

## HyFlex at Montana State University Billings

### Montana State University Billings

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In 2015, Montana State University Billings sent two faculty from the Sociology department to the e-Learn Conference. It was from this event that we first became aware of the HyFlex teaching format. At the conference the format was branded a “true hybrid,” and our e-Learning staff rejected this singular interpretation of hybrid design. Despite the intriguing student-centered possibilities of HyFlex gleaned from the conference, no one from our e-Learning office followed up with the participating faculty or further researched the possibilities of HyFlex, in part due to the perception that the faculty had too narrow a vision of hybrid teaching.

Luckily, one of the faculty members who attended the conference, Dr. Joy Honea, did not lose her enthusiasm despite the tepid reception she received from our staff. During the fall semester of 2017, she reached out to see if there was faculty development money available to support her travel to a conference to learn more about HyFlex. Unable to locate an upcoming conference with HyFlex on the program, the Director of e-Learning, Dr. Sue Balter-Reitz, began researching HyFlex to see what resources were available. Dr. Brian Beatty’s name quickly appeared, and Sue emailed him to see if he had any presentations scheduled. He did not have anything on his docket, which turned out to be a fortunate event for MSUB. Instead of sending one faculty member to a conference, we asked if we could visit San Francisco State University to meet with Dr. Beatty and attend his custom workshop on HyFlex.

We were able to secure funds to send six of us to investigate the potential of HyFlex for our University. Our scouting party included the Director of e-Learning, an Instructional Designer, and four faculty members familiar with hybrid and online learning. We embarked for San Francisco State, hopeful that the HyFlex course delivery model would help us negotiate some of our enrollment and retention issues.

### MSUB’s Readiness for HyFlex Delivery

Montana State University Billings is a regional comprehensive university located in Billings Montana. Billings, with a population of approximately 105,000, (United States Census) is the largest city in the state. Health care and banking are the primary economic drivers in the city. Fifty-seven percent of students enrolled in the university are from Yellowstone County, where Billings is located. Almost all students work at least part time, and a good majority of them are employed full time. Needless to say, our students rely upon flexible course delivery modes in order to balance their competing priorities.

The University includes five colleges split into two campuses: University Campus and City College. City College is our embedded community college. The portfolio of programs offered by the institution spans one semester technical certificates to Master’s degrees. Headcount for Fall 2018 was 4,315 (Montana State University Billings) The average age

of our students is 24.6, and many students enroll less than full time in order to balance family and work obligations. Despite relatively low tuition, MSUB students tend to be debt averse, and stop out to earn money to pay for their next semester. As a result, time to graduation can be slow and retention and completion numbers are not ideal, especially when compared to peer institutions who have more traditional students.

The demographics of the university prompted early adoption of distance education. MSUB began offering Internet-enabled classes as early as 1996, and by 2000 had a healthy number of fully online classes and programs. In 2018, the university offered 27 fully online program and 665 online course sections (Montana Board of Regents). Full-time faculty have largely embraced online teaching, partly because doing so is tied up with the university's mission, and partly out of necessity to fulfill student demand. A minority of faculty have been hesitant to embrace online learning because they fear the reduction of on-campus instruction will result in inferior student learning and retention. Our students also desire on-campus classes, but they must be offered at times that fit into their packed schedules. Students often mix and match on campus and online classes in their course registration in order to better balance work and family obligations. In any given semester, approximately 55% of students are registered in at least one online course.

Student demand for online course sections is high, and academic departments struggle with balancing staffing for online and on-campus offerings. As with many regional comprehensives, budgets are challenging, and departments are under pressure to cancel low-enrolled courses. Most often this translates to cancelling on-campus sections, leaving students who prefer face-to-face learning feeling pressured to enroll in online courses. Our unique student demand for both on-campus and online courses positions MSUB to be a potential leader in adopting innovative course delivery formats.

## **Important Lessons from San Francisco State University**

MSUB's experience building a robust online education program assisted our exploration of HyFlex. Decisions about online staffing, scheduling and course development belong to the academic department; a structure that ensures faculty centrality. We knew that for HyFlex to work at our university, it would need to be led by faculty. At MSUB, faculty are represented by two unions, the Montana State University Billings Faculty Association (representing faculty on University Campus) and the Montana Two Year College Faculty Association (MTYCFA) (representing faculty at City College). Thus, it was crucial that we included faculty who would be able to serve as representatives for union issues, as well as influencers for peers, as we determined if HyFlex was appropriate for our campus. We ended up inviting two faculty from each campus to SFSU. These faculty were program leads and all had significant experience teaching online and hybrid courses.

