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Graduate Student Preferences for Practicing Faith in Online Coursework

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The purpose of this investigation was to gain a better understanding of the expectations graduate students hold regarding the amount of and types of faith-related activities utilized in online coursework. Two groups of participants surveyed were enrolled at two different, faith-based institutions in Pennsylvania, United States; one a Catholic university and one a Christian college. Results of the survey and subsequent response analysis indicated that 82% of the students preferred the instructor utilize faith activities more frequently in online coursework, despite having enrolled at the institution for its academic reputation.

The research on effective online pedagogy suggests that, in order for an online class to be an engaging and positive learning experience for students, it must contain the following essential elements: student autonomy, instructor presence, and interactivity (Pelz, 2004). Student autonomy is best described as students having the capability to collaborate with each another through discussions, about projects, and regarding assignments. *Instructor presence* is described as how often the instructor serves as an expert resource for students or how available the instructor is for student support. *Interactivity* is described as the amount of collaborative opportunities present within the course to promote student and faculty engagement. As Ravert and Evans (2007) note, “A continuing trend in all levels of education is toward creating constructivist and student-centered learning environments” (p.321). To meet the needs of a technologically dynamic population of students, instruction is tailored and facilitates experiential learning using interactive elements. It engages varied learning styles, fosters critical thinking and encourages collaborative learning (Tapscott, 2009). The professor maintains a supportive presence throughout by guiding discussions, commenting on assignments and offering expert, valuable feedback to students on a regular basis (Schutt et al., 2009). Research conducted by Schutt et al. (2009) supported these constructs stating “the social presence [in online coursework] impacts learning, interaction, interpersonal relationships and user satisfaction” (p.137).

The majority of the literature in online pedagogy for graduate education has focused on graduate student populations served by either public or private institutions. These studies solely concentrated on student preferences for effective, online teaching practices. Little research exists on populations of graduate students enrolled in faith-based institutions regarding their preferences for practicing faith traditions in online coursework. Although graduate students at these institutions expect a quality, online education, the manner by which and frequency of how faith practices manifest in coursework have not been addressed. The purpose of this investigation therefore, was to gain a better understanding of the expectations graduate students hold regarding the amount and types of faith-related activities presented in online coursework. Additional factors explored included student rationale for enrolling in online coursework, student institutional choice, institutional programs, coursework, and faith practices currently utilized in online courses.

LITERATURE REVIEW

When examining a students' rationale for selecting an online master's program, current literature suggests a students' life responsibilities figure prominently (Allen & Seaman, 2009). Among reasons for enrolling in an online course or program, was that it was consistent with their current lifestyle and the "personal control it allowed them" (Clayton et al., 2010, p. 361). For students who undertake higher education, employment and family responsibilities, online learning affords a more flexible schedule (Picciano, 2002). And, distance education with its broader accessibility is desirable to 84% of students who must work full- or part-time while balancing personal obligations (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

Poock and Love (2007) reported that the decision-making process to enroll in a graduate degree program provides students with an opportunity to evaluate possible school choices and find a best-fit institution for their life-style, strengths and talents. Students locate and pursue a specific field of study as well as determine what their educational needs might be. Some decide on a program or institution that has rigorous standards. Other factors influencing student choice were favorable living/travel expenses, opportunities for peer interactions and job prospects after graduation (Kassop, 2003; Lei & Ning-Kuang, 2010; Lowe & Lowe, 2007).

None of these research studies addressed whether students chose an online graduate program because of the institutions' commitment to faith, religion or spirituality.

Historically, education was rooted in faith, especially postsecondary higher education. Harvard University for example, was founded after John Harvard willed his entire library and a considerable sum of money to help educate ministers (Wechsler et al., 2008). Faith was the driving force for establishing the institution in the 1600s, despite no physical site for a campus, no professors to teach courses, and no students enrolled. During that time period, faith-based education operated on the premise that one's faith solidifies when that person/student gains more knowledge and wisdom (Crawford & Rossiter, 1992). Thus, faith-based institutions counted on each field of study to help students understand how the complexities of knowledge work together to imbricate faith in one's life. Regardless of the field of study, deepened knowledge pointed to embracing diversity within a faith community and hence, the opportunity for students to generalize and demonstrate this premise to society. It is apparent that faith-based institutions hold this premise in high regard today. Institutional programming addresses the spiritual nature and importance of increased knowledge and its positive relationship to faith practices. Additionally, this is evidenced in institutional goals, mission statements and branding. For example,

Spiritual formation is one of the recognized benchmarks of higher education that is Christian. A communal commitment to spiritual formation is indeed part of the Christian higher education community's DNA, and is in fact reflected in the criteria for accreditation in both the Association of Biblical Higher Education (ABHE) and the Association of Theological Schools (ATS). (Maddix & Estep, 2010, p.423)

However, the majority of the literature supporting the communal premise focuses on undergraduate programming.

