

Pandemic or Profession? Factors Motivating Students to Pursue an Online Bachelor's Degree

Dr. Carolyn Kusbit Dunn, East Carolina University

Carolyn Kusbit Dunn is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Technology Systems at East Carolina University. Dr. Dunn teaches Technical Writing and Technical Presentations, and centers her research on the pedagogy of technical writing, crisis and risk communication, and the the ethics of crisis and risk communication.

Dr. David L. Batts, East Carolina University

David Batts, Ed.D., is an assistant professor in the Department of Technology Systems at East Carolina University. His career experiences include industrial consulting and managing an outreach center. His research interests include Distance education qual

Introduction

In the Fall of 2021, many universities attempted to return to a semblance of normalcy after a year and a half of COVID restrictions. This seemed an appropriate time to survey distance education students about their experience, and how COVID impacted their decisions about their education. An online survey was sent to all currently enrolled distance education students (591 students in all) in the Bachelor of Science in Industrial Technology program at East Carolina University (ECU). In addition to several other questions, the survey asked students about the decisions they made regarding class enrollment during the COVID 19 pandemic in the fall 2021 semester. The goal was to ascertain whether the pandemic, and subsequent moves to all virtual education, resulted in students taking less or more courses, and the reasons behind those changes. Preliminary data from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center indicate that new enrollments declined in 2020, and that reductions in course hours occurred later in Spring 2020 than usual – after widespread shutdowns in March [1]. This paper attempts to discern whether similar trends were seen in the ECU BSIT program, and what role COVID played in decisions to add to or reduce course schedules. The paper also explores the importance of why these students were attaining a four-year degree.

Bachelor of Science in Industrial Technology

The Associates of Applied Science (AAS) degrees were once considered terminal degrees and developed for people seeking technical skills to join the workforce. Students in community colleges who wanted to transfer to a four-year institution would seek an Associates of Art (AA) or Associates of Science (AS) degree.

East Carolina University developed a pathway for graduates of AAS degree programs to receive their four-year degree without having to start completely over. The Bachelor of Science degree in Industrial Technology (BSIT) has eight concentrations: Industrial Management, Industrial Engineering Technology, Information and Computer Technology, Distribution and Logistics, Mechanical Design Technology, Architectural Design Technology, Health Information Technology, and Bioprocess Manufacturing. Not only does this provide students with a wide variety of technical degree choices, six of the eight can be completed entirely online. This provides students from all over the state of North Carolina and all over the United States an opportunity to complete their four-year degree without ever having to come to campus, and they can continue to work while they complete their studies.

The BSIT program has seen dramatic growth over the last 16 years at ECU. In 2005, there were 170 students enrolled in this program. This number has drastically increased to 638 students in the fall of 2021. Of the 638 students, 89% were taking classes online. COVID 19 forced education institutions to convert face-to-face classes online; however, did this affect what current distance education students decided to take during the pandemic? Also, what was most important to students for attaining a four-year degree.

COVID and Online Instruction

A number of scholars have explored how COVID 19 impacted education. Wester et al. noted a decline in engagement among STEM students during the pandemic [2]. Likewise, in another study, students surveyed about the transition from face to face to virtual classes tended to evaluate the transition poorly, citing drops in enjoyment, interest, and value [3]. Means and Neisler described not only student dissatisfaction with the switch to online learning, but also the barriers that the sudden change raised for students [4]. However, these findings addressed traditional on campus programs that moved to an online format during the pandemic. Would the findings be the same for programs that were already fully online, as is the case with the BSIT? Did the pandemic result in similar problems for online students, or were they faced with different concerns, such as loss of a job, or increased working hours in an ‘essential’ workplace?

The survey in question contained three questions that dealt with COVID 19. The first question asked students if they were taking more, the same, or less classes during the COVID 19 pandemic and subsequent economic downturn. Two subsequent questions asked for the rationale behind a student’s decision to take more or less courses during the COVID 19 pandemic. Researchers were interested not only in *what* decisions students made, but in discerning what factors may have impacted student decision making, and what that might imply.

Summary of Survey Results

There were 104 responses after fourteen days of the survey being sent to the student population (n=566). The current response rate is 18.4 percent. Respondents reported overwhelmingly taking the same number of classes during the pandemic with 77 recorded. This represents 74% of students’ responses. There were thirteen students (12.5%) who stated they took more classes and six (5.8%) stated they took less classes. Authors do note that one student responded other but, in the narrative, stated that they took less classes. Responses that indicated “other” (n=7; 6.7%) to taking more, less, or the same number of courses were excluded from our primary analyses if respondents indicated the fall 2021 semester was their first being enrolled in the BSIT program (n=4; 3.8%) or if they returned after a period of absence (n=1; 0.01%). However, these respondents are still represented in the total sample size.

Table 1.

