

November 2021

Students' Perceptions of Online Learning to Inform Jesuit Education

Arthur Ko PhD

University of Detroit Mercy, koar@udmercy.edu

Mitzi M. Saunders PhD

University of Detroit Mercy

Nadia Saadat PhD

Wayne State University

See next page for additional authors

Follow this and additional works at: <https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe>



Part of the [Online and Distance Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ko, Arthur, Mitzi M. Saunders, Nadia Saadat, Elizabeth L. Royal, Jennifer L. Dean, and Rick Acevedo. "Students' Perceptions of Online Learning to Inform Jesuit Education." *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* 10, 2 (2021). doi:-.

This Scholarship is brought to you for free and open access by the Scholarly and Peer-Reviewed Journals at ePublications at Regis University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal by an authorized administrator of ePublications at Regis University. For more information, please contact epublications@regis.edu.

Students' Perceptions of Online Learning to Inform Jesuit Education

Cover Page Footnote

Work reported in this publication was supported by the National Institutes of Health Common Fund and Office of Scientific Workforce Diversity under three linked awards 2RL5GM118981-06, 2TL4GM118983-06, and 2UL1GM118982-06 administered by the National Institute of General Medical Sciences.

Authors

Arthur Ko PhD, Mitzi M. Saunders PhD, Nadia Saadat PhD, Elizabeth L. Royal, Jennifer L. Dean PhD, and Rick Acevedo EdD

Students' Perceptions of Online Learning to Inform Jesuit Education

Arthur Ko
Associate Professor
University of Detroit Mercy
kab9237@gmail.com

Mitzi M. Saunders
Professor & Graduate Coordinator, AG-CNS
University of Detroit Mercy
saundemm@udmercy.edu

Nadia Saadat
Part-Time Faculty
Wayne State University
nads@wayne.edu

Elizabeth L. Royal
Instructional Designer
University of Detroit Mercy
royalel@udmercy.edu

Jennifer L. Dean
Dean of Libraries & Instructional Technology
University of Detroit Mercy
deanjl@udmercy.edu

Rick Acevedo
Career, Co-Op & Entrepreneurial Director
College of Engineering & Science
University of Detroit Mercy
acevedri@udmercy.edu

Abstract

A small group of faculty, staff, and administrators, known as the Online Learning Community (OLC), were collectively interested in enriching online learning at a Jesuit university. With a culture at this Jesuit and Mercy university driven by face-to-face (F2F) learning, the first step was to assess students' perceptions of online learning from students who have taken online courses at the university. The survey, guided by best instructor practices in online learning and Jesuit philosophy, traditions, and concepts, was designed to explore students' perceptions, experiences, and practices in online learning. Students (N=484) self-enrolled in the study and included students from all the colleges in the university and across four campuses. The most notable response in the data was students' (72%) desire for more online learning opportunities at the host university. The freedom and flexibility afforded in online classes was prevalent in students' open-ended statements about online learning but students additionally emphasized the importance of instructor qualities of being organized in course delivery, availability, and effective communication skills. In this study, OLC members sought to place students' perceptions at the core of efforts to inform online learning at this Jesuit and Mercy university. The findings enrich and demonstrate linkages with core Jesuit traditions and concepts.

Background Information

In the spring of 2019, a group of faculty, staff, and administrators at a Catholic university began meeting as a learning community (LC). This university is a member of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities (AJCU) in higher education in the United States. The LC was initiated by an instructor with over 20 years of teaching experience and 13 years exclusive to online pedagogy in an online graduate nursing program at the host university. Being able to educate nurses from across the United States and in Canada to deliver expert, holistic nursing care for vulnerable older adults was a primary reason to

provide a 100% online format. This instructor has experienced success with program achievements of consecutive years of 100% pass rates from graduates on national certification examinations, very positive student satisfaction reports, and student testimonials of personal growth, commitment to serving others, and social justice efforts that emanate from being a student in the program. From this instructor's perspective, successes were due to the personalized care afforded every student from admission to graduation and as alumni when support is still needed. Graduates return the favor by functioning as volunteer mentors for current students. Overall, this instructor perceived the use of Jesuit values

(*cura personalis*, the *magis*, discernment) as routine in the conduct of this online program. Discernment (stemming from this instructor's own experience in the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises) is a tool used to develop deeper thinkers and change agents of care for the health of populations of patients. In totality, witnessing great achievements among graduates from this online program led this instructor to urge the host university forward with an LC to investigate online learning at this Jesuit and Mercy university and ultimately demonstrate how Jesuit values impact the online learning experience. The initiative received a small grant to move forward.

An LC is an intentionally created group designed to foster community and communication through formal and informal meetings and learning opportunities.¹ The members of this LC, known as the Online Learning Community (OLC), were collectively interested in enriching online learning at the host university. Because the culture at this particular university is driven by face-to-face (F2F) learning, it was determined that the first step should be an assessment of students' perceptions of online learning from students who have taken online courses at the university. Thus, the OLC members designed a study to learn more about the university's students' experiences and perceptions of online education to inform our Jesuit educational philosophy. OLC members hoped to gather information on students' perceptions to help instructors and administrators discern their own perceptions of online learning, again in a predominantly F2F university setting. This study illustrates the OLC's first step to enriching Jesuit traditions in online pedagogy and growing online learning opportunities at the host university.

Literature Review

To our knowledge, a study on students' perceptions of online learning in the Jesuit traditions does not exist. Thus, key concepts in successful online learning were reviewed to guide the formation of this study as well as Jesuit philosophy, perspectives, and concepts that would be important in online learning at a Jesuit institution of higher education—the host university.

