

## **Student Perceptions of Learning Experiences During the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Examination of Post-Secondary Hybrid, In-Person, and Online Consumer Affairs Courses**

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*The COVID-19 pandemic required many post-secondary family and consumer sciences (FCS) programs, including consumer affairs programs, to offer in-person courses in hybrid or online format. The current literature focuses on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on online learning that occurred during Spring 2020 but does not examine hybrid learning in this context. Using a survey, this study examined student perceptions of their learning experiences in hybrid, 100 % in-person, and 100 % online consumer affairs courses during the Fall 2020 semester. Findings indicate students have a more positive view of their experiences in hybrid courses relative to in-person and online with differing responses based on students' year in school. Discussion includes implications for FCS education programs at secondary and post-secondary levels and suggestions for future research.*

Family and consumer sciences (FCS) “is the comprehensive body of skills, research, and knowledge that helps people make informed decisions about their well-being, relationships, and resources to achieve optimal quality of life” (American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences, n. d., para. 4). This field includes several areas, including consumer affairs, textiles and apparel, and nutrition. Many of these areas are the focus of post-secondary degree programs at colleges and universities. This article describes research designed to examine students’ experiences with hybrid, in-person, and online learning among consumer affairs college students in Fall of 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Background**

In March 2020, the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic and its effects on public health forced higher education leaders to change the delivery of in-person programs in the United States. Many in-person programs pivoted to 100 % online delivery for the remainder of the Spring 2020 term and for all the Summer 2020 term. In Fall 2020, many higher education institutions opted for a hybrid model that required some in-person instruction. Hybrid models combine in-person instruction with online activities. Students spend less time engaged in in-person instruction than with traditional in-person courses, with more course content moved online. In-person activities in hybrid courses center on authentic, active learning experiences (The Pennsylvania State University, 2021). In this paper, hybrid approaches are compared with in-person and online approaches. In-person approaches refer to all instruction and activities delivered in-person. Online approaches refer to all instruction and activities delivered online.

### **Online Learning Models in Family and Consumer Sciences Higher Education Programs**

Online and hybrid learning models have become increasingly common in FCS higher education programs in recent years, particularly at the graduate level. For example, the Great Plains Interactive Distance Education Alliance (GPIDEA) offers graduate degrees and certificates in a variety of FCS areas, including family and consumer sciences education, merchandising, and family financial planning (GPIDEA, n. d.). Family financial planning is an area taught by consumer affairs program faculty at some institutions, including South Dakota State University (South Dakota Board of Regents, 2019). Moreover, Kansas State University offers a doctoral degree in personal financial planning using a hybrid model (K-State Online, n. d. b.). At the undergraduate level, fewer academic programs in FCS are offered using an online or hybrid model. Examples of such programs include an online bachelor's degree in personal financial planning offered by Kansas State University and an online bachelor's degree in FCS offered by Western Kentucky University (K-State Online, n. d. a.; WKU Online, 2020).

### **Learning Models During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Due to the health and mortality consequences associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, 100 % in-person programs in FCS, including consumer affairs programs, were forced to quickly pivot to an online delivery model in March 2020. For Fall 2020, many colleges and universities required programs to adopt a hybrid model that included courses to offer both in-person and online opportunities for instruction. Both commentary and research about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on instruction in higher education has begun to proliferate, but much of the existing literature focuses on the online learning that occurred during the Spring 2020 semester. Moreover, literature on the impact of COVID-19 on instruction in higher education FCS programs, including consumer affairs programs, is still limited.

Regarding online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in Spring 2020, students found it to be more convenient and felt it facilitated more student participation than in-person learning (Hussein, Daoud, Alrabaian, & Badawi, 2020; Nambiar, 2020). However, students found the workload and technology problems associated with online course delivery to be barriers to learning (Hussein, Daoud, Alrabaian, 2020). In a study of students enrolled in a social work program during the pandemic, students indicated they retained less information with online learning and that they preferred in-person learning (Smoyer, O'Brien, & Rodriguez-Keys, 2020). Students missed the in-person experience of being near others. For online learning, synchronous activities were preferred over asynchronous activities because students perceived more opportunity for discussion with their instructor.