As increasingly more faith-based institutions begin to develop and refine online graduate programs, leadership at these institutions must engage in continuing, evaluative discussions regarding methodologies by which these same premises effectively translate to the online environment. Online education offers ways to improve teaching and learning that traditional education delivery models cannot match; such as improving student access and facilitating richer student discussions (Kassop, 2003). When asked about practicing faith traditions in online coursework, what do students really want? What do students expect of their professors? Will increasing the amount of opportunities students have to practice their faith in an online course lead to faith formation? Results from the current investigation indicate that graduate students prefer an increased amount of faith-focused activities be included in online coursework. Further review of the data indicated students believed the online environment served as a venue that supported faith practices through discussions, projects and learning communities.

Examples of the faith-based practices explored for this project included social networking, online learning communities, course projects and summative and formative assessments. Although spiritual formation in online coursework is beyond the scope of this report, other studies, such as that originating at the Erskine Theological Seminary (Lowe & Lowe, 2007), have evaluated the use of these same activities to facilitate spiritual formation online. The results of this study indicated social networks and professional learning communities support spiritual formation in the online setting (Lowe & Lowe, 2007). Additional researchers reported similar findings where online, professional learning communities (PLC) used to practice or share faith traditions also supported faith formation (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). These PLCs facilitated spiritual growth by encouraging student and faculty discussion and interaction. With the professors' guidance and expertise for crafting activities and discussions that promoted faith practices, the communities utilized in these courses helped students develop significant relationships with peers and with God. They became authentic experiences that nurtured and formed faith. Gresham's (2006) research echoes these findings stating divine pedagogy "includes a communal dimension similar to the church, provides active participation of the students in the learning process and is relevant to online education because it is rich in symbols and signs that communicate meaning" (p. 27).

Communal dimension activities utilized in Gresham's (2006) research were group lead prayer and journal responses that focused on a devotion, a faith tradition or on a reading from a sacred text (Lowe & Lowe, 2007). The activities' design was consistent with the essential elements recommended for a successful online experience. These activities allowed the students to share their faith tradition(s) with their peers. As a result, the students reported the online PLC was one of the strongest aspects of their graduate program (Allen & Seaman, 2009; Kassop, 2003; Lowe & Lowe, 2007). Students viewed it as a real community where they shared ideas without constraint with peers having faiths other than their own. For those faith-based, online programs with a definitive faith focus but no definitive religious, communal dimension in online courses, students developed faith-focused activities for the class. The following section describes in what manner students received feedback essential to facilitating their spiritual growth and professional development in online coursework. It begins with the current projects' faith activities focus and methodology.

METHODOLOGY

This project sought to determine expectations graduate students hold regarding the amount of and types of faith-related activities presented in online coursework. Two groups of participants were surveyed and were enrolled at

two, different faith-based institutions in Pennsylvania, United States; one a Catholic university and one a Christian college. The researcher instituted a timeline for project implementation and completion. Included in the project was a written proposal for Institutional Review Board (IRB) evaluation. Upon approval from the IRB, the researcher developed then modified the survey (Appendix) for online distribution via Qualtrics Survey Software (Qualtrics, version 2014.20, Provo, UT).

Personnel at both institutions granted the researcher permission to use the respective graduate programs' LISTSERVs for communication and distribution purposes. The students' names and email addresses remained anonymous and information collected was kept confidential. A request for volunteer participation, an introduction to the study and its potential risks for participation were sent to the students approximately 1 week prior to survey distribution. Students completed the survey within a 2-week timeframe. After the two-week timeframe elapsed, a final reminder and/or request for participation was sent via each LISTSERV. As a result, 61% of the surveys were returned.

Sample

The students participating in the study attended one of two faith-based institutions in Pennsylvania. At the time the study commenced, a total of 60 students were enrolled in various, online graduate programs at these institutions. The students completed a brief survey to ascertain what types of and how often they preferred faith-based activities be utilized in online courses.

A total of 37 surveys ($N=37$) were returned. This number equated to approximately a 61% rate of participation. In terms of demographics, one question used determined student gender. A total of 34 participants reported they were female; three participants reported they were male. Also, 27 students identified themselves as Christian (no specific denomination); three identified themselves as Catholic. Six students reported "other" when asked how they would describe themselves by way of the faith they practiced. When asked if they were enrolled in an online program of study at the master's degree level, 31 students reported "yes" and six reported "no." A response of "no" might indicate, perhaps, they are taking a graduate class, but have neither enrolled nor have been accepted into a graduate program of study.

