

**Student Focus Groups:
Experiences Learning in FlexSync and Online Synchronous Courses
Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning**

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Student Focus Groups: Experiences Learning FlexSync and Online Synchronous Courses

In Fall 2020, the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) recruited students who were enrolled in FlexSync and online (synchronous and asynchronous) courses to participate in focus groups about their experiences. Recruitment messages were shared via emails from departments and also on the MavLife app during October and November.

A total of 26 students indicated interest and completed the focus groups. The focus groups were scheduled and conducted in November 2020. Six focus groups were conducted in total with the size of the groups ranging from two to four participants and took place via Zoom. Focus groups lasted between 30 and 40 minutes and were conducted by four students (2 undergraduate and 2 graduate; 2 female and 2 male; all identified as students of color) trained to assist with research projects in CETL. Transcripts from the recorded sessions were analyzed for themes by the CETL Director.

Students were asked to respond to the following questions:

- Describe your classroom experiences last spring and this fall.
- What is going well for you in your online or FlexSync courses?
- What hinders your ability to learn in these formats?
- What resources are needed to help you be successful in your online and FlexSync?
- Why are students not attending in-person when they indicated they wanted to be?
- Why might academic dishonesty be a growing problem this spring and fall?
- Share other comments or feedback about your teaching.

Participant Profile

Participants represented all six colleges and identified with the following demographic characteristics:

- 15 domestic and 11 international;
- 17 female and 9 male;
- 10 Asian, 3 Black, 1 SE Asian, 11 White

Additionally, the participants ranged in the number of years they have been attending Minnesota State University, Mankato from one to five years, with 15 indicating that they have been enrolled one year or less at the institution. All students received a \$25 GrubHub gift card for participation.

Findings

Upon review of the focus group data, four themes emerged: a) defining expectations; b) mixed messages; c) connections; and d) access. Each theme will be explored in further detail.

Defining Expectations

Students described feelings of uncertainty regarding their expectations in online learning. This was particularly noticeable in their conversations about engagement in their course and when asked to talk about the prevalence of academic dishonesty. Engagement in many classrooms, particularly in FlexSync and synchronous online courses was not defined. Students expressed concerns about how they were to interact and what was expected of them. As one student indicated, “Whatever the group leader is doing is what I’m going to do, and if the teacher don’t have their camera on, I don’t see a point having mine on. I think the camera on does add that face-to-face a little bit, you can kind of see everyone.” Others shared, “<Professor> makes us keep our cameras off.” Another shared, “I know, like I think <Professor>, in the first class, she just like, I expect you, I don’t know if she said that, but I’m pretty sure she expects us to have our cameras on.” A similar sentiment was shared by another student, “Yeah, I have some classes that

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require your video to be on, and some don't so it seems to depend upon that teacher as I have the teacher that do not want to have video on from anyone except from him so that's his choice, and I don't turn my video on." Students would benefit from more clearly defined expectations around engagement to reduce confusion.

They also felt that a lack of accountability played a significant role in feelings of uncertainty about expectations. For examples, one student shared the following: "The fact that you can turn off your video and sound which I haven't done this but take them off and take a nap. It's like that makes it a lot easy, there is not structure, you are not be held accountable."

Another student had the following comment, "What hinders is I think some students when they're on the Zoom call, the position, like they're all sitting like this or like this. And then it irritates me. And so then I try to speak to you as some people carry their phones like they are walking up and out. Like they are going for a walk during a Zoom class! So, yeah, it is annoying. Many students don't know what etiquette to follow."

Cheating and academic dishonesty was another area that students felt needed to be defined more clearly, particularly in online learning settings where they felt the rules were less clear. As one of the participants shared, "I think there's probably a fine line between, you know helping each other out on you know like math homework, and you know, getting questions solved." Others shared statements like, "Everybody has the same answers and like they've never said anything like no partners, like no groups. And so, kids are getting the work done together." Finally, some students commented on how exams are open notes and open book in some classes and that can cause confusion where cheating is not clearly defined. "So, like from the start they're making exams open notes and open books. The student isn't cheating, is just going to his notes and maybe help him learn a little better than just straight up cheating as well." It was clear that in some settings utilizing course materials was considered cheating but when this was accepted, cheating was typically difficult to define.