### **Student Perspectives and Demographics**

There is a paucity of literature on the influence of student demographics on students' perception of their experiences in hybrid and online courses during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a study exploring the effectiveness of hybrid learning prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Gulnaz, Althomali, and Alzeer (2020) found males and females did not differ in their perception of the effectiveness of hybrid learning. Day, et al. (2020) found students who had previously taken online courses were more successful during the pivot to remote learning during Spring 2020 than those who had not previously taken online courses. Tichavsky, Hunt, Discoll, & Jicha (2015) found students who enrolled in 100 % online courses were an average of nearly two years older than those enrolled in 100 % in-person courses prior to the pandemic. Older students are more

likely to be upperclassmen (e.g., juniors and seniors) who have been exposed to prior online learning. It's likely that upperclassmen will report a different learning experience in hybrid and 100 % online courses than underclassmen (e.g., freshmen, sophomores). Racial disparities regarding students and the COVID-19 pandemic have been noted. Specifically, Harper (2020) noted an increased risk of violence for Asian American and Asian international students given the "Chinese Virus" connotation associated with COVID-19. Moreover, "COVID-19 infections and deaths are disproportionately affecting African Americans and other communities of color" (Harper, 2020, p. 156). This means students from these groups are more likely to have lost someone close to them due to the virus, leaving them susceptible to emotions that may inhibit their engagement in coursework which, in turn, may influence how they perceive their learning experiences.

## **Methods**

### **Hypotheses**

Given the shift from online to hybrid learning models during the Fall 2020 semester, there is little empirical guidance to assist instructors in ensuring quality experiences for students enrolled in post-secondary FCS programs, including consumer affairs programs. This study seeks to address this gap in the literature by exploring the research question, "How do students enrolled in hybrid consumer affairs courses during Fall 2020 perceive their experiences relative to their experiences in 100 % in-person and 100 % online consumer affairs courses?" Consistent with the above research question, the following hypotheses were tested in this study:

#### ***H1: Lower Quality Learning Experience with Hybrid Courses Relative to In-Person Classes***

Most students enrolled in hybrid consumer affairs courses during Fall 2020 will report a lower quality learning experience relative to their experiences in 100% in-person consumer affairs courses.

**H1a: Year in School.** Students enrolled in hybrid consumer affairs courses during Fall 2020 will report the quality of their learning experience relative to their experiences in 100 % in-person consumer affairs courses differently based on their year in school.

**H1b: Race.** Students enrolled in hybrid consumer affairs courses during Fall 2020 will report the quality of their learning experience relative to their experiences in 100 % in-person consumer affairs courses differently based on their race.

**H1c: Sex.** Students enrolled in hybrid consumer affairs courses during Fall 2020 will *not* report the quality of their learning experience relative to their experiences in 100 % in-person consumer affairs courses differently based on their sex.

#### ***H2: Higher Quality Learning Experience with Hybrid Relative to Online Classes***

Most students enrolled in hybrid consumer affairs courses during Fall 2020 will report a higher quality learning experience relative to their experiences in 100 % online consumer affairs courses.

**H2a: Year in school.** Students enrolled in hybrid consumer affairs courses during Fall 2020 will report the quality of their learning experience relative to their experiences in 100 % online consumer affairs courses differently based on their year in school.

**H2b: Race.** Students enrolled in hybrid consumer affairs courses during Fall 2020 will report the quality of their learning experience relative to their experiences in 100 % online consumer affairs courses differently based on their race.

**H2c: Sex.** Students enrolled in hybrid consumer affairs courses during Fall 2020 will *not* report the quality of their learning experience relative to their experience in 100 % online consumer affairs courses differently based on their sex.

### **Instrument**

Data were collected using a 26-item online survey developed for the purpose of this study. The development of survey items was informed by available literature and a publicly available student survey that was designed to measure the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on university students (Aucejo & Zatar, n. d.). Four items developed by Aucejo and Zatar (n. d.) were modified and included in the survey. Four additional survey items were open-ended and five were designed to gather demographic information.

