

# Students' Attitudes about Online Master's Degree Programs versus Traditional Programs

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In this study, the researchers investigated current education students' attitudes toward an online Master's degree in education. Current research and literature regarding online versus traditional Master's programs were reviewed. Participants of this study were 62 students at a western university. Using an experimenter-designed questionnaire, the students rated their attitudes and opinions toward both traditional and online Master's degree programs. We found that students regardless of past online experiences felt the traditional Master's degree program was more accepted by employers, more worthwhile to their future, and more worthwhile to their career than the online Master's degree program.

Keywords: Online versus Traditional Education, Attitudes, and opinions

## INTRODUCTION

Online Master's programs are becoming increasingly popular. The U.S. Department of Commerce (2002) reported that enrollment in distance education courses at postsecondary institutions was at over 1,000,000. Students are bombarded with advertisements about online degree programs which are more convenient, independent, and do not require scheduled class attendance. The question for the future is if online Master's programs will eventually replace the traditional classroom. Dolezalek (2003) wrote, "These online programs don't threaten the traditional universities – at least not yet. But some researchers believe it is only a matter of time before the ivy-covered walls find themselves threatened by the online onslaught" (p. 2). Some experts have gone as far as to predict that the traditional model of instruction, which includes students attending classes at prearranged times and locations, will disappear in the near future (Drucker, 1997).

Traditional classrooms cause difficulties for people with work and family responsibilities. Online programs offer less time away from the family, less transportation issues, and more freedom to work when and where you want to work. Boyd (2005) found the average students in a western university's online graduate degree program were

working professionals who attend school part-time. Their average credit load was between three and six credit hours and the mean age was 33.

Studies suggest the quality of instruction is equal in accredited online and traditional schools (Cooper, 2001; Coppola, 2000; Dolezalek, 2003; Faux, 2000; Keefe 2003; Russell, 1999; Wisner & Priest, 1998). Therefore, theoretically, students can obtain an equal education from either type of program. The strongest concern between online and traditional classes is that online courses may not provide the same learning opportunities as the traditional course. One concern in particular is the ability to have dialogs between the teacher and students. Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, and Zvacek (2006) felt that for an online learning experience to be beneficial and comparable to traditional programs technology must be in place to recreate the communication or dialog between the participants of that program. Trewern and Lai (2001) surveyed several online courses and found they often offer a variety of Web-based options to enhance face-to-face communication between students and teaching staff. Trewern and Lai (2001) say most of the Web-based learning systems and environments are text based, though a variety of multimedia tools are available on the Web and interaction between professor and students are becoming more and more common as technology in this area increases.

According to Brewer (2001), televisions and teleconferencing are the major tools in online learning. However, they indicated, "there is no evidence to support the idea that face-to-face instruction is the optimum delivery method" (Brewer, 2001, p.29). On the other hand, research found instruction via teleconferencing could facilitate learning as well or better than classroom instruction. Excluding face-to-face instruction did not impair the learning process (Brewer, 2001).

The success of online programs lies in students' attitudes. If students do not view online programs as effective and beneficial to their future, the online degree program will remain the second choice for students. Although, research supports that the quality of learning is equal for the two different presentations of instruction, it is unclear whether student and employer perspectives view online programs as equal. After all, perception often drives behavior (O'Malley & McCraw, 1999).

A study by Small and Lohrasbi (2003) examined the opinions' MBA students held regarding online courses. The authors looked at two groups, MBA students without online experience and those with online experience. A student was considered to have online experience if he/she had taken more than two courses in a web-based format. The results found that students without online experience rated online courses as lower in quality and being less competitive, where those with online experience reported traditional and online instruction as equal. However, both groups of students reported some hesitation in whether or not employers preferred traditional over online programs.

