Introduction to the Special Issue: Best Papers Presented at the OLC 21st International Conference on Online Learning and Innovate 2016

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The Online Learning Consortium (OLC) traces its roots to the Alfred P. Sloan Consortium (Sloan-C) that emerged in the 1990s when a cadre of early adapters of online learning began to coalesce into a professional community. Funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, this community embarked on a number of activities designed to promote quality in the design and implementation of online and blended learning applications. In 1995, a one-day meeting of grantees of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation's *Anytime, Anyplace Learning* Program met in Philadelphia to discuss their work and share their experiences. Ninety individuals attended this first event. This meeting grew into an annual event for the next five years. In 2001, it was decided that the event be expanded into a full conference with paper submissions and reviews, workshops, and exhibit areas. The University of Central Florida agreed to host the conference in Orlando in November. That was a fateful decision as the attack on the World Trade Center on 9/11 followed by the anthrax scare in Florida in October of that year severely limited the number of people willing to fly to Orlando to attend the conference. Still, three hundred and sixty participants attended to share and discuss research, effective practices, student services, and administrative support for online learning. Since 2001, the conference has grown and has evolved into the premiere event for presenting current ideas, research, and best practices in online learning.

In 2015, the Online Learning Consortium celebrated the 21st anniversary of the International Conference on Online Learning. The theme of the conference, *Shaping the Future of Online Learning*, focused on the latest developments in online and blended learning. Almost 3,000 individuals attended this conference either in person or virtually. Six hundred and sixty-eight proposals were submitted for presentation.

In April, 2016, the Online Learning Consortium initiated a new conference, OLC Innovate: Innovations in Blended and Online Learning. Almost 2,000 individuals attended this conference and 506 individuals submitted presentation proposals. Of the 1,172 proposals submitted for both conferences, the nine articles selected for this special edition represent the best presentations as determined by the conference track chairs and editorial staff of the *Online Learning Journal*.

The Articles

The nine articles in this special edition represent a wide variety of topics and issues worthy of research. The findings and conclusions add significantly to our understanding of online and blended learning. These articles also represent an excellent mix of research methods (quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method). Doctoral students and others interested in research may find important insights into methodological techniques as used by the authors of these articles.

The first article, *A National Study of Differences between Distance and Non-distance Community College Students in Time to First Associate Degree Attainment, Transfer, and Dropout,* by Peter Shea and Temi Bidjerano, is a national study examining outcomes of community college students. The primary goal of the current study was to examine national data (National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Beginning Postsecondary Student Survey, 2004-09) on three outcomes for community college students with and without online and distance education experiences. The outcomes examined were attainment of first associate degree, transfer, and dropout. In contrast to previous research, compared to exclusively classroom-based students, initial results suggest significantly more students who had engaged in online/distance education had either attained an associate degree at the end of the observation period or transferred to a different institution. These results are interpreted with regard to their implications for policy and practice.

In *Job Satisfaction, Organizational Commitment, and Turnover Intention of Online Teachers in the K-12 Setting,* Ingle Larkin, Laurie Brantley-Dias and Anissa Lokey-Vega explore factors influencing K-12 online teacher's job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions. Using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1954), Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory of Satisfaction (1959, 1968), Meyer and Allen's Measure of Organizational Commitment (1997), and Fishbein and Ajzen's Theory of Reasoned Action and Planned Behavior (1975), this mixed-methods study was conducted in public, private, charter, for-profit, and not-for-profit K-12 online schools in a single Southeastern state. The researchers used a sequential explanatory design by collecting and analyzing quantitative data and then qualitative data in two consecutive phases. Phase I included a 74-item survey with responses from 105 participants. These results revealed that K-12 online teachers have a moderate to high level of job satisfaction, which corresponds to their affective commitment to their organization and their intent to remain teaching in the online setting in the immediate, intermediate, and long-term future. Participants identified flexibility, meeting student needs, technical support, and their professional community as the most satisfying aspects of their job, while compensation, workload, missing face-to-face interaction with students, and unmotivated students were identified as least satisfying aspects. In Phase II, eight qualitative focus group interviews were conducted and analyzed using a constant comparative method; these results confirmed and expounded upon the quantitative findings in Phase I. This study informs K-12 online school leaders, policymakers, and researchers of statistically significant variables that influence K-12 online teacher satisfaction, commitment, and retention.

A Study of Faculty Governance Leaders' Perceptions of Online and Blended Learning by Elizabeth Ciabocchi, Amy Ginsberg, and Anthony Picciano reports the findings of a study on faculty governance leaders' perceptions to online and blended learning. For the purposes of this study, faculty governance was defined as formally established bodies in colleges and universities such as senates, councils, and collective bargaining organizations that are affiliated with the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). While there have been many studies on the perceptions of students, faculty, and administrators, there has been very little research on the perceptions of faculty governance leaders who hold critical positions in colleges and universities. Governance leaders are at the crux of approval processes that influence the development of curricula, faculty personnel policies, and academic programs, all of which can impact the implementation of online and blended learning initiatives. The

research methodology for this study included a survey sent to a sample of governance leaders at U.S. institutions of higher education and follow-up phone interviews or email correspondence with a small number of volunteers. The sample was identified using an American Association of University Professors (AAUP) membership list. The results of this study provide important new information on the perceptions of this influential group of leaders on matters relating to online and blended learning.

