2018

Assessment Brief: Update on UNST Online Course Experience

Portland State University. University Studies Program

With a university-wide interest in increasing online course offerings, University Studies has very thoughtfully studied and supported online teaching and learning with the objective of translating our university studies goals and our engaged learning model into online spaces. Our number of online course offerings has gradually increased overall, as have our efforts to research and analyze the student experience and student success in addition to faculty support tools and methods. Through using (course evaluations and the dashboard?), we are able to understand our areas of best practice in online teaching and learning and areas for additional support and energy. This report contains a summary of results, a discussion of those results, and recommendations. These recommendations are intended to inform and guide our program-level efforts and faculty support programming in the next academic year.

SUCCESS RATES IN ONLINE UNST COURSES

In our previous investigation (FA 11 – SP 14), we discovered that 58% of online SINQ courses and 7% of online Capstone courses could be considered "High DFWXI" courses. That is 20% or more of students in the course earned a grade of D, F, W, X, or I.

Between FA 14 and SP 18, the overall number of online SINQs remained relatively stable, ranging from 16 to 24 each term. **The number of high DWFXI SINQs dropped** during each of those years with the exception of SP 17 and SP 18.

The overall number of online Capstones has increased between 14-15 (~10 per term) and 17-18 (between 11 and 17 per term) academic years. For academic years 14-15, fall 15 and winter 16, no Capstone course met the threshold to be classified a high DFWXI course. **During 16-17 and 17-18, only one online Capstone course was considered a high DFWXI course each term.**
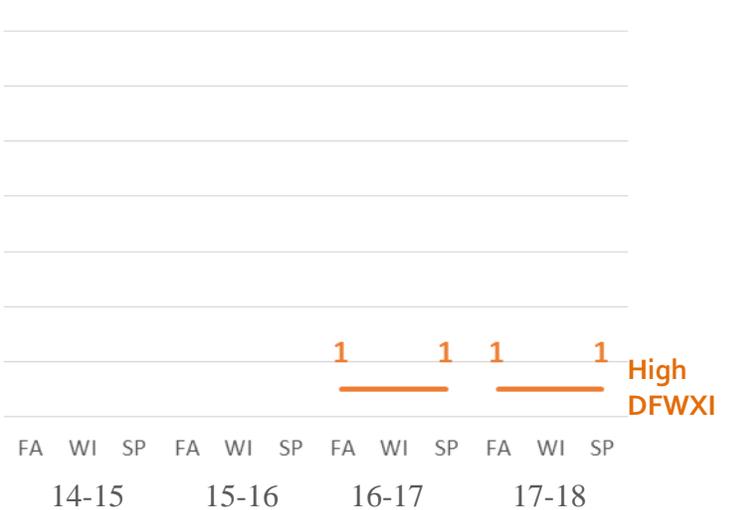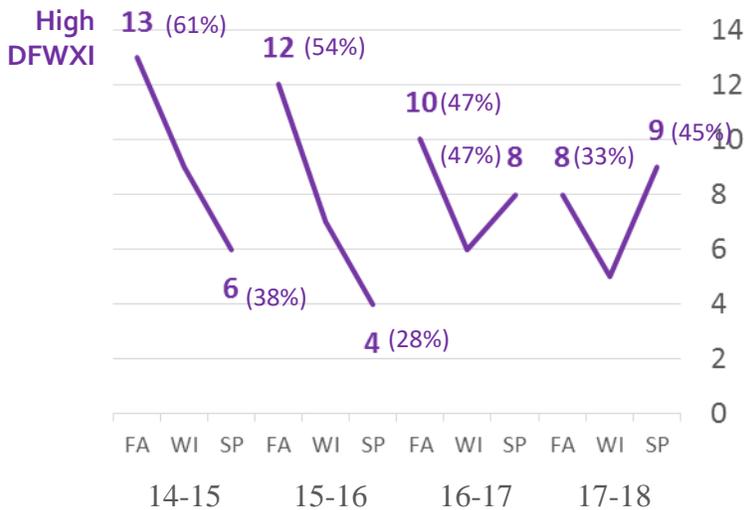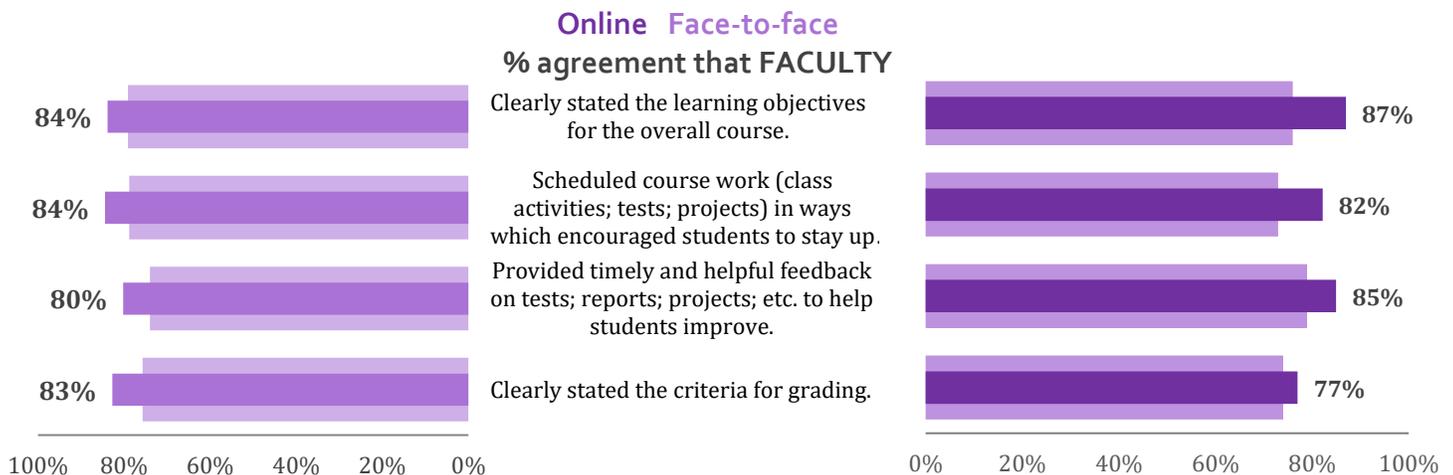
STUDENT EXPERIENCE IN ONLINE SINQs AND CAPSTONES

