Research Methods On-Campus Course (Course C) and a Research Methods Distance Learning MPA Course**

Question #	On-Campus n = 22	Distance Learning n = 11	t-value
#1 Instructor Information	4.72 (.70)	4.45 (.52)	-1.14
#2 Instructor Grading	4.72 (.70)	4.36 (.50)	-1.53
#3 Useful Assignments	4.77 (.68)	4.27 (.47)	-2.17*
#4 Instructor Expectations	4.63 (.90)	4.54 (.52)	-.308
#5 Instructor Preparation	4.77 (.14)	4.54 (.52)	-.966
#6 Effective Presentation	4.54 (.18)	4.18 (.60)	-1.25
#7 Instructor Availability	4.80 (.11)	4.45 (.52)	-1.76
#8 Overall Teaching Effectiveness	4.63 (.16)	4.27 (.47)	-1.40
#9 Understanding	4.50 (.80)	4.54 (.52)	.170
#10 Instructor Knowledge	4.85 (.65)	4.18 (.75)	-2.24*

\* =  $p < .05$

\*\* =  $p < .01$

\*\*\* =  $p < .001$

Note: Standard deviations appear in parentheses.

Note: The full text of the survey questions may be found in Appendix A.

**Table 4**

**Mean Student Satisfaction Responses of a Research Methods On-Campus Course (Course D) and a Research Methods Distance Learning MPA Course**

Question #	On-Campus n = 22	Distance Learning n = 11	t-value
#1 Instructor Information	4.85 (.47)	4.45 (.52)	-2.19*
#2 Instructor Grading	4.71 (.64)	4.36 (.50)	-1.57
#3 Useful Assignments	4.76 (.52)	4.27 (.47)	-2.28*
#4 Instructor Expectations	4.71 (.64)	4.54 (.52)	-.749
#5 Instructor Preparation	4.90 (.30)	4.54 (.52)	-2.48*
#6 Effective Presentation	4.71 (.90)	4.18 (.60)	-1.76
#7 Instructor Availability	4.85 (.35)	4.45 (.52)	-2.57*
#8 Overall Teaching Effectiveness	4.81 (.68)	4.27 (.47)	-2.34*
#9 Understanding	4.50 (.96)	4.54 (.52)	.885
#10 Instructor Knowledge	4.95 (.21)	4.18 (.75)	-3.85***

\* = p<.05

\*\* = p<.01

\*\*\* = p<.001

Note: Standard deviations appear in parentheses.

Note: The full text of the survey questions may be found in Appendix A.

Tables 5 and 6 represent the student satisfaction means for a core public budgeting and finance course (Courses E and F). The instructor for these courses is the same instructor for Courses C and D.

Again, Tables 5 and 6 show a pattern of lower levels of satisfaction among distance learning students (18 out of 20 questions). However, the vast majority of differences (16 out of 20 questions) are small.

**Table 5**

**Mean Student Satisfaction Responses of a Public Budgeting On-Campus Course (Course E) and a Public Budgeting Distance Learning MPA Course**

Question #	On-Campus n = 17	Distance Learning n = 8	t-value
#1 Instructor Information	4.94 (.24)	4.50 (.75)	-2.22*
#2 Instructor Grading	4.94 (.24)	4.75 (.46)	-1.37
#3 Useful Assignments	4.76 (.43)	4.62 (.52)	-.704
#4 Instructor Expectations	4.76 (.43)	4.62 (.74)	-.593
#5 Instructor Preparation	5.00 (.00)	4.62 (.74)	-2.13*
#6 Effective Presentation	4.76 (.43)	4.5 (1.07)	-.890
#7 Instructor Availability	4.93 (.25)	4.75 (.71)	-.911
#8 Overall Teaching Effectiveness	5.00 (.00)	4.37 (1.19)	-2.22*
#9 Understanding	4.80 (.41)	4.5 (1.07)	-.974
#10 Instructor Knowledge	5.00 (.00)	4.87 (.35)	-.454

\* = p<.05

\*\* = p<.01

\*\*\* = p<.001

Note: Standard deviations appear in parentheses.

