Increasing Flexibility, Satisfaction, and Efficiency Using the Hybrid Flexible Approach

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Potential Solutions to an Ongoing Challenge

Colleges and universities of various sizes, both private and public, are striving to increase enrollment, while dealing with the issue of limited classroom space, and frequently these schools do not have the ability to expand the total number of classrooms through building projects because of budgetary constraints (Smith, 2016). This classroom space challenge is exacerbated by the traditional way of delivering undergraduate education, through classroom anchored, lecture-based course offerings that are typically offered in a two to three day per week, face-to-face format (Smith, 2016). Administrative solutions to this dilemma generally focus on extending the school day, either through the addition of earlier courses, later courses, or both. The adding of early courses may increase classroom options, but could negatively affect student learning (Owens, Belon, & Moss, 2010). The addition of later courses could increase capacity, but since two thirds of four-year college students work, this solution could also maximize schedule flexibility (McCormick, Moore III, & Kuh, 2012).

If building new buildings or extending the school day cannot be relied on to solve the classroom space deficit, what are some institutional options that will promote both student success and schedule flexibility? Administrators frequently look to online course offerings as a solution (Moe & Chubb, 2009). Online courses have the potential to increase campus capacity by moving some instruction out of the physical campus, as well as reduce overhead costs. Cost savings could be realized through decreased faculty pay for accelerated courses, through facility overhead cost decreases, as well as through potential revenue increases coming from increased campus capacity (Bowen, 2012).

A significant challenge to the online programs option is the fact that many students would not prefer an online course or program if given the option because of their learning preference to have face-to-face interaction. This is where the Hybrid Flexible (HyFlex) approach comes in. As we have seen in previous chapters, HyFlex courses are the combination of an online course and a hybrid/blended course that give students the ability to choose their learning modality from week to week, thus increasing their options for course and program completion. Additionally, from an institutional perspective, instead of offering two separate courses, with two separate teaching contracts, to potentially two separate professors, the Hyflex option brings the modalities together to help the institution realize potential cost and space savings.

Exploring the Hyflex Option

The potential cost savings is what drove the Adult and Professional Studies program at San Diego Christian College, a small private liberal arts college in Southern California, to explore the use of the HyFlex model. The non-traditional undergraduate program, since the 2016-17 academic year, had experienced lower than expected enrollment in both online and onsite course sections. Because of this enrollment decrease, it became evident that costs associated with this program needed to be reduced. The enrollment decrease made it so there were only 8-12 students in each course section (1 online/1/onsite) rather than close to the 24-student enrollment cap in each modality. The main objective of the program was to provide an excellent, flexible learning experience for all students in each modality. An important goal of the institution was to also run a robust program cost effectively, while making sure course sections are as full as possible. Single mode or teacher-led hybrid approaches could not fulfill the objective of an excellent, flexible learning experience because of low enrollment numbers in each modality offering. The goal of running the robust program in a cost-effective manner, while offering courses in two separate modalities, proved hard to achieve.

What It Looked Like

It was determined that, by combining unique online and onsite course sections together into unified courses, the institutional objectives/goals of an excellent learning experience and program cost effectiveness could be fulfilled. This combination of course modalities was achieved by building all courses in the program within the online modality, while also offering every student the weekly choice to participate in some discussion and application activities in the classroom instead of online. Building these classes in this way, as hybrid flexible, gave every student the ability to choose their attendance modality from week to week, even if many of them could not choose to attend onsite because of their proximity to the campus. Even if these students could not attend courses onsite, they were still able to participate in the course, alongside those onsite students, in the online discussions each week.   While initially no synchronous learning opportunities were given to the online students, some onsite course section professors recorded their onsite sessions and posted them for students to view and/or review. After a year or so in this format, weekly optional synchronous sessions were offered via the video conference tool built into LMS.

To promote student success and overall retention, the program established minimum attendance expectations, as well as late work policies across the program. The attendance policy required students to miss no more than two of the five weeks of the course, with attendance being tracked by either presence in the on-campus sessions or through completion of the equivalent learning activity designated as the participation/attendance assignment. Late work policy was established that allowed students to turn in late work up to one week late for 20% off the earned grade and prohibited all late submissions past that point. The one exception to this rule applied to asynchronous discussions that were not allowed to be turned in late for credit.