Instrumentation

For this report, a 10-question survey (Appendix) developed by the researcher, was distributed electronically to 60 possible participants via Qualtrics Survey Software. Qualtrics Survey Software allows researchers to gather survey data using a web-based platform for compilation and analysis of information. Questions included in the survey helped to ascertain what students expected from online coursework at their respective faith-based institution.

Thirty were distributed to graduate students at a Catholic institution in Southeastern, PA and the remaining to graduate students at a Christian college in Southcentral, PA. The survey was exclusive to this project.

RESULTS

One question asked students to classify the institution they attended as an undergraduate. For this question, 33 of 37 participants replied. Of the students, 14 attended a public higher education institution, 13 attended a faith-based, higher education institution and the remaining students reported they attended a private, non-faith-based institution. When asked why they chose to enroll in online, master's level coursework or an online master's level program at their current institution, 33% of the students reported their reason was due to the academic reputation of the institution. Of the students, 15% reported their sole reasoning for choosing the institution was because of its faith component.

A majority (55%) of the students identified themselves as enrolled in a Social Sciences program at their current institution. An additional 12% indicated they were enrolled in a master's of education program. Program selections also included Business, Arts, Religion, Medical or Technology to which no ($n = 0$) students responded. Of the students selected, 33% "other" as their course of study.

DISCUSSION

At faith-based institutions, the moral, ethical, spiritual, and academic development of students is a fundamental goal holding true for undergraduate education. In areas such as character enrichment and human intellect, spiritual formation is subject for advanced study and exploration. However, spiritual formation is not and should not be confined to one area of study. Using the phrase "cross-curricular" is an appropriate description of curriculum efforts at spiritual formation at most faith-based institutions; meaning all faculty, across all areas of study assume a responsibility in educating undergraduate students in relation to the "greater meaning and wise integration of all of their learnings within the larger context of their lives" (Crawford & Rossiter, 1992, p. 61). As graduate enrollments continue to rise at these previously undergraduate-exclusive, 4-year institutions, might stakeholders assume this fundamental goal holds true for master's level students enrolled in online coursework even when the coursework concentrates to one area of study? It is established, adequately, through research, that online coursework fosters spiritual formation via learning communities (Lowe & Lowe, 2007; Palloff & Pratt, 2007). But to what degree do master's level students want to engage in

faith practices in the online environment? And, what faith-based activities do they prefer to address their preferences, interests and unique faith traditions? Affirming whether professors integrate faith practices in online, graduate level courses, 74% of the students responding to the Faith Practices Survey indicated their instructor integrates faith-related activities throughout her/his course. This percentage is high; however, it is not all that surprising considering the college type. From this 74%, students reported their instructor utilized the following activities to integrate faith practices or faith with content: readings, discussions, live video/audio sessions, projects/assignments and assessments. The specific activity-percentage breakdown appears below in Table 1.

The data presented above was interpreted to mean the graduate instructors utilized a variety of community building techniques in their online coursework. Furthermore, the students indicated the purpose of the activities was to integrate faith practices into the coursework. Of the 26%, 22% of the students reporting their instructor did not integrate faith practices in their coursework preferred their instructor do so via discussion forums or projects. More than 56% reported ‘‘by other means,’’ but did not suggest specific instructional activities. Also, the students did not indicate the activities they preferred were, or had to be strictly biblical in nature. They reported the instructor allowed them to share their faith traditions freely, with peers using an approach that facilitated community building amongst members.

Although students made a conscious choice to enroll at their current, faith-based institution, Catholic or Christian, a considerable percentage (23%) of students reported they ‘‘were not comfortable participating’’ in faith-based practices in online coursework. Yet others (62%) reported they favored more faith-related activities in online coursework and some (15%) indicated they preferred less faith-related activities in their coursework.

In concord with current literature and according to the research and data presented throughout the course of this investigation, one may interpret the majority of students who chose an online master’s education at a faith-based institution readily expect to practice faith or engage in a faith-related activity in their coursework. Recall one of the primary practices

TABLE 1 Percentage of Faith-Based Activities Utilized in Online Coursework.

Activity	Students Reporting Faculty Use
Readings	74%
Discussions	83%
Live video/Audio sessions	30%
Projects=Assignments	65%
Assessments	13%
Other	9%

influencing online course success is creating of a community of learners or PCL, where learners find opportunities to be leaders and teachers (Palloff & Pratt, 1999; 2007). The results of prior studies suggest a religious or spiritual ethos manifests itself among students as a result. Online courses that included online chapel services, prayer rooms, faculty forums, audio, video and discussion boards provide a place for collegial, communal exchanges (Maddix & Estep, 2010). These mediums provided the social presence for students and faculty learning together in a spiritually focused, online community (Maddix & Estep, 2010).