Best Practices in Online Learning

Key concepts presented in the online literature are associated with instructor qualities—social presence, organizational skills, and effective communication. In a virtual classroom, the social presence by instructors is crucial for establishing a positive learning environment—where a digital communication space is developed as the setting for online pedagogy. In online learning, knowledge is created and transferred virtually as a result of finding solutions and working together toward common goals (meeting course objectives and personal goals).² Through the active presence of the instructor, information is readily shared and students inclined to be more engaged in the learning process. This is an important recipe for successful online learning.

Besides social presence, students are more likely to have a successful online experience if the online environment is well organized.³ Thus, organizational skills by the instructor and in course design are critical.⁴ This requires a seamless course navigation where students can readily and easily access the information they need in an online course. Through structured course design and course planning, the instructor actively guides students through the course from the first day.⁵ This additionally includes a well-structured syllabus and instruction that complements the organization of online content.⁶ The syllabus needs to provide clear expectations and directions to students in accomplishing course objectives and requirements. In this regard, the need for clear communication in the course syllabus and at the virtual site is critical for students to stay abreast of course requirements and expectations. Thus, it is not enough to be socially present alone, but to also be well-organized in all aspects of an online course.

Finally, online instructors must incorporate optimal communication skills for success in online learning.⁷ Students feel connected to the course when instructors communicate with them on a routine basis and students expect frequent communication and feedback from the instructor.⁸ Being available and communicating frequently with students is associated with a positive online learning environment.⁹ Overall, the literature supports the importance of ongoing instructor

presence and engagement with students, a well-organized course, and ongoing and effective communication.

Jesuit Philosophy, Perspectives, and Concepts That Inform Online Learning

There are three important Jesuit concepts to consider in online learning: (1) care of the whole person (*cura personalis*), (2) striving to do more for God and for our neighbors (the *magis*), and (3) the formation of strong character through discernment. These Jesuit values continuously frame the teaching-learning experience and are reflected in students' achievement of learning objectives and whole person formation. The succeeding section provides a description of these values and how they assist in informing online learning and their contribution to the design of this study as noted in that section of this paper. *Cura personalis* is a Latin phrase meaning "care for the person." People need to be treated as individuals taking into account their unique differences.¹⁰ The role of instructors in a Jesuit university goes beyond articulating course content but additionally incorporates the attributes of caring, empathetic mentoring, and relationship-building.¹¹ Finally, in the practice of *cura personalis*, developing trust between the instructor and student is of prime importance. Thus, the need for engagement and effort to communicate with and get to know online students is vital to implementing this value.

The *magis* is a Latin word that means "more," and it expresses the ideal of always seeking what gives more glory to God and would be the better choice and have a better impact on the world.¹² Jesuit institutions reflect upon the importance of serving the people with the utmost concern to uplift spirits and glorify God through students' actions in helping others. An instructor's preparation, training, and continuous improvement in the conduct of an online course builds efforts exemplifying the Jesuit value of the *magis* in striving to do more for God and others. For these reasons, students' perceptions of instructor qualities related to online offerings at any Jesuit institution of higher education would be important information so instructors can better meet students' needs. With this information, instructors can modify their approach and courses

to better guide students towards the *magis* in their own uniqueness towards the universal good.¹³ Finally, the *magis* is about action or mobility and going where the needs of others are, so being accessible to learners who need online options who might otherwise not be able to access programs is important.¹⁴

Discernment is a process that helps one to seek God's direction for guidance in one's daily life.¹⁵ It is an important habit for instructors and students to engage in regularly. Discernment is a prayerful "pondering" or "mulling over" of the options facing oneself—options to understand in one's heart as God might see them.¹⁶ In online learning, students are faced with a unique set of challenges adjusting to the demands of online learning rather than F2F learning. Self-motivation is important for students in online courses when showing up for coursework each week is self-determined rather than a specific day, time, and classroom as in F2F learning. For instructors, setting up a successful online course is contingent upon clarity, communication, organization, direction, guidance, and social presence provided by instructors.¹⁷ Regular discernment becomes important for online instructors as they make important decisions on how best to deliver courses online and meet students' needs for whole person development, virtually.

Purpose of the Study

Overall, using key concepts for instructors in online learning and Jesuit education philosophy, the study was designed with the hope of enriching online learning at the host university and providing an opportunity for replicability in other Jesuit institutions of higher education. Specifically, the purpose of the study was to: 1) understand students' perceptions and experiences in taking online courses at the host university located in the Midwestern region of the United States, 2) develop further strategies utilizing Jesuit educational philosophy and traditions to inform and enrich online learning, and 3) increase the viability of the university's online programs.

Methods

Data Collection and Sample

The sample student population consists of approximately 5,080 students. Data were collected via an anonymous survey during the spring of 2019. Participants (N=484) were self-selected from the undergraduate and graduate student population from all four campuses using multiple methods: an email announcement to all the student listservs, a link on the Learning Management System (LMS)(Blackboard) home page, and flyers posted in the departments and buildings with QR codes that could be scanned with a cell phone and would take students directly to the survey. All students enrolled at the university were invited to participate.

The study received Institutional Review Board approval from the host university. Online consent was presented before starting the survey, and only students 18 years old and older were allowed to participate. All survey data were non-sensitive information regarding the respondents' perceptions toward online learning as well as their personal experiences in online courses. The survey was anonymous; no identifiable information about the students was collected, and the results of the study were reported in aggregate form. The survey took approximately 20 minutes for respondents to complete. Descriptive statistics were used to present the respondents' demographic profile and characteristics. Student respondents had the opportunity to be entered in a drawing to win a gift card through a link at the end of the survey. Three gift cards were issued at the end of the study.

