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THE IMPACT OF ONLINE STUDENT-PROFESSOR RELATIONSHIPS ON COURSE PERFORMANCE AND TURNOVER INTENTIONS

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Abstract

In recent years, online education has played an essential part in the delivery of knowledge and is now vital to the long-term strategic planning and management of higher education in the United States. Historically, colleges and universities offered the traditional face-to-face courses. With the advent of the internet, universities began offering web enhanced courses where face-to-face lectures were augmented with web resources. As more students became web savvy, universities offered courses that were a hybrid (blended/ flipped) of limited face-to-face interactions and significant online delivery of content to the students. In recent years with the proliferation of internet-based technologies and platforms, universities have engendered a massive transformation of online courses from a class enrollment of few hundred students to Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) that have enrollments of over a million students who span across the globe.

According to the Babson Survey Research Group, online courses are those in which greater than 80 percent of the content is delivered online and typically have no face-to-face meetings (Allen & Seaman, 2013). The Babson Survey Research Group has tracked the online enrollment of 2,820 for-profit and nonprofit degree-granting colleges and universities for the past 10 years. The report provides evidence that over 6.7 million students (~32% of total enrollment) took at least one online course during fall 2011. Over 62.4% of colleges surveyed now offer complete online programs as compared to 34.5% in 2002. Also, the report shows that business, computer, and information sciences have shown steady growth in enrollments while health professions appear to be growing at a faster pace. Overall, there is a general agreement among college and university presidents that there will be substantial growth in online learning and most students in the future will take many classes online (Parker, Lenhart, & More, 2011).

Interestingly, the growth of online education has attracted the attention of professors, students, politicians, university administrators, parents of students, financial institutions, and various stakeholders of universities and educational systems. The advocates of online education believe that online education will decrease higher education costs and will improve access to quality education without compromising student outcomes. However, the critics of online education argue that online educational programs are mediocre and conducive only to the motivated students (Harvard Magazine, 2014). Further, critics believe that online programs promote plagiarism, decrease the overall educational experience, diminish the quality of student learning, and increase dropout rates (Parker, Lenhart, & More, 2011). This debate on the strengths and weaknesses of online education will likely continue well into the future.

The authors endeavor to bring to focus a neglected issue in the debate on the pros and cons of online education and one that has a greater impact on professor-student and university-student relationships. As universities respond to the needs of its stakeholders through the proliferation of online education programs and due to the revolutionary changes in how online education is delivered, we believe students (a) are physically, socially, and psychologically separated from their universities, (b) rely extensively on electronic media for communication with fellow students and professors, (c) have less access to peer support, (d) have fewer informal interactions with

fellow students and professors, and (e) generally, receive scripted, rather than face-to-face, feedback from professors (Mulki et al., 2008; Badrinarayanan, Jillapalli, & Becerra, 2010). On one hand, students enjoy the flexibility and mobility in performing their learning responsibilities and on the other hand, students have reduced opportunities to build and maintain interpersonal relationships with their professors, fellow students, and the university. The lack of interpersonal relationships could lead to “lone wolf tendencies,” reduced course performance, and higher turnover intentions (Mulki et al., 2007).

This research draws from the context of distal salesperson-supervisor relationships (Cron & DeCarlo, 2006; Jaworski & Kohli 1991; Kohli, 1989), self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000; LaGuardia et al., 2000, Deci & Ryan, 1985), communication theories (Dennis, Fuller, & Valacich, 2008; Daft & Lengel, 1986), and human brands research (Thomson, 2006; Jillapalli and Wilcox, 2010; Jillapalli and Jillapalli, 2014) and extends to the context of professor-student relationships. Thus, an understanding of the antecedents and nature of online student-professor relationships on attachments, course performance and turnover intentions is crucial in an ever growing environment of online education. However, there are several relevant theories such as “instructor immediacy” (Christophel, 1990), “transactional distance theory” (Moore, 1973; Moore & Kearsley, 1996), “concept of communication immediacy” (Mehrabian, 1971), “learning community” (Swan, 2004, 2002; Roberson & Klotz, 2001; Boyer, 1995; Gabelnick, 1990; McMillan & Chavis, 1986), and “social presence” (Tu & Mclsaac, 2002) that can enhance our understanding of professor-student relationships in an online learning environment.

The conceptual framework captures the essence of self-determination theory and posits that in the context of online student-professor relationships, strong attachments form when professors are responsive to the innate needs (autonomy, competence and relatedness) of online students and the fulfillment of these innate needs discourage “lone wolf tendencies.” Interestingly, communication theories suggest that technology-enabled communication platforms must enhance media synchronicity (synchronous and asynchronous) and media richness to foster student attachments with the professor in an online context. In addition to media synchronicity and media richness, we submit that periodic face-to-face interactions between professor and students are important to enhance strong student attachments to the professor. Furthermore, the intensity of these relational attachments to the professor engender relationship outcomes such as increased course performance and reduced turnover intentions.

To the extent that the research propositions presented in this paper are supported, the implications to professors, university administrators, and academic literature are substantial. This research contributes to the body of academic online literature by providing a theoretical framework for online students-professor relationships. To the professors, this research highlights the importance of satisfying the innate psychological needs of online students and encouraging periodic face-to-face interactions to improve students’ course performance. For the university administrators, this research could provide practical guidelines to improve the overall online educational experience, augment the quality of student learning, and help reduce course dropout rates. In summary, this research underscores the importance of cultivating and enhancing interpersonal relationships between the professor and students in an evolving and dynamic online educational environment.

References Available upon Request