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# Students' Attitudes and Perceptions of Online Instruction

*Karen Ivers, Ph.D. Chair, Department of Elementary and Bilingual Education*
*JoAnn Carter-Wells, Ph.D., Coordinator, MS in Instructional Design and Technology*
*California State University, Fullerton*
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## Abstract
This study examines several variables that can affect students' attitudes and perceptions of online instruction: prior experience with computers, peer interaction, teacher/student interaction, and institutional support. Data was collected over an 18 month period, reflecting the time students were enrolled in an online Master's of Science Instructional Design and Technology (MSIDT) program. Data included two reports filed by an external evaluator; responses to a discussion board prompt, "Being an Online Student;" midpoint reflections written by each of the students; and an end of the program survey. Findings support previous research related to students' attitudes and perceptions of online instruction. The researchers provide recommendations to help educators plan and design positive online learning experiences based upon specific examples of how students' prior experience with computers, peer interaction, teacher/student interaction and experiences with institutional support hindered or encouraged their feelings of inclusiveness (community), motivation, and learning.

Background- 1st online degree program at CSUF; primarily business/industry students; interdisciplinary team and community learning environment; use of BB for program delivery; intake interview included prior experiences with online instruction –either as student or as instructor

Method- two reports filed by an external evaluator from focus group meetings with students and faculty; responses to a discussion board prompt, "Being an Online Student;" midpoint reflections written by each of the students; and an end of the program "community of learners". Use of key analytic strategy of coding to both categorize qualitative data and also describe the implications and details of these categories with respect to the core concepts or the four variables that can affect students' attitudes and perceptions of online instruction: prior experience with computers, peer interaction, teacher/student interaction, and institutional support.

Findings- Findings support previous research related to students' attitudes and perceptions of online Instruction

1. prior experience-. The data collected for this study appears to support the notion that students' prior experience with computers can boost positive perceptions of online learning
2. peer interaction- Several of the strengths that students identified with the MSIDT program include: social posting threads, group projects, group discussions, and face-to-face meetings (orientation and midpoint).
3. student/instructor interaction- Student responses on the end of the program survey indicate that 87 percent felt comfortable sharing their ideas, information, and knowledge with their peers and instructors; 13 percent neither agreed nor disagreed.
4. institutional support- 60 percent of the MSIDT students reported that they felt their "sense of being a member of the MSIDT community" was negatively impacted when technical difficulties of Blackboard (the online learning tool) arose. Most (73%) felt Blackboard was easy to use and navigate, noting it positively impacted their learning experience. 54 percent of the students felt they had access to online support services such as Admissions and Records, Student Financial Services, Graduate Studies, Distance Education Department, the campus

library and bookstore, and university technical support. 27 percent neither agreed or disagreed or did not respond

## Recommendations

1. Assess the minimum computer skills (saving files, logging into and navigating the Internet, etc.) needed to be successful in the online program.
2. Determine which software products in which students will need to have basic, intermediate, or advanced skills.
3. Establish minimum computer requirements (e.g., Internet speed, memory, etc.) and whether or not a specific platform and operating system are required.
4. Ensure students have the necessary computer skills and meet the requirements before accepting them into the online program.

Peer Interaction

1. Create opportunities to support social interactions among students (e.g., an online social forum where students can talk about topics outside of the program.)
2. Establish a safe learning environment; review and enforce rules of netiquette and cooperation.
3. Assign group projects.
4. Establish group discussions.
5. Hold face-to-face meetings (e.g., orientation and midpoint, as well as optional end of the program event).

Teacher/Student Interaction

1. Establish consistency in all courses across the program.
2. Balance workloads among concurrent courses.
3. Communicate clear goals and expectations.
4. Be aware and supportive of students' personal situations and needs.
5. Be committed to the students' success.
6. Maintain a constant presence on discussion boards.
7. Provide weekly summaries of discussions – citing students by names for their contributions.
8. Provide timely responses to emails.
9. Give supportive and positive feedback.
10. Ensure instructors have the necessary disposition and time to teach online.

Institutional Support

1. Foster awareness of campus supporting units-Program Handbook
2. Integrate campus units in program needs and elicit support as "team" member.
3. Establish clearer protocols for technology support and contact

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