Note: The full text of the survey questions may be found in Appendix A.

**Table 6**

**Mean Student Satisfaction Responses of a Public Budgeting On-Campus Course (Course F) and a Public Budgeting Distance Learning MPA Course**

Question #	On-Campus n = 18	Distance Learning n = 8	t-value
#1 Instructor Information	4.94 (.23)	4.50 (.75)	-1.87
#2 Instructor Grading	4.83 (.38)	4.75 (.46)	-.440
#3 Useful Assignments	4.83 (.38)	4.62 (.52)	-1.15
#4 Instructor Expectations	4.88 (.32)	4.62 (.74)	-1.28
#5 Instructor Preparation	5.00 (.00)	4.62 (.74)	-2.20*
#6 Effective Presentation	4.94 (.23)	4.5 (1.07)	-1.71
#7 Instructor Availability	4.82 (.39)	4.75 (.71)	-.337
#8 Overall Teaching Effectiveness	4.83 (.38)	4.37 (1.19)	-1.50
#9 Understanding	4.47 (.87)	4.5 (1.07)	1.06
#10 Instructor Knowledge	4.77 (.54)	4.87 (.35)	.789

\* =  $p < .05$

\*\* =  $p < .01$

\*\*\* =  $p < .001$

Note: Standard deviations appear in parentheses.

Note: The full text of the survey questions may be found in Appendix A.

Finally, Tables 7 and 8 show the student satisfaction means for a core policy analysis course (Courses G and H). The instructor for these courses is the same instructor who offered the introductory courses discussed earlier. As is the case with the introductory course students, distance learning students in the policy analysis course express higher levels of satisfaction than their on-campus counterparts on 14 out of 20 questions. Again, these differences are minor for 17 out of the 20 combined questions.

**Table 7**

**Mean Student Satisfaction Responses of a Policy Analysis On-Campus Course (Course G) and a Policy Analysis Distance Learning MPA Course**

Question #	On-Campus n = 9	Distance Learning n = 15	t-value
#1 Instructor Information	4.33 (1.11)	4.60 (.63)	1.39
#2 Instructor Grading	4.55 (.88)	4.80 (.56)	.186
#3 Useful Assignments	4.00 (1.11)	4.60 (.91)	1.44
#4 Instructor Expectations	3.44 (1.5)	4.07 (1.53)	.968
#5 Instructor Preparation	4.55 (1.01)	4.80 (.56)	.826
#6 Effective Presentation	4.22 (1.30)	4.40 (.91)	.688
#7 Instructor Availability	4.55 (.72)	5.00 (.00)	2.41*
#8 Overall Teaching Effectiveness	4.11 (1.05)	4.67 (1.05)	2.92**
#9 Understanding	4.22 (1.09)	4.73 (.46)	2.35*
#10 Instructor Knowledge	4.55 (1.01)	5.00 (.00)	1.39

\* =  $p < .05$

\*\* =  $p < .01$

\*\*\* =  $p < .001$

Note: Standard deviations appear in parentheses.

Note: The full text of the survey questions may be found in Appendix A.

**Table 8**

**Mean Student Satisfaction Responses of a Policy Analysis On-Campus Course (Course H) and a Policy Analysis Distance Learning MPA Course**

Question #	On-Campus n = 7	Distance Learning n = 15	t-value
#1 Instructor Information	4.71 (.48)	4.60 (.63)	-.421
#2 Instructor Grading	4.85 (.37)	4.80 (.56)	-.243
#3 Useful Assignments	4.71 (.48)	4.60 (.91)	-.309
#4 Instructor Expectations	4.42 (.78)	4.07 (1.53)	-.584
#5 Instructor Preparation	4.85 (.37)	4.80 (.56)	-.243
#6 Effective Presentation	4.57 (.53)	4.40 (.91)	-.765
#7 Instructor Availability	4.85 (.37)	5.00 (.00)	1.51
#8 Overall Teaching Effectiveness	4.57 (.53)	4.67 (1.05)	.225
#9 Understanding	4.42 (.78)	4.73 (.46)	.734
#10 Instructor Knowledge	4.85 (.37)	5.00 (.00)	.556

\* = p<.05

\*\* = p<.01

\*\*\* = p<.001

Note: Standard deviations appear in parentheses.