The end of term course evaluation is a source of information about students' experiences in their courses. We use the same initial sets of questions across face-to-face and online course evaluations for SINQs and Capstones. During our last investigation (FA 11–SP 14 end of term), we tested for differences between online and face to face courses and found several areas of difference. Many of those areas remain different between face-to-face and online courses (Fa 16-SP17), however, we also see online courses improving across several areas. Only questions where differences were found are shown below.
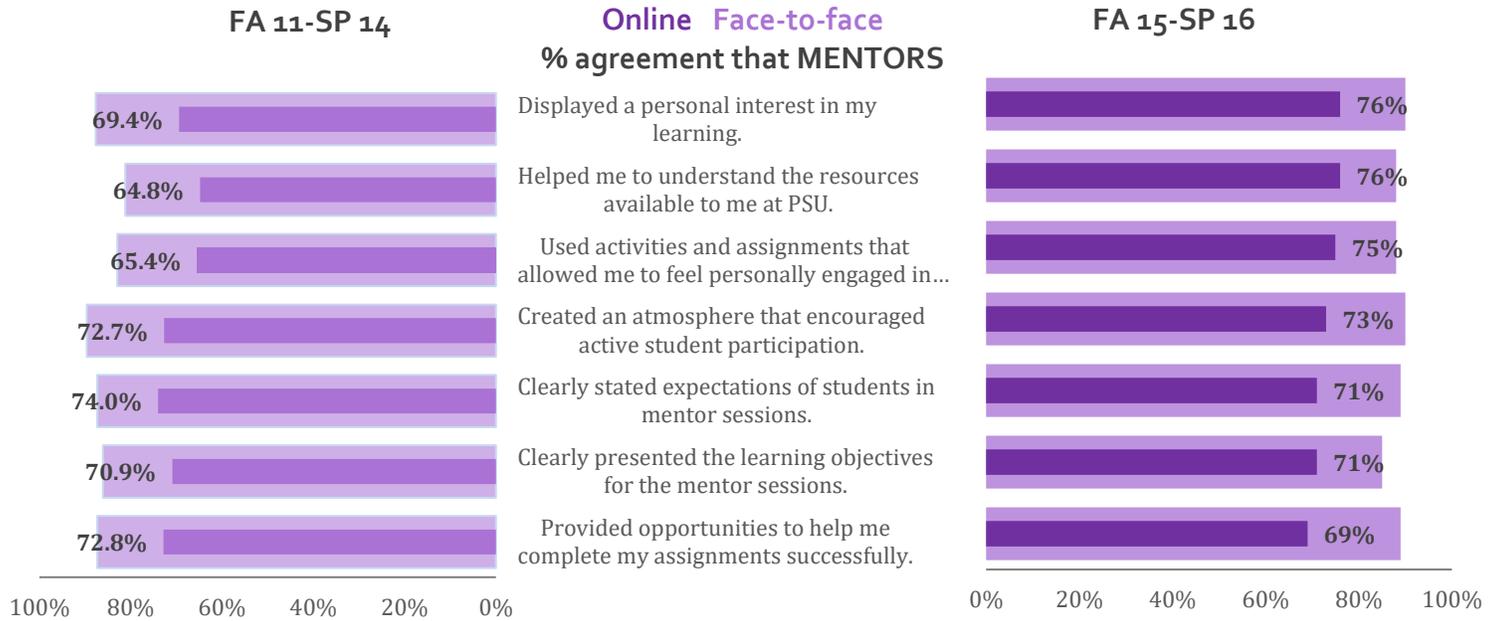
88% of online SINQ students agree they had opportunities to improve their writing skills. That rate is higher than agreement in face-to-face courses. Online SINQ students still have lower levels of agreement that they developed teamwork skills and felt a sense of community with classmates. Satisfaction with SINQ online courses and agreement that mentor sessions connected with the course improved so that there weren't significant differences for those items in the FA 16-SP17 academic year.