### **Sample Recruitment and Demographics**

Upon receipt of IRB approval, data were collected from students enrolled in consumer affairs courses at one Midwestern university. Information about the study was shared with instructors and an academic advisor in the college in which the consumer affairs program was housed, for dissemination to students. Study recruitment information was shared on department and college social media. Inclusion criteria were being 18 years of age or older and having been enrolled in a hybrid undergraduate consumer affairs course during the Fall 2020 semester. Forty-five students completed the survey between December 2020 and February 2021. Two respondents indicated they had not been enrolled in a hybrid consumer affairs course during the Fall 2020 semester, so their responses were removed prior to data analysis. The sample was comprised of majority White ( $n = 39$ , 88.6%), female ( $n = 27$ , 61.4%) college juniors ( $n = 26$ , 59.1%).

### **Data Analysis**

Descriptive statistics were computed for respondents' demographic information. Descriptive statistics and one-way ANOVAs were computed to test the hypotheses. All quantitative analyses were completed using SPSS version 26. To analyze the qualitative responses to the open-ended survey items, open coding was utilized. In open coding, codes that seem relevant to the research question are noted by reading and coding the transcript line-by-line (Esterberg, 2002). After the completion of open coding, focused coding was conducted to identify categories and themes. Coding was completed by hand.

For the quantitative analyses, the following dependent and independent variables were used to test the hypotheses:

### ***Dependent Variables***

**Hybrid vs. In-Person Learning Experience.** This continuous variable, measured on a seven-point Likert scale, reflects responses to a survey item that asked students to rate their learning experience in hybrid consumer affairs courses relative to their experiences in 100% in-person consumer affairs courses. This dependent variable was used to test H1, H1a (year in school), H1b (race), and H1c (sex).

**Hybrid vs. Online Learning Experience.** This continuous variable, measured on a seven-point Likert scale, reflects responses to a survey item that asked students to rate their learning experience in hybrid consumer affairs courses relative to their experiences in 100%

online consumer affairs courses. This dependent variable was used to test H2, H2a (year in school), H2b (race), and H2c (sex).

***Independent Variables***

**Year in school.** This categorical variable reflects responses to a survey item that asked respondents to indicate if they were a freshman, sophomore, juniors or senior. This variable was used to test H1a and H2a.

**Race.** This categorical variable reflects responses to a survey item that asked respondents to indicate their race. This variable was used to test H1b and H2b.

**Sex.** This categorical variable reflects responses to a survey item that asked respondents to indicate if they were male or female. This variable was used to test H1c and H2c.

**Results**

Overall, students did not report a lower quality learning experience in hybrid consumer affairs courses relative to in-person courses. The demographic variables of race and sex did not influence students’ rating of their learning experiences. Juniors and seniors were more likely to report a higher quality learning experience in hybrid courses relative to sophomores. More students viewed their learning experience in hybrid consumer affairs courses as positive or equal to their experience in online courses. The demographic variables of race and sex did not influence students’ ratings of their learning experiences. Juniors and seniors were more likely to rate their learning experiences in hybrid consumer affairs courses as better than or equivalent to their experiences in online consumer affairs courses. H1a, H2, and H2 were supported. H1, H1b, H1c, H2b, and H2c were not supported. ANOVA results are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1**

***Learning Experiences in Consumer Affairs Courses: ANOVA Results***

Learning Format	Dependent Variable	<i>p</i> -value
In-Person vs. Hybrid	Year in School	.048
	Race	.463
	Sex	.544
Online vs. Hybrid	Year in School	.046
	Race	.758
	Sex	.348

**Learning Experience: In-Person vs. Hybrid**

Descriptive statistics were computed to determine if students reported a lower-quality learning experience in hybrid when compared with in-person courses. Twenty-one students reported their learning experience in hybrid consumer affairs courses was worse relative to their experiences in 100 % in-person consumer affairs courses. Another 21 students reported their learning experience in hybrid consumer affairs courses was either the same as or better relative to their experiences in 100 % in-person consumer affairs courses. This hypothesis (H1) was not supported.

However, to gain additional insight, students were asked to explain their rating of this question in an open-ended survey item. The themes that emerged from the open-ended responses were Equal Learning Experience, Flexibility, and Student-Instructor Communication. *Equal Learning Experience* was defined as the hybrid learning experience being perceived as equivalent to the in-person learning experience. *Flexibility* was defined as the perceived freedom to manage one's responsibilities in addition to coursework. *Student-Instructor Communication* was defined as the perceived quality and frequency of communication between students and instructors.