Mixed Messages

Students expressed concern with a lack of consistency in how courses were presented and that when instructions and course organization was not consistent, there was confusion. Students also mentioned that they themselves were known to give mixed messages, particularly when indicating early on in the semester that they preferred to attend class in-person and then over time chose not to attend in person.

One student shared the following challenge when attempting to determine what was required for each online course and how it was organized. "I went to the library a couple of times to just sit, try and focus, but it's just figuring out what to do for each class because everyone else has a different system that works for them." Sharing a frustration with this thought around mixed messages, a student shared, "Everybody [instructors] tries to use D2L but nobody uses it the same. So, it makes it really hard to navigate because if one teacher fills in everything and another teacher does not touch it until grading and even though I had a teacher who does not use D2L at all and just goes, 'here is your course syllabus.'"

As mentioned previously, students were asked to share why there was a perception of mixed messages regarding their desires to attend classes in person but then not actually attending in this modality. Typically, students shared thoughts related to attendance and tardiness policies, ease of attending online, and uncertainty about who might be attending. This uncertainty led to some anxiety because students did not feel connected to the instructor nor the other students in the class. Because of this, they were anxious about attending, not knowing who might be there.

Regarding attendance and tardiness policies, students shared thoughts similar to the following: "Just think about it, if you are living a little far from campus then you have to worry about catching the bus. If you

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are late, your attendance is gone, but if you are at home, you can't miss class. To be honest, it makes a person attend online because you can't miss it." Another student shared the following about why there are mixed messages about attendance preference, "Well I think it's physically laziness because I have that sometimes. One day I don't feel like going and then you just end up like being online. I think it's just pure laziness." Others commented on the how FlexSync and online courses were more flexible, allowing course work to be scheduled outside of the class meeting times. "I like the fact that it is flexible because some days I might be busy with meetings or work and other, and then I can adjust my school schedule around everything else." Finally, there was a comment related to concerns about not knowing who might show up to class in person, "I like don't who is going to be there. I have never seen their faces before. If I don't know who is going to be there and I don't want to be the only one, so I just don't go."

Connections

Making connections with both faculty and other students was perceived to be extremely difficult for students. It presented one of greatest challenge to students feeling as if they were being successful. Below are several quotes of how students described the impact of a lack of connection with both faculty and their peers:

- "I had one class that I withdrew from; I never saw anybody's face."
- "Connecting with other classmates is something that definitely has changed because I don't know any of my classmates because everything is online, so I have never seen most of my classmates."
- "Like a con I guess would be like not having that face-to-face but like all your professors. Talking to my brother and sister who both graduated from here. [They say] those relationships with your professors early on like, especially with all of them is. Not being able to build those relationships face-to-face kind of sucks."
- "I prefer to be in-person just because you can ask more questions and it is more interactive."
- "I don't even know my classmates even if I want someone to show me like how to do the example."
- "I don't know, maybe it was that I could only register for classes online, but I was hoping to meet new people, but I didn't get that chance. I have to be, like stuck in my apartment."
- "Yeah, as a fresh currently, I have to 100% agree like I don't know anybody in my class, hardly recognize one or two faces, and when I go to lab once or twice a week because that's the only thing I have in-person. I am also in the band and I think I could only make only one connection with one person in my whole first semester."

Additionally, students commented on how the conversations happening in class and after with faculty and peers is important to progress with course work and to understand the material. However, online course delivery made these interactions difficulty. "It's like doing any group work is kind of hard. Because you have to email everybody, and you know, text everybody and make a specific time. Like sometimes, time doesn't work for everybody. But in class it is little, little bit easier. Like just talking and all that. The work can be done a little bit faster, I guess." Another student added to this statement saying, "If you are in a group, and it's an in-class, yeah, that's the moment after you are like all right let's have a twenty-minute meeting and just get it over with. But, unlike now, in the online, you have to wait for everyone's message. Right now, everyone's [email inbox] is filled up with all the notifications."