Note: The full text of the survey questions may be found in Appendix A.

After reviewing the tables, it becomes apparent that the satisfaction levels of distance learning and on-campus students are very similar. The differences are rather negligible in 66 out of 80 questions (82.5%). The next step is to analyze the questions where larger than anticipated differences are noted to uncover any discernable patterns in the data. Of the 14 large differences, three of the differences come in the form of Question 3. However, the directionality is different between instructors. While distance learning students are more satisfied with the usefulness of assignments for the instructor in the introductory course, they are less satisfied with the assignments used in the research methods course. Two of the 14 larger than expected differences involve the instructor preparation question (Question 5) in the public budgeting course. Again these differences are seen only for this instructor in this particular course and do not appear to be part of any larger pattern in the data. Another question that involves large differences

between distance learning and on-campus students is Question 8. This question measures the overall teaching effectiveness of the instructor. The mean on this question is lower among on-campus students in only one of the on-campus sections of the public budgeting course (Course E). The opposite is true for Course G (an on-campus policy analysis course) as the distance learning students are actually more satisfied with the teaching effectiveness of this instructor than distance learning students.

The most obvious pattern to the data does not involve the mode of instruction (distance learning or on-campus) but, rather, the instructors. The instructor for Courses A,B,G, and H received more favorable evaluations from distance learning students on 31 out of 40 possible questions (77.5%). The content of the question does not appear to impact the student satisfaction levels. For this instructor, distance learning students are more satisfied than on-campus students with most aspects of the course measured by the survey. However, as mentioned previously, these differences are marginal at best. Interestingly, the opposite is true for the instructor in Courses C, D, E, and F. In this instance, the instructor received higher satisfaction ratings from distance learning students in only four out of 40 possible questions (10%).

#### Discussion and Implications

As mentioned earlier, the small sample sizes and unique setting preclude reasonable assertions of statistical significance. However, anecdotally, the data do suggest that the instructor may be a more important variable to consider in evaluating student satisfaction with distance learning MPA education than the mode of instructional delivery. The most obvious pattern in the data suggests that distance learning students respond to the instructor more so than the method of delivery used. The mode of delivery for all four distance learning courses is essentially identical. The students receive the same number and duration of synchronous and asynchronous sessions. The delivery method for all of the courses in this analysis is primarily lecture based and the assignments require equivalent amounts of work and academic rigor. The primary variation between these courses is the instructor. Therefore, it is interesting to note any differences in the experience or preparation level of the instructors. Both instructors are tenured full-time faculty members with more than ten years each of full-time faculty experience teaching in MPA programs. Instructor 1 has taught in the MPA program since its inception in 1998. Instructor 2 has taught in the program since 2001 but has also taught Courses C, D, E, and F in online versions using multiple