Adaptive Learning in Psychology: Wayfinding in the Digital Age by Charles D. Dziuban, Patsy D. Moskal, Jeffrey Cassisi, and Alexis Fawcett provide the results of a pilot study that investigated the use of the Realizeit adaptive learning platform to deliver a fully online General Psychology course across two semesters. Through mutual cooperation, University of Central Florida and the vendor researchers, examined students' affective, behavioral, and cognitive reactions to the system. Student survey results indicated that students found the system easy to use and were generally positive about their seamless transition to adaptive learning. While the majority of students were successful, learning outcome metrics utilizing Realizeit indices indicated a potential for early prediction of students who are likely to be at risk in this environment.

In *Assessing Readiness for Online Education: Research Models for Identifying Students at Risk,* Claire Wladis, Katherine Conway and Alyse C. Hachey explore the interaction between student characteristics and the online environment in predicting course performance and subsequent college persistence among students in a large urban U.S. university system. Multilevel modeling, propensity score matching, and the KHB decomposition method were used. The most consistent pattern observed was that native-born students were at greater risk online than foreign-born students, relative to their face-to-face outcomes. Those with children under 6 years of age also had lower rates of successful online course completion than would be expected based on face-to-face outcomes. In addition, while students enrolled in online courses were more likely to drop out of college, online course outcomes had no direct effect on college persistence; rather, other characteristics seemed to make students simultaneously both more likely to enroll online and to drop out of college.

Shelley Meyers and Linda Feeney, in *Examining Interactive and Metacognitive Processes in Student Learning: Findings from a Hybrid Instructional Environment,* examine the interaction and metacognitive behaviors of graduate students in the online portion of a flipped classroom. For their time outside the face-to-face classroom, students were given the choice of two online methods for their interactions -- synchronous verbal discussions and asynchronous written discussions. Students were provided a detailed outline for their discussions. Discussions were analyzed and interactive and metacognitive behaviors were categorized and counted. Interaction behaviors and metacognitive behaviors were present in both environments. Synchronous verbal discussions were found to include significantly more interaction behaviors in five of six categories. There was no significant difference in the number of metacognitive behaviors. Students demonstrated the same level of learning behaviors in both environments.

Leanna Archambault, Katheryn Kennedy, and Joe Freidhoff, in *Accountability for Students in K-12 Online Learning: Perspectives from Michigan Stakeholders and Beyond,* focus on policy issues in Michigan regarding K-12 online courses. In Michigan, Section 21f of the State School Aid Act enacted in 2013 strengthened parents' and students' ability to request online courses: "A student enrolled in a district in any of grades 6 to 12 is eligible to enroll in an online course as provided for in this section." The passing of 21f brought about several concerns related to accountability in a choice environment. Examples of such concerns included a pervasive belief about the lack of rigor or quality in online courses, an averseness to another district educating a student for one or two courses yet remaining responsible for that student's growth, and uncertainty about how mentors and teachers would be evaluated on their online students. Consequently, a legislative directive was issued to the Michigan Virtual Learning Research

Institute that centered on accountability. In response to that directive, Michigan stakeholders, as well as experts from other course access states and national organizations, were interviewed to better understand the conversations surrounding accountability in K-12 online learning in both Michigan and beyond and to make key recommendations for moving the field forward in an informed way.

In *"Comfort" as a Critical Success Factor in Blended Learning Courses,* Linda S. Futch, Aimee deNoyelles, Kelvin Thompson, and Wendy Howard consider the highly contextual environment of effective blended learning courses by identifying the strategies instructors use to unify the face-to-face and online components of their courses to support student success. Using a case study model, interviews were conducted with three community college instructors who were identified as exemplary teachers of blended learning courses in their institutions. The research questions explored in this article include: (R1) What are exemplary community college teachers' perceived obstacles to student success in blended courses? and (R2) What solutions or strategies do exemplary community college teachers employ to overcome those concerns in blended courses? Interview analyses identified descriptive themes and sub-themes related to student success. It was found that "comfort" emerged as a mediating factor for student success, with "organization," "communication," and "support" acting as supporting themes.

Linda Merillat and Monica Scheibmeir, in *Developing a Quality Improvement Process to Optimize Faculty Success,* evaluate a faculty enrichment program in a School of Nursing. A central focus for the program was the development and maintenance of an online faculty resource center identified as "My Faculty Center." Nursing faculty used the tools in My Faculty Center to assess their baseline skills in the areas of teaching and learning best practices, use of learning management system, and technology. The first goal (Goal 1) of the systematic faculty development program was to measure the impact of the Faculty Enrichment program on overall faculty development with regards to technology. The second goal (Goal 2) was to evaluate the relationship, if any, with faculty development and student evaluations. To meet Goal 2, data from end-of-course evaluations and the skills assessments were correlated. Results indicated that the instructor's desire to learn more about teaching and learning best practices was positively correlated with students providing higher scores on progress on relevant objectives, perceiving the instructor as an excellent teacher, and the overall course rating. When students rated an instructor as an excellent teacher, that instructor self-reported a higher level of applying skills in using Desire-to-Learn (D2L). Negative correlations were found between the instructor's self-reported skills with presentation and multimedia tools and the students' perception of progress toward objectives, excellence of course, and overall course rating. Based on the initial results, future professional development will optimize adequate training on the Learning Management System (i.e. D2L), for all faculty, and emphasize the *effective* use of technology in the classroom.

In closing, we would like to acknowledge the efforts of a number of individuals who made critical contributions to this special issue, particularly Beth Meigs and the staff of the *Online Learning Journal (OLJ)*; Peter Shea, for his leadership as editor of OLJ; Kathy Ives, for her guidance and direction in navigating the Online Learning Consortium forward during a difficult transitional period; and the OLC staff and program committees for their efforts and dedication in organizing the conferences at which the authors originally presented their research.

The editors of this special issue hope our readers enjoy the articles selected and welcome any comments.

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