### ***Equal Learning Experience***

Seven students indicated that they perceived hybrid learning and in-person learning to be equivalent. One student shared, "I learned just as much as I would have for an in-person class" and another shared, "I enjoyed hybrid consumer affairs courses and found that it was just about as easy to learn as a normal in-person class." Another student commented, "[My] learning experience in hybrid courses was similar to in-person courses." This was echoed by another student who said the hybrid experience was "basically the same as in-person."

### ***Flexibility***

Six students noted flexibility as a positive of their hybrid learning experience. One student appreciated the "flexibility to manage multiple responsibilities" and another noted, "it was nice to have time to do other things when we had class online." Another student commented, "hybrid courses allowed for greater flexibility in student schedules".

### ***Student-Instructor Communication***

Five students discussed student-instructor communication in their responses, with two noting that student-instructor communication "was worse" in hybrid consumer affairs courses relative to 100 % in-person courses. One student shared, "hybrid courses had more miscommunication about in-person meetings." Another student noted they felt that hybrid courses enabled "high communication that sometimes lacks when in-person." Overall, the students who commented appeared to prefer hybrid consumer affairs courses over 100 % in-person consumer affairs courses.

### ***Year in School***

A one-way ANOVA comparing the dependent variable "hybrid vs. in-person learning experience" with "year in school" was computed to see if students' year in school impacted their preference for one form of learning over another. A significant difference was found [ $F(3, 40) = 2.882, p = .048$ ], demonstrating students' report of their learning experience in hybrid consumer affairs courses relative to their experiences in 100% in-person consumer affairs courses is dependent on their year in school. Juniors and seniors preferred hybrid learning relative to sophomores. H1a was supported.

### ***Race***

A one-way ANOVA comparing "hybrid vs. in-person learning experience" with "race" was computed. No significant difference was found [ $F(3, 40) = .873, p = .463$ ]. Students'

report of the quality of their learning experience in hybrid consumer affairs courses relative to their experiences in 100% in-person consumer affairs courses did not differ by race. H1b was not supported.

### ***Sex***

A one-way ANOVA comparing 'hybrid vs. in-person learning experience' with 'sex' was also computed. No significant difference was found [ $F(2, 41) = .678, p = .544$ ]. Students' report of the quality of their learning experience in hybrid consumer affairs courses relative to their experiences in 100% in-person consumer affairs courses did not differ by sex. H1c was supported.

### **Learning Experience: Online vs. Hybrid**

For H2, "Most students enrolled in hybrid consumer affairs courses during Fall 2020 will report a higher quality learning experience relative to their experiences in 100 % online consumer affairs courses," twenty-four students reported that their learning experience in hybrid consumer affairs courses was either the same as or better than their experiences in 100 % online consumer affairs courses. Fifteen students reported their learning experience in hybrid consumer affairs courses was worse than their experiences in 100 % online consumer affairs courses. H2 was supported. To gain additional insight, students were asked to explain their rating of this question in an open-ended survey item. Two themes emerged from the qualitative responses, *Interactions and Connections with Others* and *Learning*. Interactions and Connections with Others was defined as students' interactions with, and connections made with peers and instructors. Learning was defined as students' perceptions of understanding course material.

### ***Interactions and Connections with Others***

Students overwhelmingly indicated their hybrid learning experience included more and better interactions and communication with peers and instructors. One student shared:

I think that hybrid was a little better than 100 % online courses because we still got to meet our professor in hybrid whether it was through Zoom or in class every once in a while. In 100 % online courses you don't really get the opportunity to meet with your professor whether it's on Zoom or in class.

Another student shared that "hybrid allows for connections with others" and another commented that there was "more interaction in hybrid courses than online courses."

### ***Learning***

While several students mentioned learning, the responses were mixed: some thought hybrid consumer affairs courses facilitated a better learning experience than 100 % online consumer affairs courses, and other students thought 100 % online consumer affairs courses provided a better learning experience than hybrid consumer affairs courses. Regarding the learning experience in hybrid consumer affairs courses, one student shared, "hybrid learning allows for more instructor guidance than online courses;" another shared that "online courses are less confusing than hybrid [courses]." Still others commented on the poor-quality learning experience afforded to them in 100 % online consumer affairs courses. One student indicated that it is "more difficult to understand the material in 100% online consumer affairs courses."