During the visit, Dr. Beatty arranged for our team to meet with faculty who taught HyFlex courses for SFSU. This was incredibly valuable; the experience that these faculty shared helped us to understand the diversity of options available for structuring a HyFlex course. These conversations also helped ease our faculty's apprehension about the workload associated with HyFlex, including the concern that faculty would be teaching two courses for the price of one, and that HyFlex would allow administrations to overload course enrollments. Dr. Beatty, and the faculty who spoke to our team, emphasized two crucial points: 1) HyFlex design begins with a solid online course design and 2) the additional work for faculty is in the design phase and not in the teaching of the HyFlex course.

The visit was a success in that all four faculty who had the opportunity to interact with the SFSU team returned to MSUB highly motivated to adopt versions of HyFlex into their own courses.

## **Piloting HyFlex**

Immediately upon our return to campus, we began working with the administration and the unions to start a small pilot in Fall 2018. The Faculty Association included the HyFlex pilot on its agenda, and it was in these meetings that we hammered out an agreement on how to compensate faculty for HyFlex. All parties agreed that we needed to ensure that our HyFlex sections were well-designed so as to ensure student success and retention. As a result, the administration

agreed to provide a stipend for faculty to complete faculty development courses in both online and hybrid course design. This was a first for MSUB as we have no required faculty development programs for teaching anywhere on campus. Additionally, the administration agreed to a stipend for course design equivalent to the stipend for online course development. The MTYCFA, who meet separately from the Faculty Association, were willing to abide by the agreement made by the Faculty Association.

Three of the original four faculty who visited SFSU developed courses for the Fall 2018 and Spring 2019 semesters. These three courses provided a strong basis for evaluating the possibility of HyFlex. The courses: BGEN 105: Introduction to Business SOC 482: Contemporary Sociological Theory and COMX 435: Media Criticism, serve very different student populations. The Introduction to Business Class is taught at City College and is geared for beginning students. Sociological Theory was an online class for majors that was converted to HyFlex at the request of the students, who were all on campus majors. Media Criticism, which is a course that is taught at both the undergraduate and graduate level in the Communication department, is a course for experienced students. Communication offers courses both fully online and on campus, so the enrollment in this course was guaranteed to provide insight into the mix of onsite and distance students.

## **One Faculty Member's Perspective: Sam Boerboom's Reflections on HyFlex**

There were several challenges to getting my first HyFlex course off the ground. First, I needed to work with my department's administrative associate to communicate with students about how to register for my HyFlex Media Criticism course. The course listed a weekly required course meeting on campus like any other hybrid course in the course schedule. MSUB was not able to generate a unique course code to designate the section as HyFlex, because the format had only been used once at MSUB at that point. I was teaching my course with on-campus and asynchronous online options available to my students. It was very challenging explaining to students that they would have the option each week to choose how to participate. The "early adopters"—those I had recruited from my on-campus and hybrid courses the semester before—were thrilled about the flexibility afforded to them. My online-only students were more apprehensive due to the novelty of the format. They needed reassurance that their experience would not be lesser because they had to participate exclusively online. Put differently, they wanted to be assured that the course was not designed and optimized primarily for on-campus students.

I received a stipend to develop the course and took to heart the best practices taught by Dr. Beatty and the other faculty at SFSU. The design phase of the course was relatively straight-forward. I learned quickly that communication with students about their participation options each week was going to be challenging, especially because many of our students do not consistently use the email assigned to them through our learning management system, Brightspace. I learned that when piloting HyFlex, an instructor committed to intentional design best practices should strongly consider how best to leverage an LMS's design features to reinforce to students through weekly announcements, unit introduction pages, and email prompts their participation options for each unit.

Once my students got used to how the course looked different from on-campus or hybrid sections, they seemed to grasp the flexibility afforded to them. Of course, those students who were able to attend on-campus were able to have their questions answered in real-time by me, which proved to be advantageous to them. I perceived that all of the students in the class intuitively grasped how HyFlex worked after the first three weeks. After that initiation stage, I determined that I had three different types of students in the class: the majority (60%) were exclusively online; 30% were exclusively on-campus; and 10% or so were participating both online and on-campus.

Student feedback was overwhelmingly positive. The online-only students appreciated that they would not have to wait two semesters until the class would be offered online again. Additionally, I heard from two students who attended the on-campus meetings only once during the semester. One of the students was local and the other lived further away from the Billings area. Both remarked that having the flexibility of participation each week allowed them to plan ahead on choosing a week they could attend class. They loved meeting their on-campus classmates and being able to ask

questions of me in-person. My on-campus students remarked that they valued the flexibility of knowing that if a work, family, or health obligation arose, they would not have to scramble to arrange options to attend class. One student in particular commented that HyFlex reduced her anxiety about being a student. When I inquired what she meant by that, she commented that students like her often internalize class absences as evidence that they are bad learners, or that they should not be in college. I was struck by this comment and came away more convinced than ever that HyFlex is an ideal way to meet our students where they are on their educational path.