asynchronous platforms in addition to Blackboard. Instructors 1 and 2 both use Blackboard extensively in their on-campus classes however both instructors only began using the synchronous Symposium software in Fall, 2004. Therefore, both instructors have limited experience using the synchronous software platform but extensive experience utilizing Blackboard. Given these different levels of experience, it is interesting to note if distance learning students are more satisfied with the synchronous or asynchronous aspects of the instructors' delivery. As seen in Table 9, student satisfaction of the asynchronous element of the introductory and policy analysis courses is marginally higher than the student satisfaction levels for the synchronous element. However, the satisfaction levels for both elements are higher for the policy analysis course (which is offered as the third course in the program) than for the introductory course (which is the first course offered in the program sequence). A similar increase in satisfaction levels is evident for the research methods course as well. The student satisfaction with both synchronous and asynchronous elements increased for Instructor 2 between the research methods course (the second course offered in the program sequence) and the public budgeting course (the fourth course offered in the program sequence). This difference may be attributable to the students becoming more comfortable with the synchronous and asynchronous elements as they progress through the program as well as an increase in the comfort level of the instructors in using these types of technologies. However, any advantage that emerges from instructor experience using these technologies may be temporal in nature. Examining future satisfaction levels for these instructors on these questions will better determine the longevity of these increases.

**Table 9**  
**Mean Student Satisfaction with the Technology Used in Distance Learning Courses**

Question	Introductory Course	Research Methods Course	Policy Analysis Course	Public Budgeting Course
#9 – The Symposium sessions enhanced student learning	4.29	4.47	4.58	4.53
#10 – The Blackboard sessions enhanced student learning.	4.37	4.44	4.67	4.6

## Conclusion

Therefore, the results of this exploratory study indicate that there are few substantial differences between the satisfaction levels of distance learning and on-campus students. Despite the different modes of delivery and the accelerated nature of the distance learning program, both distance learning and on-campus students are highly satisfied with the quality and delivery of the four courses analyzed in this study. The only discernable pattern to this preliminary data is the variation in the directionality of the satisfaction levels. It appears that satisfaction is more a function of the instructor in the course rather than the mode of delivery. As the database expands and more surveys are added to the study, it will be interesting to see if this pattern continues. If it does, the implications may be important for public affairs distance education. Rather than focusing on the merits of the delivery mode itself; perhaps an emphasis should be placed on assisting instructors in adapting to these new technologies. Additionally, distance learning programs may want to place additional emphasis on recruiting faculty who already possess an interest in computer assisted instruction. While experience in using the particular method of computer assisted instruction is certainly useful, it is likely that the initial advantages afforded by this experience are temporary. The desire to utilize this technology to its fullest potential is perhaps more important than prior experience.

This preliminary research lends itself to the existing compendium of studies that document little difference between the satisfaction levels of distance learning and on-campus students. As this research expands, the debate will hopefully expand beyond a discussion of the feasibility or sagacity of distance learning public affairs education. Distance learning is undoubtedly here to stay and our future focus should be on how to better enhance the distance learning experience for MPA students through instructor preparation and course design. The march of this new technology will not stop so it is incumbent on public affairs educators to learn how to best harness this new technology to help enhance civic education and achieve DiIulio and Kettl's vision of rediscovering government.

**Appendix A**  
**On-Campus Course Evaluation**

Instructions: This form is provided for you to use in evaluating the instructor of this course. A summary of the evaluations from all students in this class and this evaluation will be read by your instructor only after the semester grades have been submitted. Please be candid in your responses. These evaluations are used to assess the quality of teaching by this instructor as perceived by students. Responses may be used in making personnel decisions regarding your instructor. **IF ANY PERSON(S) HAS TRIED TO INFLUENCE YOUR RATINGS ON THIS EVALUATION THROUGH SUBSTANTIVE ADVICE OR INSTRUCTION AS TO WHAT RATINGS YOU SHOULD GIVE, YOU SHOULD REPORT THAT PERSON(S) TO THE DEPARTMENT CHAIR OR OTHER UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATOR SO APPROPRIATE ADMINISTRATIVE ACTION MAY BE TAKEN.**