Implementation Process

Designing the Hybrid Flexible courses began with the standardization of format and flow of both onsite and online courses. This standardization of courses across the entire program was possible because all courses were not built by individual faculty members but by an instructional design team that collaborated with those course content experts to create relevant assignments, discussions, and media content. Once online and onsite courses were built within a standard format and flow, it was easier to then combine the courses into one unified Hybrid Flexible course. The move to Hybrid Flexible was communicated to the faculty well in advance of implementation, and both learning experience improvement and cost savings objectives were clearly pointed to as the motivation for this change. The initial design of the Hybrid Flexible courses was tested in select course sections to see how it functioned for both student and faculty. The design of these courses was then adjusted over several 5 week modules and training for both student and faculty was then created and made available within the student and faculty support center courses, housed in the learning management system.

One of the challenges that the school experienced, with moving an entire program into the Hyflex model, is that all faculty had to be in the San Diego area so they could come to campus to teach the onsite portion of the course. With strictly online courses the faculty pool was much larger as they were drawn from all over the United States. One additional challenge faced was the number of students who could potentially attend onsite shrank over time due to attrition and smaller than expected enrollment numbers for San Diego based students. This, at times, created a learning environment in the onsite course meeting that had too few students for good discussion and activity. This led to both student and faculty dissatisfaction. Accreditation was not a factor because the program was already approved to be taught both online and onsite and credit hours were the same for both attendance modalities. A salary increase to compensate for the additional work necessary to teach mixed modality courses was discussed, but in the end, was not implemented due to budget constraints.

Studying the Impact of Hyflex Implementation

The biggest impact made was in the area of cost effectiveness, where the program was able to realize over $170,000 in salary savings over one calendar year. During the time studied, individual course offerings were reduced by 126 courses, as onsite and online sections were combined. In addition to this savings, additional savings were realized through the reduction of the instructional design and human resource administrative time. The overall learning experience was also improved by increasing the overall student number of students in each course section, lending to more engaging and diverse online discussions.

For the purpose of completion of my doctoral dissertation, a mixed method causal comparative and phenomenological study was conducted to discover and examine the impact, if any, of 16-week traditional and five-week Hyflex delivery modalities on student learning and satisfaction within undergraduate courses. (Rhoads, 2020) Quantitative satisfaction data was collected through a Likert survey as well as through data extraction from the institution's student information system. Qualitative data was collected from students through open ended survey questions as well as from select faculty through interviews. For each of the two hypotheses, statistical analysis was presented through descriptive statistics as well as through comparative analysis. The quantitative analysis was followed by qualitative analysis that explored themes and patterns that emerged.

The participants in this study included a total purposive sample of eighty-one students from fifteen undergraduate courses, offered in the traditional and non-traditional programs, over the course of five academic semesters. Results from causal comparative analysis revealed the need for clear directions, and expectations along with an organized learning environment, and pointed to the Hyflex modality as stronger in these areas than the traditional modality. These strengths may come from the fact that online or hybrid courses with less face to face contact with students need to be more explicit in their written directions and expectations within the learning management system. It is recommended that traditionally delivered courses be built and organized like those within the Hyflex delivery modality, so directions and expectations are clear even if the student cannot make it to the physical classroom.

Results from phenomenological analysis revealed that students perceive that they learn better and are more satisfied when they are given choices for their schedule and course type rather than being assigned to courses without options or input. It was also revealed that many students prefer the traditional classroom, but schedule conflicts prohibit many of these students from attending according to their preference. It is recommended that traditionally delivered courses be built and organized in the Hyflex delivery modality format so students could attend according to their preference as much as possible, but also be given the flexibility to attend online when necessary.

Data analysis also revealed that students struggle with keeping up with accelerated, five week Hyflex or online courses when they also enrolled in a program that has primarily 16 week courses. It is recommended that traditional student enrollment in five week Hyflex courses be minimized when they are also enrolled in mostly 16 week traditional courses. If the entire traditional program could transition over to shorter five or eight week Hyflex courses, it could then be recommended for these traditional students because of its increased flexibility and decrease course enrollment overlap.

Results from phenomenological analysis of, "How did Hyflex courses impact faculty/staff performance or satisfaction?" revealed that faculty need to be properly trained in the administration of these courses, as well as paid fairly to compensate for the extra work of moderating two modalities within one course. It is recommended that an online faculty support course be built and required of all Hyflex faculty. It is also recommended that faculty be paid at a higher rate than stand alone traditional or online courses, in relation to the increased workload required of teaching Hyflex courses. These measures would certainly lead to higher satisfaction among Hyflex faculty.

It is recommended that future research be done to test the impact that different courses with identical curricular content and structure (Hyflex and traditional), but that are delivered via different modalities, have on success and satisfaction. Courses that were compared within this specific study had the same learning objectives, but curriculum and structure were different. It is recommended that research also done on the impact that different length courses, delivered via different modalities, have on success and satisfaction. Courses compared (Hyflex and traditional) in this study were different lengths and those lengths could have an impact on student learning/performance and satisfaction separate and apart from delivery modality. It is also recommended that research be done on the learning/performance and satisfaction of students only taking one or two courses at a time in the accelerated Hyflex model, versus four or five courses at a time in the longer traditional model. Traditional students within this study took four to five courses at a time while Hyflex students took one or two courses at a time, which could have an impact on student learning/performance separate and apart from delivery modality.