### ***Year in School***

For H2a, “Students enrolled in hybrid consumer affairs courses during Fall 2020 will report the quality of their learning experience relative to their experiences in 100 % online consumer affairs courses differently based on their year in school,” a one-way ANOVA comparing ‘hybrid vs. online learning experience’ with ‘year in school’ was computed. A significant difference was found [ $F(3, 40) = 2.911, p = .046$ ], demonstrating students’ report of their learning experience in hybrid consumer affairs courses relative to their experiences in 100% online consumer affairs courses is dependent on their year in school. H2a was supported.

### ***Race***

For H2b, “Students enrolled in hybrid consumer affairs courses during Fall 2020 will report the quality of their learning experience relative to their experiences in 100 % online consumer affairs courses differently based on their race”, a one-way ANOVA comparing ‘hybrid vs. online learning experience’ and ‘race’ was computed. No significant difference was found [ $F(3, 40) = .394, p = .758$ ]. Students’ report of the quality of their learning experiences in hybrid consumer affairs courses relative to their experiences in 100 % online consumer affairs courses did not differ by race. H2b is not supported.

### ***Sex***

For H2c, “Students enrolled in hybrid consumer affairs courses during Fall 2020 will *not* report the quality of their learning experience relative to their experience in 100% online consumer affairs courses differently based on their sex,” a one-way ANOVA was comparing ‘hybrid vs. online learning experience’ with ‘sex’ was computed. No significant difference was found [ $F(2, 41) = 1.084, p = .348$ ]. Students’ report of the quality of their learning experience in hybrid consumer affairs courses relative to their experiences in 100% online consumer affairs courses did not differ by sex. H2c is supported.

## **Discussion and Implications**

Findings of this study address a gap in the literature by providing insights on students’ perceptions of their learning experience in hybrid consumer affairs courses relative to 100 % in-person and 100 % online consumer affairs courses during the COVID-19 pandemic. Consumer affairs is an area of FCS. Moreover, this study provides insight on demographic factors that may influence students’ perceptions of their learning experiences during the pandemic.

Taking both the quantitative and qualitative findings into account, hybrid is the preferred mode of delivery for students enrolled in undergraduate consumer affairs courses given the flexibility and ability to interact with instructors and peers that hybrid courses offer. The preference for hybrid consumer affairs courses relative to 100 % in-person or 100 % online consumer affairs courses differs by students’ year in school. Students’ race and sex do not appear to be factors that influence their preference.

Given the findings of this study, post-secondary consumer affairs programs should consider offering consumer affairs courses in a hybrid format. However, it may not be appropriate for all consumer affairs course offerings to be in a hybrid format, given students’ preference for hybrid learning is influenced by their year in school.

The COVID-19 pandemic is changing the landscape for higher education programs, and FCS programs are not immune to these changes. To recruit and retain students, post-secondary



programs must be designed in a way that meets students' needs. Changing the mode of delivery for courses has impacts beyond student recruitment and retention. Technology platforms (e.g., Brightspace, Blackboard) allow for the delivery of course content to larger audiences at a lower cost (Govindarajan & Srivastava, 2020). Offering more courses in a hybrid format may reduce students' attendance costs, which might improve their financial well-being. Moreover, this would reduce the instructional workload of faculty, and resources once devoted to in-person instruction could be redirected to career guidance and mentorship.

To expand upon the findings of this study, future studies should consider gathering data from students at multiple universities to obtain a larger, more diverse sample. Moreover, studies exploring this topic with students enrolled in programs in other FCS areas, such as nutrition and textiles and apparel, at both the secondary and post-secondary levels should be considered.

### **Limitations**

Like all studies, this study has limitations. Data were collected from students enrolled in undergraduate consumer affairs courses at one university located in the Midwest. Regarding the sample, respondents were primarily white, female juniors, limiting the generalizability of the findings to consumer affairs programs at tribal colleges, historically black colleges and universities, and Hispanic serving institutions. However, the population of students enrolled in consumer affairs courses at the university where this study was conducted have been historically majority white, female upperclassmen. The current population of undergraduate students at the university where this study was conducted are majority white females. Moreover, student performance data (e.g., course grades) were not gathered for this study, nor was data regarding income and students' access to technology.

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