Others shared that the perceived lag time for communication created by online interactions creates uncertainty and concern. "If you are in class, you know you are going to go. You know, the next day that you're going to have class and you're gonna have to show up and then you are literally going to show the professor that this the problem that you have, you know? [They] give you some solutions or something like that. But when you are expecting an email, you're not actually sure, like, has the professor gotten the email or not. You are not even sure about that. Like the kind of pressure, Oh, my God, you know? What should I do? Should I call him? Should I text him? Or should I send him a second email?"

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Access

Online teaching modalities have created both positive and negative consequences related to access to both the course material and the instructors. Many students commented that with the increased access to the course materials including recorded lectures, they have struggled with time management. “When I have 3 or 4 projects all coming in at the same time and so it's really hard to keep an eye on due dates and how much time I have to give to each of them. So, time management is a problem.” “I would say the same thing for procrastination. Like that's the main thing that I struggle with. Okay, I'm going to watch the lecture and get back to this again, but you're never getting back to this again.”

Others reflected on how procrastination with viewing or attending class meetings led to problems being successful in class. “And then I feel like that then you kind of procrastinate, and then you struggle on later. But then I also feel like with working, I know since we're like online and you have the ability to watch the lecture later, you are just like, I will take that shift during class periods, and they don't have to show up [to class].” Another example of time management concern was shared with the following story, “I have four lectures to finish watching. So, I take each lecture, each lecture is 30 minutes, so I know it's going to take me two hours to finish the lectures. So, at 10pm my exam is due, but I start my course lectures during 6pm or 5pm so that I have like a half an hour before its due. That's what online has brought to me.”

Many students commented on how access to lectures at a later time was helpful to them, especially if they were in a different time zone and when want to review material. “It will be hard for me to do FlexSync courses to attend Zoom meetings. I could attend Zoom meetings, but they would be at like 3am and my concentration would not be good. [I can] Listen to lectures whatever time I wanted; I feel like online classes are better.” Another shared, “The recordings of his lectures help from the class where it's taught in-person. So, I just have the online options. So, he puts those in there so if we have any questions, we can watch the recordings, and they usually have most of the answers to my questions.”

Access to help, whether from instructors or tutors was perceived to be more difficult in an online environment. “So, because you have to mail them, and you know, the professors email list will be like crazy. So, it takes a lot of time to respond to that.” For live Zoom course sessions, access to the instructor is a problem as well,

Or even if you are concentrating, you can, in the offline class, you can literally ask professor on the spot like, what do you mean by this term? Right? But during the online thing, if you do not understand something, I'm pretty sure you cannot ask the professor on the spot or like, can you explain to me? If you are right interrupting him, you- you don't feel like it's that much ethical to ask during, while he's speaking online. I don't know why but I feel that way. But even if you put it in the inbox, he might look up five or ten minutes later. And meanwhile you just feel out of the blue because you don't understand something. And you're like ok, ok just leave it. From there you just leave the whole class.

Being able to get the help that is needed also led students to engage in academic dishonesty. “It's [cheating] has been a problem because they are not getting the experience or explanation they need from the professor, especially those courses where the professor doesn't hold Zoom meetings, doesn't lecture. They just send you homework and you don't know what to do. You have no option but to look at stuff because you need the grade.” Another stated, “So I feel like just meeting one day once a week is like necessary for your buildup questions.” Others, when asked why academic dishonesty has been a larger problem during Fall 2020 than it has been in the past, stated the following:

- “It's like really hard to reach the teachers because they don't reply on the weekends. Most of my exams are due at Friday night. So, if I miss something or I have a problem with something, they be like, oh we don't reply on the weekends.”
- “I was struggling. I want help from tutors but there weren't many days like they were available.”

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- “Many of my classes are junior level, so some of them don’t have tutors. As engineering students, sometimes it takes more time to understand a concept by ourselves.

Conclusion

Students shared their experiences of learning during Fall 2020. These experiences provide some suggestions for changes and resources to be considered for development to support learning in virtual settings. Some specific recommendations to consider include:

- Establishing clear expectations for students from assignments, exams, to communication practices, and class facilitation.
- Utilizing D2L tools that students have indicated will support their success including due dates, announcements, and grades.
- Evaluating student success resource availability to meet changing needs created by online modalities.
- Making time and space for students to connect to one another and instructors to help them create relationships that are crucial for their wellbeing and academic success.