Survey Instrument and Design

The survey was created by the OLC with the purpose of being student-centered. The survey was composed of four sections: demographic information, internet use, perceptions, and experience. We specifically assessed access to the internet and technical skill level, reason for choosing online learning, online learning past experience, assistance needed in taking online courses, important instructor qualities, online learning modes of communication, online versus F2F courses, perceived need for more fully online programs, and an array of questions related to

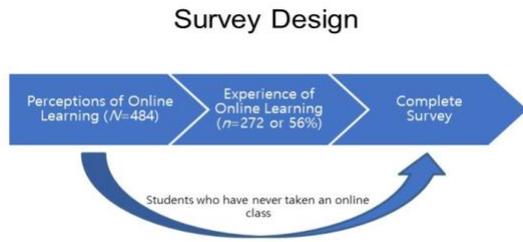
taking online courses related to the key concepts of social presence, organization of course content, and effective communication.

In the spirit of *cura personalis*, the following questions were crafted: assistance needed in online classes, preferred means of communication from instructors, need for more fully online programs, perception of difficulty of online courses, comparison on workload (F2F and online), and reasons for choosing an online course. This information would assist instructors to find avenues that promote whole person growth in learning.

To discern students' perceptions about how they feel about online courses at the host university, students were asked to respond to questions ranging from enjoyment in taking online classes to helpfulness and availability of online instructors and several open-ended items. In our own (OLC members) discernment of online learning over traditional F2F pedagogy, we wanted to be sure to identify any deeper, humanistic concerns or needs by students that might get missed in the survey questions. Affording students open-ended items to express what they liked most and least allowed for this level of sharing to better understand the human experience in online pedagogy. Specifically, we asked: What do you like most about taking online classes? What do you like least about taking online classes? Overall, how well does the host university support and facilitate online learning? Why or why not? Overall, the survey included 31 questions.

The survey was hosted in Baseline, part of the Campus Labs suite, and was designed to customize to the experience of the individual respondent; specific answers would either include or skip further questions. This branching logic helped to ensure the integrity of the data. For example, students who had never taken an online class would skip the questions about their experience in online classes and only be asked about their perceptions, while students who identified as unemployed would not be asked about hours worked. Due to this format, the sample size fluctuated throughout the survey. The design of the survey is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *Study Design*



Statistical Analyses

Data were analyzed using the Baseline data analysis tool and Excel. The open-ended items were analyzed using qualitative methods.¹⁸ Specifically, the OLC carefully read through all responses to the open-ended items for redundancy, patterns, and irregularities in relationship to the quantitative data to develop categories that fit together. A color-coded display that included similar phrases from students was created. Through this visualization, the OLC determined key concepts and conclusive statements for the open-ended items at >90% agreement.

Results

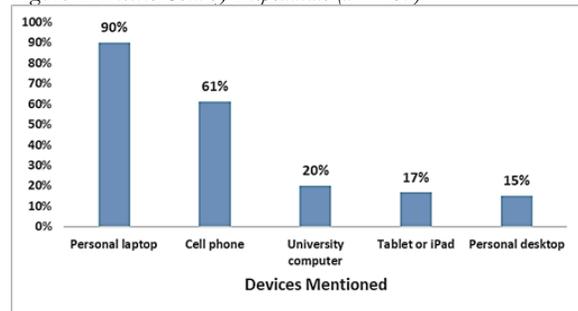
Respondents' Characteristics

Four hundred and eighty-four students participated in the study. The demographic characteristic of the sample is presented in Table 1. Typical respondents were female (71.4%) between 18-22 years old (54.1%), white (59.9%), followed by African American (14.5%), employed (56.4%), and worked between 11-30 hours per week (43.6%). Nearly 69% resided off campus, were single (83.3%), and without dependents (80.5%). While all schools/colleges and levels of students were represented in the study, the main proportion of respondents were 3rd and 4th year students (35%) and attended the schools/colleges of engineering/science (22.2%) and health professions/nursing (22.2%).

Internet Use, Access, and Technical Skill Level

The devices used by respondents to access school related work are presented in Figure 2. A large majority of the respondents (89.94%, $n = 420$) used their personally owned laptop to access the internet for school related work, followed by the use of their cell phones (61.03%, $n = 285$). The respondents' primary Wi-Fi access for school related work was home (59.74%, $n = 279$), followed by the use of university Wi-Fi (36.40%, $n = 170$). A high number of the respondents (47.54%, $n = 222$) considered their computer skills as "great," while 43.25% ($n = 202$) described their skills as "good."

Figure 2. *Devices Used by Respondents (n = 467)*



Reasons for Choosing Online Classes

The respondents' reasons for choosing online classes are presented in Figure 3. One of the main reasons the respondents (29.87%, $n = 135$) indicated was that F2F did not fit into their schedule, followed by less need to go to campus (19.25%, $n = 87$).