O'Malley and McCraw (1999) surveyed 128 students in business classes on their attitudes regarding online courses. The majority of participants in this study had taken or was taking online courses. The authors found that students felt ambiguous when asked if they felt online courses were effective. In addition, the authors found that students felt they could learn an equal amount of information in online versus traditional courses and that online courses offered more flexibility. However, the students in this study still indicated they preferred taking traditional courses to online courses.

Pattison (2003) surveyed the attitudes of 100 teachers who were beginning an online Master's Program. This author found that before the courses began 84% to 87% of the students believed distance learning was effective. However, after one year of course work was completed this dropped to 15% to 26%. It is difficult to decipher if these results reflect the effectiveness of the instruction. The results may instead reflect the difficulties inherent in an online format such as independence and motivation to stay on top of the work. Many students enter the programs with barriers that make it difficult to attend a

traditional program and perhaps these same barriers affected their perception of the quality of the program. Stick and Ivankova (2004) found when starting an online graduate program in educational leadership that some students were unable to structure their personal obligations in order to accomplish the course work.

Studies have also examined whether employers would prefer to hire a person with a degree from traditional program before they would hire a person with a degree from an online program. Dolezalek (2003) found over 50% of employers considered online graduate programs not as credible but still acceptable. Nearly 10% said that they found online programs neither credible nor acceptable. The study went further and found that it was not that the program was online, but instead the name of the institution was unknown and therefore not credible. However, many corporations pay for online degrees for their employees. This suggests employers are supportive of this type of degree program.

### *PURPOSE*

This study examines students' attitudes about online learning among students who may pursue a Master's in Education degree program in the future. It looked at both the students as a group and then just at those students who had previous online experience. The rationale for examining those with online experience was that these students might have different attitudes because of previous online experiences (Small & Lohrasbi, 2003). Small and Lohrasbi (2003) reported students with online experience did not feel online and traditional programs differed and a second analysis was undertaken to examine whether this was true in this study's data as well.

The research questions for this study were:

1. Do students prefer an online program over a traditional Master's program?
2. Do students with online experience prefer an online program over a traditional Master's program?

## **METHODS**

### *PARTICIPANTS*

An online Master's degree survey was given to 62 undergraduate students in Educational Psychology classes at a western university. Two students did not answer the demographic questions. The students' demographic information is presented in table 1. The majority of students that completed the survey were female between the ages of 20-30. This is inline with the overall statistics for the college of education. According to the university's databook between 2001-2005, 75% of undergraduate students in the college of education were female and 25% were male.

### *INSTRUMENT*

A survey (see Appendix A) was created to gather information regarding students' attitudes toward online and traditional Master's degree programs. An online program is any program offered completely online and a traditional program involves coming to a class with an instructor and lecture format. The survey included demographic questions as well as statements about online Master's programs overall and then separate statements that examine their attitude about Traditional Master's programs. Students were asked to rate their opinions to the statements on a five-point Likert Scale with one being "strongly disagree" and five being "strongly agree".

*Table 1. Demographic Information*

Gender	87.5% female	9.4% male		
Age	3.1% under 20	81.3% age 20-30	10.9% age 31-40	1.6% age 51-60
Urban/Rural	62.5% urban	34.4% rural		
Marital Status	78.1% single	14.1% married	4.7% divorced	
Level of Educ	59.4% High School	25.0% Associates	12.5% Bachelors	
Internet access	92.2% have access	4.7% did not		
Completed	62.5% have	34.4 have not		
Online Course				
Distance from Univ.	39.1% under 5 miles	43.8% 10-20 miles	0 % 21-30 miles	14.1% 30+ miles

*Note.* Two students did not answer the demographic questions.