During COVID-19 and the economic downturn, are you taking more, the same, or less courses per semester?

Response	Frequency	Frequency Percentage
More Courses	13	12.5
The Same Amount	77	74.0
Less Courses	7	6.7
Other	7	6.7
Total	104	100.0

Note the authors changed the response rate for less courses from six to seven due to the response of a student stating that they took less classes during the pandemic

There were thirteen students who stated they took more classes. The responses on why they took more classes are as follows:

- I was taking online classes prior to starting this Fall semester. I took online 4 classes between the spring and summer semester as I was working full time. I am currently taking 5 classes this semester.
- Because I want to complete my degree as early as soon.
- It was a mistake, I should have kept it the same.
- I took 1 1/2 years off from school to focus on home life (new baby, new house, new job). We were also tight financially and I could not afford the cost of classes too.
- I have more time available.
- More time to do more classes or the classes are offered online which allows for more to be taken at once.
- Trying to complete my degree sooner.
- I took a winter semester class along with some extra course one semester as I was staying home and had the time. I have now returned to my normal 2 class per semester load.
- More time at home.
- Speed up graduation date.
- Working from home allowed me more time to focus on my study. No commute to deal with.
- Quicker degree completion.
- I was originally part-time in school and full-time in manufacturing as an operator. During COVID I was laid off and decided to take school on full-time to finish my degree faster and to be able to start working at the level I would like to in manufacturing.

As seen in the responses, a majority reported that they had more time at home and could take more classes. However, five responses dealt with completing the degree sooner. This aligns with how the students responded to the question of the importance of job advancement with earning their four-year degree (see Table 2). Nearly 90% of the respondents said job advancement was important or very important. Only 4.8 percent said it was not important.

Table 2.
Importance of **Job Advancement** on why you decided to get a four-year degree.

	Frequency	Frequency Percent
Very Important	74	71.2
Important	18	17.3
Slightly Important	7	6.7
Not Important	5	4.8
Total	104	100.0

There were six students who stated they took less classes. The responses on why they took less classes are as follows:

- Working full time, getting my feet wet at new school, online courses.
- I have a new born.
- Covid, having to work more to provide for myself.
- Had to pay for own class... financial Aid ran out.
- Affordability, not financial aid, no scholarships.
- I work a fulltime job and more classes is difficult right now

The responses show that only one of the six students mentioned Covid having an impact on the number of classes taken during the pandemic.

COVID 19 did not seem to play a factor in students taking less or more classes. Of the respondents, 74% stated they were taking the same number of classes. As noted earlier, 88.5% stated job advancement as why they were pursuing the four-year degree. This is similar to how the students stated that increased salary and professional goal was important or very important. 88.4% stated that Increased salary was important or very important to attaining their four-year degree (see Table 3). Similarly, 87.5% of the students said that professional goal was important or very important to seeking their four-year degree (see Table 4).

Table 3.

Importance of **Increased Salary** on why you decided to get a four-year degree.

	Frequency	Frequency Percent
Very Important	64	61.5
Important	28	26.9
Slightly Important	6	5.8
Not Important	6	5.8
Total	104	100.0

Table 4.

Importance of **Professional Goal** on why you decided to get a four-year degree.

	Frequency	Frequency Percent
Very Important	66	63.5
Important	25	24.0
Slightly Important	9	8.7
Not Important	4	3.8
Total	104	100.0

Implications

The majority of the online students stated that the number of classes taken during the pandemic did not change. The pandemic and all that was involved with it, did not affect online students and the number of classes they took. However, twelve percent stated that they took more classes with a majority stating that they had more time at home. It seems that some students

took advantage of the time at home due to COVID 19. Only one response said they took less classes due to the pandemic. However, it was mentioned by 38% of students taking more classes was due to trying to finish the degree sooner. This aligns with how the students ranked the importance of getting their four-year degree. The ranked job advancement, increased salary and professional goal as important or very important by nearly 90% of the respondents.

The results from this sample of BSIT students at ECU indicate academic institutions should not expect a dramatic increase or decrease of course enrollment for online students based on a pandemic that keeps citizens home more. It is also noted that AAS transfer students seek a four year degree for their professional growth.

Conclusion

The majority of respondents indicated their course load stayed consistent during the pandemic, and several students responded that the extra time at home during the pandemic closures prompted them to take on additional coursework. It seems the pandemic presented an opportunity for some home bound students to advance in their coursework. This is an interesting divergence from the bulk of the literature reviewed previously, which suggested that engagement, value, and participation declined for many traditional on campus students who moved to virtual coursework during the pandemic. Unlike those trends in face-to-face programs, the survey results suggest that for students already enrolled in the fully online BSIT program, the pandemic did not present a problem in terms of finishing coursework, and in some cases, even encouraged students to take on additional courses they normally would not have.

References

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