Figure 3. *Reasons to Choose Online Classes (n = 452)*

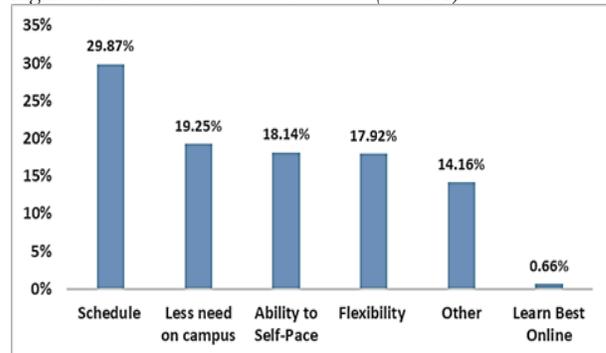


Table 1. Respondents' Characteristics

Demographic characteristic		
	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	136	28.10
Female	346	71.49
Age		
18-22	262	54.17
23-29	130	26.86
30-34	24	4.96
35-40	19	3.93
40-50	25	5.17
Above 50	24	4.96
Ethnicity		
White	290	59.92
Hispanic or Latino	29	5.99
Black or African American	68	14.5
Native American or American Indian	0	0
Asian/Pacific Islander	54	11.16
Prefer not to say	23	4.75
Other	20	4.13
Employment Status		
Employed	273	56.40
Unemployed	211	43.60
Hours of work in a week		
Less than 10	56	21.05
11-30	116	43.61
31-40	34	12.78
40 or more	60	22.56
Place of residence		
Off campus	324	68.50
On campus	102	21.56
Other	47	9.94
Marital status		
Single	394	83.30
Married or living with a long- term partner	79	16.70
Dependents living with you		
Yes	92	19.45
No	381	80.55
Student Rank		
1 st Year	85	17.97
2 nd Year	70	14.80
3 rd Year	95	19.87
4 th Year	72	15.22
5 th Year or beyond	16	3.38
Graduate Student	136	28.75
College		
Architecture	21	4.44
Business Administration	48	10.15
Eng & Science	105	22.20
Health Professions/Nursing	105	22.20
Law	21	4.44
Dentistry	76	16.07
Lib Arts & Education	89	18.82
Other	11	2.33

Note. *N* = 484

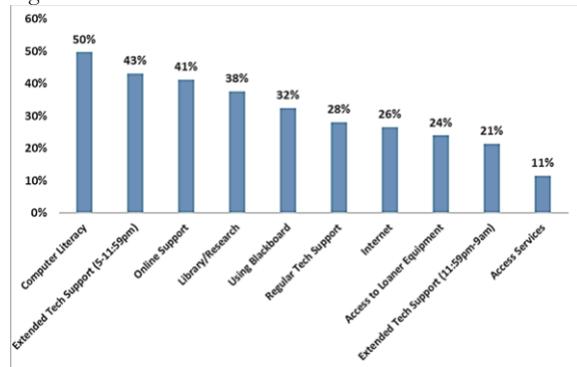
Online Learning Experience

Prior to coming to the university, 54.60% ($n = 255$) of the respondents had taken a fully online class, while 45.40% ($n = 212$) had not. A fully online class in this study was defined as a class that has no F2F instructor interaction whatsoever. Of the respondents, 35% had taken a total of 1-2 fully online courses in total while 34% had taken 3-4 courses. When asked how many fully online courses they had taken at the host university, 38% ($n = 182$) reported “0” while another 38% ($n = 180$) reported “1” or “2”.

Assistance Needed in Online Classes

Respondents were asked which kind of assistance they would need if they were to take another online class (See Figure 4). Nearly half of the respondents (49.63%, $n = 135$) indicated the need for assistance with computer literacy (basic computer use) followed by extended technical support hours between 5pm and midnight (43.01%, $n = 117$). Other common responses were: online access to tutoring or other academic support (41.18%, $n = 112$), accessing the library and online databases/research assistance (37.50%, $n = 102$), and assistance navigating and using the LMS (32.35%, $n = 88$).

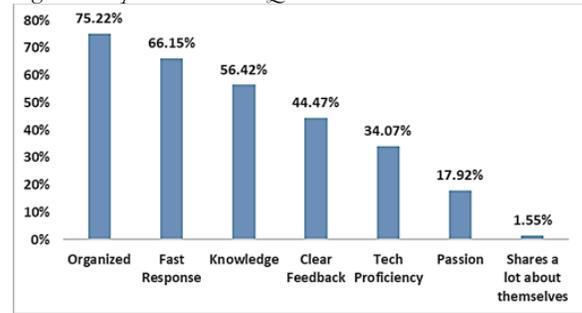
Figure 4. Assistance Needed in Online Classes



Important Instructor Qualities

Respondents' expectation of instructors is presented in Figure 5. Respondents identified the top three instructor qualities in an online course as being organized (75.22%, $n = 340$), fast response to emails/student contact (66.15%, $n = 299$), and knowledgeable about content (56.42%, $n = 255$).

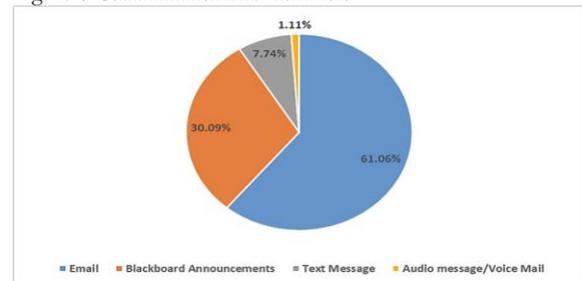
Figure 5. Important Instructor Qualities



Online Learning Communication

The preferred means of communication from instructors is presented in Figure 6. Respondents were asked about their preferred communication method from their instructor in a fully online class. The majority of respondents (61.06%, $n = 276$) indicated email communications, and the second most common form was Blackboard announcements (30.09%, $n = 136$). As for the preferred way to communicate with their classmates in a fully online class, 35.62% ($n = 161$) indicated through the Blackboard message board while 32.74% ($n = 148$) indicated through text message.