Upon reflecting on my first HyFlex class, I determined that I would design the course differently the next time I taught it with a focus on including participation assignments that would allow both my on-campus and online students to interact more with one another. In my first HyFlex class, I designed separate participation assignments for those participating on-campus and online. Not only was it more work for me as the instructor, it separated my students into two distinct groups, which was not my intention when I initially designed the course. My focus was on presenting students with flexible participation options, and not thinking enough about how to blend the class together as a dynamic, interactive whole. I believe that sharing what transpired in each unit's on-campus meeting—whether by written summary and/or video recording—with those participating online would increase perceptions of inclusion.

I learned through piloting HyFlex that it is a nimble course delivery format that accommodates students managing several obligations. HyFlex is a course scheduling solution that keeps our students on track to graduate in a timely fashion. But it is more than these things, too, it seems. HyFlex allowed me a platform to reimagine blended classroom learning space and how I should be present in it. I was able to leverage HyFlex to incorporate both on-campus and online learners in the same space during the same weekly block of time. As the result of my experience, I am firmly convinced HyFlex is a game-changer for our students and our institution.

## **Lessons Learned from the HyFlex Pilot and Next Steps**

As Dr. Boerboom's experience illustrates, HyFlex was a natural fit for MSUB: our student demographics, faculty experience and online infrastructure made it relatively simple to launch the pilot phase at our institution. At the time we are writing this case study, there has been a great deal of interest by other faculty adopting HyFlex and we are currently working on a plan to scale HyFlex for Fall 2020.

Our Provost and Institutional Research Director are committed to evaluating the pilot to ensure that it was an effective instructional modality. While data analysis is ongoing at the University level, faculty who participated in the pilot asked students to complete a survey on their experiences in these courses. Overall, students responded that they would be highly likely to enroll in another HyFlex class. Qualitative comments across all three pilot courses echo Dr. Boerboom's observations that students found the flexibility of the HyFlex section transformative for their education.

Two large issues emerged as we evaluated our HyFlex Pilot. Perhaps most important is that we need to ensure that we can clearly communicate to students what HyFlex means for them. There are two elements to this concern. First, the university needs to develop a course code to identify sections taught in this modality. We currently designate courses as on campus, hybrid and online using suffixes (100, 600, and 800 respectively). During the pilot we were unable to create a suffix for HyFlex. This must happen as we scale. Second, we need to create a communication campaign to clearly communicate to students what the expectation for participation is within any given class. Students in the pilot needed a few weeks to adjust to the flexibility offered in these sections; if we can streamline their understanding this will make teaching easier for faculty.

A second issue that arose was that faculty who were not part of the pilot, but had heard about HyFlex, began to announce they were offering HyFlex sections. This raises concerns about quality within these rogue HyFlex courses. One of the lessons this campus learned during its growth of online is that it's important to provide students with a consistent experience within a given modality. It would be a shame for the HyFlex project to be undermined by faculty who do not have a well-designed and executed course. In order to ensure excellence, we will need to collaborate with deans and department chairs who provide oversight of faculty course modality. They will need to be gatekeepers who

ensure faculty offering HyFlex Sections have completed the faculty development requirements and have a well-designed course.

During Fall 2019, the three faculty members who participated in the pilot, along with the Director of e-Learning and the Vice Provost, will host an open forum for faculty interested in being part of the launch of HyFlex in 2020. We are not sure what this launch will look like, but we are excited about the possibilities for our university.

We are grateful to Dr. Beatty and the faculty of San Francisco State University for introducing us to this transformative teaching format.

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Dr. Susan Balter-Reitz is a Professor of Communication at Montana State University Billings. She has served the university as Graduate Director, Director of e-Learning and Interim Vice Provost. Her experience in administration prompted her interest in innovative teaching and course design. Sue's primary area of research is in free speech, and she most recently published how universities should deal with controversial speakers. Sue can be reached at [susan.balterreitz@msubillings.edu](mailto:susan.balterreitz@msubillings.edu).



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Dr. Samuel Boerboom is an Associate Professor of Communication Theatre at Montana State University Billings. He currently chairs the Department of Communication and Theatre. Sam has served as chair of the university's graduate committee and was an eLearning Faculty Fellow for the College of Arts and Sciences. His interest in innovative course design serves his goal of increasing student engagement in online learning spaces. Sam researches and teaches political communication and has published on credibility in food science discourse. Sam can be reached at [samuel.boerboom@msubillings.edu](mailto:samuel.boerboom@msubillings.edu).

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