Even when activities appeared abundant, of best practice and varied, most students preferred the instructor utilize more. Further investigation is suggested to delineate reasons for or provide stronger evidence for why students choosing a faith-based institution might not be comfortable practicing their faith in the online environment. Assumptions include their faith tradition perhaps, is of an introspective nature, or the online environment is a place perceived not sacred enough or too public to engage in faith activities or share faith traditions. Again, these assumptions are just that, assumptions, and cannot be validated unless further study is initiated.

This study was conducted in Pennsylvania using student participants from two, smaller, liberal arts, faith-based institutions. The results should not be generalized to all faith-based institutions. The Faith Practices Survey used for this study created by the researcher was exclusive to this study. Using this survey as a reliable and valid measure of student preferences would be counterproductive however, using it to gauge initial thoughts about utilizing faith practices in online coursework may prove beneficial to the institution. It would be prudent to conduct further research on student rationale for the decisions made and preferences reported regarding choice of program, choice of institution, additional or specific types of faith practices activities preferred and comfort level when asked to participate in faith related activities. By doing so, faculty creates an enhanced sense of community, respecting the traditions of other faiths and faith-diverse online environments.

CONCLUSION

Koinonia or fellowship is the hallmark of the Christian experience and the cornerstone of Christian educational philosophy (Pazmino, 1997). Although research exists to substantiate claims of community in online courses, there remains still, a concern among some faculty that the quality of teaching and learning in online courses is amiss. It is important to address the concerns of the professoriate by acknowledging such discernments then provide evidence to support online learning. Consistency with the college's mission, well-established instructional goals, high standards for maintaining integrity

and commitment to the sense of community for both residential and students who study from a distance must appear as clear, definitive objectives in institutional strategic plans.

Maslow (1962) spoke to the sense of belonging as a basic human need. Efforts to build an online community at the both campuses in this study are evidenced in the degree and variation of community building and faith practices activities within the course taught. This is not a suggestion that campuses “rest on their laurels,” but rather they continue to engage in active measures advocating community building among the online population and nurturing those already in existence at the residential level. This researcher believes two distinct learning communities can exist at one institution and benefit from one, defined sense of community. By presenting faculty with tools (i.e., professional development, training, input, feedback) to maintain a strong commitment and afford students quality exchanges and experiences online, college campuses possess premiere opportunity to provide their learning community with advancements in spiritual formation that cross generations, cultures and attitudes.

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APPENDIX: FAITH-BASED PRACTICES IN YOUR ONLINE COURSEWORK

Q1

Gender:

- Female
- Male

Q2

Enrolled in a higher education institution that is described as having a rich foundation in, and commitment to, promoting faith through faith-based practices. I would describe myself as:

- Christian
- Catholic
- Jewish
- Other

Q3

I am enrolled in Master's degree/post baccalaureate coursework at this time.

- Yes
- No

Q4

As an undergraduate, I attended a _____.

- Public higher education institution
- Faith-based institution
- Private institution, not faith-based institution

Q5

I enrolled in a faith-based institution at the post baccalaureate level because of _____.

- The institution's academic reputation
- The institution's commitment to faith-based activities
- I am/was Alumni
- All of above
- Other

Q6

I am enrolled in a program for students interested in pursuing a master's degree in:

- Business
- Education
- Social Sciences
- Arts
- Religion
- Medical
- Technology
- Other

Q7

My instructor integrates or has integrated faith practices (i.e., prayer, devotion, readings) in online coursework.

- Yes
- No

Q8

If the answer to question number 7 is “yes”, my instructor integrates faith-based practices through online course_____.

- Readings
- Discussion forums
- Live sessions (i.e., via webinar)
- Projects/assignments
- Assessments
- Other_____.

Q9

If the answer to question number 7 is “no”, I would prefer that my instructor integrate faith-based practices through course_____.

- Readings
- Discussion forums
- Live sessions (i.e., via webinar)
- Projects/assignments
- Assessments
- Other_____.

Q10

I would prefer that the instructor integrate_____ faith-based practices in the course.

- More
- Less
- I am not comfortable participating in faith-based practices in course- work.

M. Yacapsin is an Associate Professor of Education and has had a research article entitled ‘Faith: A New Component Within Differentiated Instruction,’ published in *Christian Perspectives in Education* (CPE).