Figure 6. Communication with Instructors



Online Versus F2F on Workload

One component of the survey was to have the respondents compare the workload of F2F and online courses. The majority of respondents (59.56%, $n = 162$) indicated “about the same amount of time to complete the work,” followed by “more time to complete the work” (23.16%, $n = 63$), and “less time to complete the work” (17.28%, $n = 47$).

Need for More Fully Online Classes/Programs

Regarding a question as to whether or not the host university should have more fully online programs and classes, a majority of respondents (72.35%, $n = 327$) indicated “yes” while 27.65% ($n = 125$) indicated “no.”

Perception of Difficulty

Respondents were asked if they perceived online courses to be more difficult, about the same level of difficulty, or less difficult than F2F classes. The majority 56.19% ($n = 254$) responded “about the same” while 25.22% ($n = 114$) indicated “more difficulty” with online classes.

Level of Agreement on General Questions about Online Learning

Respondents' level of agreement on 12 questions about online learning was assessed. These questions ranged from enjoyment in taking online classes to helpfulness and availability of online instructors. In general, students had a positive level of agreement on their responses. However, one question asked (Q8) respondents if they spend a lot of time teaching themselves when they are in an online class; 35.29% ($n = 96$) “agreed” and 31.25% ($n = 85$) “strongly agreed.” A summary of responses pertaining to students' level of agreement on general questions about taking online classes is presented in Table 2.

Open-Ended Data

Three open-ended items were asked on the survey. The first question asked what students like most about taking online classes. Of the 252 student responses, the most common words used were “flexibility” and “freedom.” Flexibility and freedom were described in terms of logistics or being able to complete courses from home or elsewhere and on their own time and pace: “The freedom to do the work wherever and whenever I want” or “I like to use virtual resources at a pace convenient to me.” Freedom from going to F2F classes and/or commuting to campus were reasons for preferring online learning: “Not having to drive to class and I can fit in time to do my online homework on my lunch breaks at work.” Some students with heavier workloads and

commitments noted the flexibility of online courses: “I have 18 credits every semester. There should be a religion, philosophy, history, literature, etc., offered online for nursing students,” or “Taking online classes is really beneficial for student athletes. During the season, certain classes do not work with your schedule. When they are online, it is extremely helpful.” Finally, online pedagogy was favorable to a student with a disability that again conveys the flexibility in learning online: “As a student with a disability, online classes are a beneficial option. When I go home and re-watch every single lecture, I get more out of it because I can pause the recording and get the supplemental information I need (look up additional resources). Otherwise, sitting in class, it goes in one ear and out the other.” Overall, the flexibility and freedom of online learning is what these students collectively liked the most.

The second question asked what students like the least about online learning. There were 253 student responses. Comments were grouped into two categories: (1) communication issues, and (2) instructor issues. Communication issues centered on confusion about instructions or due dates on assignments, poor explanations on course topics, and a lack of connection with the instructor and other students: “The guidelines for the class and assignments can be a bit too vague and more difficult to network with other students because there isn't that F2F interaction.” Instructor issues centered on qualities of the instructor. Instructor qualities emphasized both organization and communication skills: “You're at the mercy of your professor—if they are unorganized and communicate poorly, then we suffer as a consequence.” Additionally, students commented on the importance of instructor availability: “If on campus, you can access them daily.”

The last question asked about the host university specifically in supporting and facilitating online learning. Of the 241 student responses, there was strong support: “The school does a good job with its online offerings,” or, “I have no negative comments—I enjoy my online courses.” Positive statements were often instructor driven or infrastructure related. An instructor's ability to communicate the content and expectations was an important aspect: “clearly explains a topic online;” “gives clear, precise directions;” “knows how to

Table 2. Percentage and Frequency Scores on Level of Agreement

Level of Agreement	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Enjoy taking online classes	157	34.73	132	29.20	91	20.13	38	8.41	34	7.52
Using online courses is an effective way to learn	129	28.54	158	34.96	103	22.79	35	7.74	27	5.97
Completing work online does not take more time and effort than it is worth	101	22.35	133	29.42	117	25.8	64	14.6	37	8.19
Instructors at the university know how to be effective when teaching online	85	31.25	108	39.71	48	17.65	18	6.62	13	4.7
My online instructor answered questions and returned emails and messages in a timely manner	110	40.44	103	37.87	34	12.50	17	6.25	8	2.94
The online classes at the university have included engaging activities and active learning	71	26.10	111	40.81	55	20.22	27	9.93	8	2.94
My online instructors encourage and foster community and cooperation in the digital classroom	76	27.94	118	43.38	49	18.01	20	7.35	9	3.31
I spend a lot of time teaching myself when I am in online classes	85	31.25	96	35.29	57	20.96	29	10.66	5	1.84
I learn as much from an online course as I do in a face to face course	64	23.53	91	33.46	44	16.18	46	16.91	27	9.93
Instructor's course structure, content, and learning explanations in the online classroom are clear and understandable	80	29.41	114	41.91	43	15.81	28	10.29	7	2.57
Written instructions for assignments in online classes are clear	90	33.09	103	37.87	52	19.12	22	8.09	5	1.84
The instructors in online classrooms are available and helpful when asked	97	35.66	107	39.34	48	17.65	18	6.62	2	0.74

clarify things. In terms of infrastructure or technology to support online learning, more online offerings were supported: "They need more online classes," or "The technology and professor support facilitate online learning."