Hyflex in a New Context

Since the time of the study I have moved to another institution and currently hold the position of the Director of Teaching Excellence and Digital Pedagogy at Vanguard University. Part of my responsibility in this position is to train faculty in both undergraduate and graduate programs in the use of technology in the classroom as well as to introduce innovative approaches to content delivery, including the introduction of the Hyflex approach. Upon arrival at Vanguard I was able to create Hyflex templates of various lengths within the Canvas learning management system and upload them to Canvas Commons for use by our faculty as they built or rebuilt their courses. (See Figures 1. and 2.) These templates were designed based on the principles of Flipped Learning, James Lang's Small Teaching, and Universal Design for Learning and provide tool recommendations as well as verbiage examples for both undergraduate and graduate courses.

Figure 1

Homepage of the 8 Week Hyflex Course Template

8 Week/1 Day Per Week Hyflex Undergrad PS

Jump to Today

Assignments in this course require APA formatting. Please save this template to your desktop and use for all future assignments.

Do This Before Anything

Week 1 (8/12/19 - 8/18/19)

Week 2 (8/19/19 - 8/25/19)

Week 3 (8/26/19 - 9/1/19)

Week 4 (9/2/19 - 9/8/19)

Week 5 (9/9/19 - 9/15/19)

Week 6 (9/16/19 - 9/22/19)

Week 7 (9/23/19 - 9/29/19)

Week 8 (9/30/19 - 10/6/19)

Figure 2

Example of Weekly Coursework Format

Note. Lighter text indicates prerequisites/requirements not met to proceed to next module

In addition to the availability of these Hyflex templates, I was also able to customize and make available to faculty, a "Designing and Teaching for Impact in Online Course" that was originally created by faculty development team at Indiana University. (See Figure 3.)This course was originally created as a course that aimed at helping faculty build online courses using evidence-based practices, but now has been customized to help faculty build quality courses in all modalities, including the preferred multi-modality Hyflex format.

Figure 3

Homepage of Designing and Teaching for Impact Course

Designing & Teaching for Impact - Certification

DESIGNING AND TEACHING FOR IMPACT

This self-paced course was designed by Indiana University and adapted for use by the Institute for Faculty Development at Vanguard University. This certification course is for anyone developing and/or teaching any courses here at Vanguard. Completion of the course with a score of 100% is required for certification.

START HERE

Last updated 5/1/2020

At the time of this writing, our institution, along with institutions around the world, are dealing with the impact of the global pandemic called Covid-19. Our schools, some more prepared than others, have just made it through a Spring semester that was seriously disrupted and pushed online in a hurried fashion, frustrating students, faculty, and administrators alike. We are now in the beginning of the Summer term and have more time to plan for the inevitability of reduced seat time at a minimum, and the potential of another online semester for most institutional courses. Vanguard University is now in the middle of transitioning as many of our courses as possible to Hyflex to maximize flexibility for students, faculty, and administrators. Once built, these courses can be used as true Hyflex courses where students have the choice from week to week/session to session to attend online or on campus, or they can be used by faculty and administration to adjust how a course is delivered week by week as needed based on ever changing health and safety guidelines. We know we have a challenging road ahead of us, but we are confident that this approach has the best chance of significantly decreasing campus density, improving student and faculty satisfaction, maximizing overhead savings, and helping our institution be more student centered now and in the future, far beyond this current health crisis.

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Dr. David Rhoads is currently serving as the Director of Teaching Excellence and Digital Pedagogy at Vanguard University in Costa Mesa, California and has been teaching in the areas of leadership and educational technology for nearly a decade. Dr. Rhoads holds an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership from Concordia University Irvine, M.A. in Teaching and Learning with Technology from Ashford University, and a B.A. in Human Development from San Diego Christian College. He enjoys helping faculty do what they do best by equipping them with solutions and best practices for their classroom. David has extensive experience in the area of online pedagogy and program development, non-traditional enrollment and support, instructional design, and educational technology. David's background, prior to working in Higher Education, included teaching at the High School level as well as 12 years of youth and young adult ministry. David is passionate about helping faculty maximize face to face and online learning opportunities so their students can gain the most benefit from their instruction. He believes that our goal as educators should be to facilitate learning is such a way that encourages and equips students to be passionate life-long learners.