1. Instructor provided clear and accurate information regarding course objectives, requirements and grading procedures.

5 = Strongly Agree  
4  
3  
2  
1 = Strongly Disagree  
N/A

2. The instructor's grading was consistent with stated criteria and procedures.

5 = Strongly Agree  
4  
3  
2  
1 = Strongly Disagree  
N/A

3. The instructor provided assignments/activities that were useful for learning and understanding the subject.

5 = Strongly Agree  
4  
3  
2  
1 = Strongly Disagree  
N/A

4. The instructor's expectations concerning work to be done in this course were reasonable.

5 = Strongly Agree  
4  
3  
2  
1 = Strongly Disagree  
N/A

5. The instructor was well prepared for class.

5 = Strongly Agree  
4  
3  
2  
1 = Strongly Disagree  
N/A

6. The instructor was effective in presenting subject content and materials in the class.

5 = Strongly Agree  
4  
3  
2  
1 = Strongly Disagree  
N/A

7. The instructor was available during posted office hours for conferences about the course.

5 = Strongly Agree  
4  
3  
2  
1 = Strongly Disagree  
N/A

8. Rate the overall teaching effectiveness of the instructor in this course.

5 = Excellent  
4  
3  
2  
1 = Poor  
N/A

9. This course improved my understanding of concepts and principles in this field

5 = Strongly Agree  
4  
3  
2  
1 = Strongly Disagree  
N/A

10. The instructor's knowledge of the subject was excellent.

5 = Strongly Agree  
4  
3  
2  
1 = Strongly Disagree  
N/A

**Appendix B**  
**Distance Learning Course Evaluation**

Instructions: This form is provided for you to use in evaluating the instructor of this course. A summary of the evaluations from all students in this class and this evaluation will be read by your instructor only after the semester grades have been submitted. Please be candid in your responses. These evaluations are used to assess the quality of teaching by this instructor as perceived by students. Responses may be used in making personnel decisions regarding your instructor. **IF ANY PERSON(S) HAS TRIED TO INFLUENCE YOUR RATINGS ON THIS EVALUATION THROUGH SUBSTANTIVE ADVICE OR INSTRUCTION AS TO WHAT RATINGS YOU SHOULD GIVE, YOU SHOULD REPORT THAT PERSON(S) TO THE DEPARTMENT CHAIR OR OTHER UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATOR SO APPROPRIATE ADMINISTRATIVE ACTION MAY BE TAKEN.**

1. Instructor provided clear and accurate information regarding course objectives, requirements and grading procedures.

5 = Strongly Agree  
4  
3  
2  
1 = Strongly Disagree  
N/A

2. The instructor's grading was consistent with stated criteria and procedures.

5 = Strongly Agree  
4  
3  
2  
1 = Strongly Disagree  
N/A

3. The instructor provided assignments/activities that were useful for learning and understanding the subject.

5 = Strongly Agree  
4  
3  
2  
1 = Strongly Disagree  
N/A

4. The instructor's expectations concerning work to be done in this course were reasonable.

5 = Strongly Agree  
4  
3  
2  
1 = Strongly Disagree  
N/A

5. The instructor was well prepared for class.

- 5 = Strongly Agree  
4  
3  
2  
1 = Strongly Disagree  
N/A
6. The instructor was effective in presenting subject content and materials in the class.
- 5 = Strongly Agree  
4  
3  
2  
1 = Strongly Disagree  
N/A
7. The instructor was available during posted office hours for conferences about the course.
- 5 = Strongly Agree  
4  
3  
2  
1 = Strongly Disagree  
N/A
8. Rate the overall teaching effectiveness of the instructor in this course.
- 5 = Excellent  
4  
3  
2  
1 = Poor  
N/A
9. The Symposium sessions enhanced student learning.
- 5 = Strongly Agree  
4  
3  
2  
1 = Strongly Disagree  
N/A
10. The Blackboard sessions enhanced student learning.
- 5 = Strongly Agree  
4  
3  
2  
1 = Strongly Disagree  
N/A
11. This course improved my understanding of concepts and principles in this field

5 = Strongly Agree  
4  
3  
2  
1 = Strongly Disagree  
N/A

12. The instructor's knowledge of the subject was excellent.

5 = Strongly Agree  
4  
3  
2  
1 = Strongly Disagree  
N/A

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