Of the smaller group of negative statements towards online learning at the host university, feeling isolated was expressed: "instructors can be terribly difficult to reach and there is nothing I can do about it;" "not feeling connected to my classmates;" and "teaching myself." Overall, most felt that the host university supports and facilitates online learning well.

Discussion

The unbiased data was collected before the COVID-19 pandemic. In a predominant culture of F2F learning at the host university, key findings of the study were supportive of online learning: the majority of students desired more online learning opportunities; enjoyed taking online classes; perceived this type of pedagogy as an effective way to learn; agreed that instructors' course structure, content, and learning explanations in the online classroom were clear and understandable; agreed that their online instructor answered questions and returned email and messages in a timely manner; felt instructors to encourage and foster community in the virtual classroom; and, overall, perceived the instructors to be effective when teaching online.

However, students' negative agreements to online learning questions (Table 2) were between 12% and 25% respectively—an opportunity for improvement. It is also important that some students felt alone in their learning experience. Feeling socially isolated in online courses has led some to withdraw from courses.¹⁹ This is important to discern considering our Jesuit and Mercy traditions of caring for the student holistically and desire for whole person development and support regardless of pedagogy. This is an area in need of more attention and research.

The open-ended items revealed that students desire both freedom and flexibility in learning and these were the most commonly reported

characteristics of what students liked the most about online learning. Online courses benefitted students with heavy workloads and competing circumstances as well as those who enjoy the option of re-listening or re-watching instructors' presentations repetitively. Given that more than half of students were working part or full-time in our study, a statistic common among today's students,²⁰ it was not surprising to find students wanting more flexibility in learning options. However, students also reported issues associated with online learning and feeling "at the mercy of the instructor." In other words, if the instructor was unorganized, less engaged, less available, and did not communicate well, the students found these online experiences to be less desirable.

Overall, the findings are consistent with other reports on important instructor qualities in online learning.²¹ Online students desire courses that are well-organized and instructors who are engaged and respond quickly.²² Effective communication is an expectation if instructors desire to achieve educational success for online students.²³ Thus, overall, the study's findings reinforce what the literature has already addressed in regard to online learning and student perceptions and promotes the importance of certain instructor qualities for success in online learning.

The second purpose of our study was to develop strategies using Jesuit educational philosophy and traditions to inform and enrich online learning. Based on the findings, the university is supporting growth in offering more online learning opportunities and ensuring that instructors are prepared and qualified to deliver online courses effectively. In this regard, the university community is doing more, the *magis* and meeting students where they are in the learning process—more online offerings and more instructor support. The university has steadily grown over the past year in its training programs for instructors to enhance how to deliver content online effectively. The enrollment in these training programs has steadily risen in the last year. Most instructors prefer online pedagogical training to be effective online instructors.²⁴ For instructors who have spent their teaching careers in F2F education, the results of the study suggest the need to discern and carefully ponder next steps

and actions that include new ways of engagement with students using online technologies. By invoking the Jesuit concept of *cura personalis* in every aspect of an online course, care of the whole person (students) can still be achieved. But more work needs to be done and best practices shared among instructors on how best to achieve this in Jesuit education. We would never want any online student to feel alone in their learning experience, which was a finding in this study.

The third purpose of the study was to increase the viability of the university's online programs. Due to the work of the OLC, the university is working towards a clear vision for online learning. The members of OLC presented the results of this survey at the annual Colleague Development Day event in fall 2019. The session prompted active dialogue and discussion from administrators and instructors. Thoughts that might lead to new policies and strategies at the university were explored such as more resources for students taking online courses, more technical support, and the need for instructor certification in online teaching. The value of the OLC is apparent with continuous funding of its efforts to promote online learning support for instructors. For example, as reflected in the Jesuit value of *cura personalis*, the OLC sponsored a webinar during the COVID-19 pandemic for instructors and staff to provide mental and physical well-being resources and training to combat the mental and physical fatigue of online teaching and online meetings. The webinar was well attended and received very favorable responses from attendees. Additionally, the OLC is actively developing online best practice materials for instructors. The OLC members are also supported through continuing education opportunities with paid attendance at national conferences on online best practices to enhance their own knowledge and skills in assisting the university in online learning. Thus, the university is taking active steps towards improving and growing online learning opportunities. This study's findings are the motivation for more research. The OLC plans to conduct a study of faculty perceptions of online learning with special attention to Jesuit and Mercy traditions in the online classroom setting. Stemming from the founding member of the OLC's own experiences in online teaching in graduate nursing, it will be an important next step

to identify how online learning in Jesuit and Mercy traditions is distinct.

Finally, there are limitations to the study's findings. The sample for the study was self-selected and did not represent all colleges/schools as the majority of respondents came from two major colleges (health professions/nursing and engineering/science). However, the demographics do match closely to where the majority of online courses and programs exist (health professions/nursing, engineering/science, 3rd and 4th level undergraduate students, and graduate students). Yet, there is caution in generalizing the results of this study at the host university or any other Jesuit institution of higher education.