## PROCEDURES

Students were recruited from Educational Psychology classes at a western university. The logic for using undergraduate students was that they are potential future Master's students. Students were given the survey to complete and hand in during the last 10 minutes of their class in line with the standards put forth by the Human Subjects Committee. Students were not offered extra credit and did not receive any type of reimbursement for their participation.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

### DATA ANALYSIS ONE

The first analysis was performed to answer the first research question: Do students prefer an online program over a traditional Master's program? This first analysis included all students surveyed as a group and did not distinguish between those who had taken online courses and those who had not. The logic being that this represents the student population as a whole that may be pursuing a Master's degree in the future. The 10 main survey statements are included in table 2. Scores of statements one to three were compared with that of statements four to six using a Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test. A non-parametric test was selected because Likert scale data is ordinal and does not meet the assumptions necessary to run a parametric statistic (Seigel & Castellan, 1988). The results were significant for all three pairs of statements. The comparison of statement one with statement four looked at student opinion regarding how worthwhile each degree would be for their future career. Students rated the traditional Master's degree program as more worthwhile ( $M_{Q1} = 3.32$ ;  $M_{Q4}=4.03$ ). The Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test was significant ( $Z= 3.71$ ,  $N=63$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Eta-squared was performed as an effect size measure and showed a large difference ( $\eta^2 = .22$ ). According to Seigel & Castellan (1988) .01 is a small effect size, .06 is a medium effect size, and .14 and up is a large effect size.

The comparison of statement two with statement five examined whether the students felt employers would accept the two different Master's programs. Students felt more strongly that employers would accept the traditional Master's degree ( $M_{Q2} = 2.97$ ,  $M_{Q5} = 4.15$ ). The difference was significant ( $Z = -4.98$ ,  $N = 54$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Again, eta-squared was performed and found a large effect size ( $\eta^2 = .46$ ).

The comparison of statement three with statement six examined whether the students

felt the different programs were worthwhile for their future career. The difference was significant ( $Z = -5.09$ ,  $N = 63$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and eta-squared found a large effect size ( $\eta^2 = .41$ ). Students rated the traditional Master's program as more worthwhile for their future career than the online Master's program ( $M_{Q3} = 2.98$ ,  $M_{Q6} = 4.19$ ). Overall, students felt the traditional program was more beneficial to their future employment and careers.

*Table 2. Ten Main Statements of the Survey*

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1. An online Master's degree is worthwhile for my future career
2. An online Master's degree will be accepted by my future employer
3. I would enroll in an online Master's degree program
4. A Master's degree from a traditional university is worthwhile for my future career
5. A traditional Master's degree will be accepted by my future employer
6. I would enroll in a traditional Master's degree program
7. Online degrees are of the same instructional quality as traditional degrees
8. Online courses require more student effort than in-class
9. An online Master's degree costs the same as a traditional program
10. The online Master's degree could replace the traditional program

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On average, students choose “neither agree nor disagree” for statements seven, nine, and ten. The means and modes are included in table 3 below. This suggests that students did not have a strong opinion in regards to differences in instructional quality, costs, and whether the online program would replace the traditional program. However, on statement eight the most given response was a “four” which suggests students felt that online courses required more effort than traditional courses.

*Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Statements 7-10*

	O7	O8	O9	O10
Mean	2.86	3.19	2.95	2.79
Mode	3	4	3	3

Note. N = 63

**DATA ANALYSIS TWO**

A second data analysis was performed to answer the second research question “Do students with online experience prefer an online program over a traditional Master's program?” The second analysis was done using the same statements but looking at only those students with online experience as indicated in the demographic information section of the questionnaire. These participants were separated out because they had indicated on their survey they had taken or were currently taking an online course. The logic for doing this was that these participants might have different attitudes because of previous online experiences (Small & Lohrasbi, 2003).

The results were significant for all three pairs of statements. The students with online experience still felt the traditional degree was more worthwhile for their future career. Students with online experience rated the traditional Master's degree program as more worthwhile ( $M_{Q1} = 3.33$ ;  $M_{Q4} = 4.00$ ). This was significant ( $Z = -2.74$ ,  $N = 40$ ,  $p < .006$ ) and eta-squared found a large effect size ( $\eta^2 = .19$ ).