Conclusion

This study illustrates the OLC's first step to enriching Jesuit traditions in online pedagogy and growing online learning opportunities at the host university. Through this study, OLC members sought to place students' perceptions at the core of its efforts—a reflection of the Jesuit value of *cura personalis*. In return, we learned that students were favorable towards online education being delivered at the host university. Instructors' course organization, social presence, and timely communication as well as the freedom and flexibility associated with online learning were vital qualities integral in students' views towards successful online learning. Sharing the results of this study with other AJCU members is imperative, so they too can benefit in improving online learning. Through continuous integration of Jesuit values, together, Jesuit higher education can support the development of best practice guidelines to promote more student-centered online offerings. HJE

Notes

¹ Milton Cox, "Introduction to Faculty Learning Communities," *New Directions for Teaching & Learning* 97 (2004): 5-23, <https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.129>.

² Annie Jézégou, "Community of Inquiry in e-learning: A Critical Analysis of the Garrison and Anderson Model," *Journal of Distance Education* 24, no. 3 (2010): 1; Annie Jézégou, "Towards a Distance Learning Environment That Supports Learner's Self-Direction: The Model of Presence," *International Journal of Self-Directed Learning* 9, no. 1 (2012): 11-23; Christine Frazer, Debra Sullivan, Deborah Weatherspoon, and Leslie Hussey, "Faculty Perceptions of Online Teaching Effectiveness and Indicators of Quality," *Nursing Research and Practice* (2017): 1-6, <https://doi.org/10.1155/2017/9374189>.

³ Liyan Song, Ernise S. Singleton, Janette R. Hill, and Myung H. Koh, "Improving Online Learning: Student Perceptions of Useful and Challenging Characteristics," *Internet and Higher Education* 7, no. 1 (2004): 59-70, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2003.11.003>.

⁴ Beth Trammell and Rosalie Aldrich, "Undergraduate Students' Perspectives of Essential Instructor Qualities," *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 16, no. 1 (2016): 15-30, 10.14434/josod.v16i1.19178; Ayesha Sadaf, Florence Martin, and Lynn Ahlgrim-Delzell, "Student Perceptions of the Impact of Quality Matters-Certified Online Courses on Their Learning And Engagement," *Online Learning* 23, no. 4 (2019): 214-233, <http://dx.doi.org/10.24059/olj.v23i4.2009>; Tanya Joosten and Rachel Cusatis, "A Cross-Institutional Study of Instructional Characteristics and Student Outcomes: Are Quality Indicators of Online Courses Able to Predict Student Success?" *Online Learning* 23, no. 4 (2019): 354-378, <http://dx.doi.org/10.24059/olj.v23i4.14329>.

⁵ Sadaf et al., "Student Perceptions of the Impact of Quality Matters-Certified Online Courses on Their Learning And Engagement," 214-233; Joosten and Cusatis, "A Cross-Institutional Study of Instructional Characteristics and Student Outcomes: Are Quality Indicators of Online Courses Able to Predict Student Success?" 354-378; Terry Anderson, Liam Rourke, Randy Garrison, and Walter Archer, "Assessing Teaching Presence in a Computer Conferencing Context," *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks* 5, no. 2 (2001): 1-17, http://www.aln.org/publications/jaln/v5n2/pdf/v5n2_anderson.pdf.

⁶ Joosten and Cusatis, "A Cross-Institutional Study of Instructional Characteristics and Student Outcomes: Are Quality Indicators of Online Courses Able to Predict Student Success?" 354-378; Anderson et al., "Assessing Teaching Presence in a Computer Conferencing Context," 1-17; Charles Blaich, Kathleen Wise, Ernest T. Pascarella, and Josipa Roska, "Instructional Clarity and Organization: It's Not New or Fancy, but It Matters," *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 48, no. 4 (2016): 6-13, 10.1080/00091383.2016.1198142.

⁷ Frazer et al., "Faculty Perceptions of Online Teaching Effectiveness and Indicators of Quality," 1-6; Sadaf et al., "Student Perceptions of the Impact of Quality Matters-Certified Online Courses on Their Learning And Engagement," 214-233; Joosten and Cusatis, "A Cross-Institutional Study of Instructional Characteristics and Student Outcomes: Are Quality Indicators of Online Courses Able to Predict Student Success?" 354-378; Cole et al., "Student Predisposition to Instructor Feedback and Perceptions of Teaching Presence Predict Motivation toward Online Courses," 245-262; Magda and Smalec, *Student Perspectives on Online Programs: A Survey of Learners Supported by Wiley Education Services*.

⁸ Joosten and Cusatis, "A Cross-Institutional Study of Instructional Characteristics and Student Outcomes: Are Quality Indicators of Online Courses Able to Predict Student Success?" 354-378; Magda and Smalec, *Student Perspectives on Online Programs: A Survey of Learners Supported by Wiley Education Services*; Davison Mupinga, Robert Nora, and Dorothy Yaw, "The Learning Styles, Expectations, and Needs of Online Students," *College Teaching* 54, no. 1 (2006): 185-189, <https://doi.org/10.3200/CTCH.54.1.185-189>.

⁹ Sadaf et al., "Student Perceptions of the Impact of Quality Matters-Certified Online Courses on Their Learning And Engagement," 214-233; Joosten and Cusatis, "A Cross-Institutional Study of Instructional Characteristics and Student Outcomes: Are Quality Indicators of Online Courses Able to Predict Student Success?" 354-378; Anderson et al., "Assessing Teaching Presence in a Computer Conferencing Context," 1-17; Randy Garrison, Terry Anderson, and Walter Archer, "Critical Inquiry in a Text-Based Environment: Computer Conferencing in Higher Education," *The Internet and Higher Education* 2, no. 2-3 (1999): 87-105, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1096-7516\(00\)00016-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1096-7516(00)00016-6).

¹⁰ The Jesuits, "Jesuit Terms," accessed June 12, 2021, <https://www.jesuits.org/about-us/glossary/>.

¹¹ Julia Bninski and Jennifer R. Wozniak Boyle, "Cura Personalis as Institutional Practice," *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* 9, no. 1 (2020): Article 12, <https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe/vol9/iss1/12>.

¹² The Jesuits, "Jesuit Terms."

¹³ Barton T. Geger, S.J., "What Magis Really Means and Why It Matters," *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* 1, no. 2 (2012), Article 16, <https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe/vol1/iss2/16>.

¹⁴ Geger, "What Magis Really Means and Why It Matters," Article 16.

¹⁵ The Jesuits, "Jesuit Terms."

¹⁶ The Jesuits, "Jesuit Terms."

¹⁷ Song et al., "Improving Online Learning: Student Perceptions of Useful and Challenging Characteristics," 59-70; Sadaf et al., "Student Perceptions of the Impact of Quality Matters-Certified Online Courses on Their Learning And Engagement," 214-233; Joosten and Cusatis, "A Cross-Institutional Study of Instructional Characteristics and Student Outcomes: Are Quality Indicators of Online Courses Able to Predict Student Success?" 354-378; Anderson et al., "Assessing Teaching Presence in a Computer Conferencing Context," 1-17; Blaich et al., "Instructional Clarity and Organization: It's Not New or Fancy, but It Matters," 6-13.

¹⁸ Mathew Miles, Michael A Huberman, and John Saldaña, *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2014).

¹⁹ Azad Ali and David T. Smith, Comparing Social Isolation Effects on Students Attrition in Online Versus Face-to-Face Courses in Computer Literacy, *Issues in Informing Science and Information Technology* 12 (2015): 11-20, <http://iisit.org/Vol12/IISITv12p011-020Ali1784.pdf>.

²⁰ Victoria S. Brown, David Lewis, and Mario Toussaint, "Students' Perceptions of Quality across Four Course Development Modules," *Online Learning* 22, no. 2 (2018): 173-195, 10.24059/olj.v22i2.1213.

²¹ Frazer et al., "Faculty Perceptions of Online Teaching Effectiveness and Indicators of Quality," 1-6; Song et al., "Improving Online Learning: Student Perceptions of Useful and Challenging Characteristics," 59-70; Trammell and Aldrich, "Undergraduate Students' Perspectives of Essential Instructor Qualities," 15-30; Sadaf et al., "Student Perceptions of the Impact of Quality Matters-Certified Online Courses on Their Learning And Engagement," 214-233; Joosten and Cusatis, "A Cross-Institutional Study of Instructional Characteristics and Student Outcomes: Are Quality Indicators of Online Courses Able to Predict Student Success?" 354-378; Anderson et al., "Assessing Teaching Presence in a Computer Conferencing Context," 1-17; Blaich, "Instructional Clarity and Organization: It's Not New or Fancy, but It Matters," 6-13; Magda and Smalec, *Student Perspectives on Online Programs: A Survey of Learners Supported by Wiley Education Services*; Mupinga et al., "The Learning Styles, Expectations, and Needs of Online Students," 185-189; Garrison et al., "Critical Inquiry in a Text-Based

Environment: Computer Conferencing in Higher Education," 87-105; Nicole D. Dobransky and Ann Bainbridge Frymier, "Developing Teacher-Student Relationships through out of Class Communication," *Communication Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (2004): 211-223, 10.1080/01463370409370193.

²² Frazer et al., "Faculty Perceptions of Online Teaching Effectiveness and Indicators of Quality," 1-6; Trammell and Aldrich, "Undergraduate Students' Perspectives of Essential Instructor Qualities," 15-30; Sadaf et al., "Student Perceptions of the Impact of Quality Matters-Certified Online Courses on Their Learning And Engagement," 214-233; Blaich, "Instructional Clarity and Organization: It's Not New or Fancy, but It Matters," 6-13; Cole et al., "Student Predisposition to Instructor Feedback and Perceptions of Teaching Presence Predict Motivation toward Online Courses," 245-262; Magda and Smalec, *Student Perspectives on Online Programs: A Survey of Learners Supported by Wiley Education Services*; Mupinga et al., "The Learning Styles, Expectations, and Needs of Online Students," 185-189.

²³ Frazer et al., "Faculty Perceptions of Online Teaching Effectiveness and Indicators of Quality," 1-6; Sadaf et al., "Student Perceptions of the Impact of Quality Matters-Certified Online Courses on Their Learning And Engagement," 214-233; Joosten and Cusatis, "A Cross-Institutional Study of Instructional Characteristics and Student Outcomes: Are Quality Indicators of Online Courses Able to Predict Student Success?" 354-378; Anderson et al., "Assessing Teaching Presence in a Computer Conferencing Context," 1-17; Cole et al., "Student Predisposition to Instructor Feedback and Perceptions of Teaching Presence Predict Motivation toward Online Courses," 245-262; Magda and Smalec, *Student Perspectives on Online Programs: A Survey of Learners Supported by Wiley Education Services*; Mupinga et al., "The Learning Styles, Expectations, and Needs of Online Students," 185-189; Garrison et al., "Critical Inquiry in a Text-Based Environment: Computer Conferencing in Higher Education," 87-105.

²⁴ Peg Pankowski, "Faculty Training for Online Teaching," *T.H.E. Journal*, (September 1, 2004), accessed June 12, 2021, <http://thejournal.com/articles/2004/09/01/faculty-training-for-online-teaching.aspx>.