Students with online experience also felt more strongly that employers would accept the traditional Master's degree ( $M_{Q2} = 2.98$ ,  $M_{Q5} = 4.1$ ). The difference was significant ( $Z = -3.74$ ,  $N = 35$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Again, eta-squared was performed and found a large effect size ( $\eta^2 = .40$ ).

Lastly, students with online experience felt the traditional program was more worthwhile for their future career. The difference was significant ( $Z = -3.93$ ,  $N = 40$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and eta-squared found a large effect size ( $\eta^2 = .39$ ).

## CONCLUSION

The results of the study show education students felt traditional programs were more beneficial to their future careers and more important to employers. Students did not have an opinion about the quality or costs of online versus traditional programs but did feel that online classes required more effort, which is in line with the O'Malley and McCraw study (1999). When the analysis was performed on those students with experience in online courses the results did not change. These students also felt traditional programs were more beneficial to their careers and more valuable to future employers. The results of this study are contrary to the results found by Small and Lohrasbi (2003). That study found students with online experience felt the two programs were equal in how beneficial the degree was to their career and future. Both studies agreed that students felt online programs were not as accepted by employers.

These results suggest students coming from a traditional university setting are more likely to enroll in a traditional Master's degree program. Colleges can use this information to help design programs around students' wants and needs. Although both programs offer services that might be beneficial to students in different stages of their lives, the results do not seem to indicate online programs will be taking the place of traditional programs any time in the near future.

One limitation to this study is the students recruited for this survey were primarily from traditional degree programs. Perhaps, if the students were recruited from an online or a distance-learning bachelor's program the results might have been different. Further research examining the differences of opinion for full-time online students versus traditional education students needs to be undertaken. In addition, it would be interesting to look at whether they would feel differently about an online degree program if offered from the same university that they would enroll as a traditional student. Dolezalek (2003) found when surveying employers that it was not that the program was online that biased them, but instead the name of the institution was unknown and therefore not credible. More and more universities are offering Master's degree programs that are online. In this case, there would be no indication on the diploma of how the student met the degree requirements other than they have obtained the degree. Perhaps this may change their attitudes about online programs.

Another possible area of investigation would be to compare actual graduate students' attitudes of online programs to the attitudes of undergraduates to see if there is a significant difference. In addition, a closer look needs to be taken at whether employers feel an online Master's of Education is equal to the traditional Master's program.

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**APPENDIX***Online Master's Degree Survey*

1. You are....  male  female.
  2. Your age...  under 20  20-30  31-40  41-50  51-60  61+
  3. Your residence...  urban  rural
  4. Your marital status... single  married  divorced
  5. Your highest level of education ...  High school diploma  Associate's Degree  
 Bachelor's Degree  other\_\_\_\_\_
  6. I have Internet access at home  Yes  No
  7. I have taken a course online  Yes  No
  8. How far do you live from UNR?  under 5 miles  10-20  21-30  30 and over
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Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements by circling the appropriate number following the statements below.

- 1 = SD = Strongly Disagree**  
**2 = D = Disagree**  
**3 = N = Neither agree nor disagree**  
**4 = A = Agree**  
**5 = SA = Strongly Agree**
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	SD	D	N	A	SA
1. I plan to enroll in a Master's degree program in the future	1	2	3	4	5
2. An <u>online Master's degree</u> is worthwhile for my future career	1	2	3	4	5
3. An <u>online Master's degree</u> will be accepted by my future employer	1	2	3	4	5
4. A <u>Master's degree from a traditional university</u> is worthwhile for my future career	1	2	3	4	5
5. A <u>traditional Master's degree</u> will be accepted by my future employer	1	2	3	4	5
6. Online degrees are of the same instructional quality as traditional degrees	1	2	3	4	5
7. Online courses require more student effort than in-class	1	2	3	4	5
8. An online Master's degree is equal to a traditional degree	1	2	3	4	5
9. An online Master's degree costs the same as a traditional University program	1	2	3	4	5
10. The online Master's degree could replace the traditional degree	1	2	3	4	5

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