FA 11-SP 14

Online Face-to-face

% agreement

FA 16-SP 17

Question	FA 11-SP 14	FA 16-SP 17
The course provided opportunities to develop skills in expressing myself in writing.	87%	88%
The course provided opportunities to develop skills in working with others as a member of a team.	68%	60%
I felt a sense of community with my classmates in this course.	51%	52%
It was clear to me how the work from the mentor sessions connected with the overall course.	72%	No Difference
Overall, I was satisfied with my experience in this class.	72%	No Difference

Where there are differences between online and face-to-face SINQs related to teaching practices, **students in online SINQs show more agreement that learning objectives and grading criteria were clear, that course work was scheduled effectively and that faculty provided prompt feedback,** all consistent with previous findings.

Online Face-to-face

% agreement that FACULTY

Question	FA 11-SP 14	FA 16-SP 17
Clearly stated the learning objectives for the overall course.	84%	87%
Scheduled course work (class activities; tests; projects) in ways which encouraged students to stay up.	84%	82%
Provided timely and helpful feedback on tests; reports; projects; etc. to help students improve.	80%	85%
Clearly stated the criteria for grading.	83%	77%

Across all questions related to mentors, online SINQ students showed lower rates of agreement than their peers in face-to-face courses. However, **students in the 15-16 academic year had higher rates of agreement than those in the 11-14 group that mentors displayed a personal interest in their learning, helped connect students with PSU resources, and used activities that helped them feel engaged in their learning.** Other items showed similar or slightly lower levels of agreement between the two groups of students.

FA 11-SP 14   Online   Face-to-face   FA 15-SP 16

% agreement that MENTORS

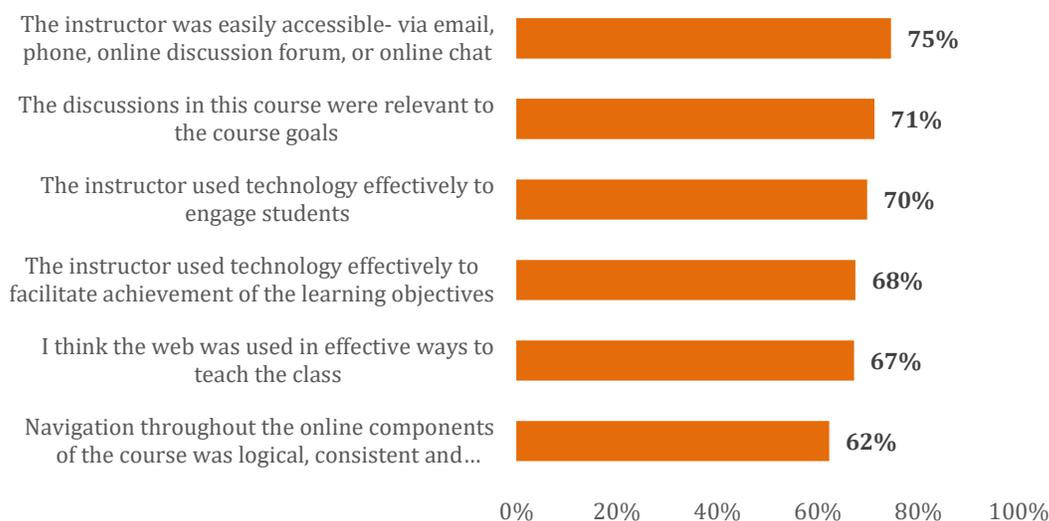|	FA 11-SP 14	Item	FA 15-SP 16
	69.4%	Displayed a personal interest in my learning.	76%
	64.8%	Helped me to understand the resources available to me at PSU.	76%
	65.4%	Used activities and assignments that allowed me to feel personally engaged in…	75%
	72.7%	Created an atmosphere that encouraged active student participation.	73%
	74.0%	Clearly stated expectations of students in mentor sessions.	71%
	70.9%	Clearly presented the learning objectives for the mentor sessions.	71%
	72.8%	Provided opportunities to help me complete my assignments successfully.	69%

Capstone course evaluation responses were more variable over time. Only two questions which showed differences between face-to-face and online courses between 11 and 14 continued to show differences in the 15-16 academic year and both changed such that **students in online Capstones were less likely to agree that their online courses addressed political issues or issues of diversity**. During the earlier time frame, there were fewer faculty teaching online Capstones and those that were had a particular commitment to diversity and political issues. With a wider range of Capstones and Capstone instructors participating online, we've seen those areas decrease. **During 16-17, online Capstone students had increased agreement that they improved their communication skills in the course and that the community work helped them understand the course content.**

FA 11-SP 14 — Online / Face-to-face — % agreement — FA 16-SP 17

	FA 11-SP 14	FA 16-SP 17
Course improved communication skills	No Difference	88%
Better understanding of course material	No Difference	87%
Opportunities to work with others who are different than me	No Difference	71%
Course explored issues of diversity	90%	69%
Deepened understanding of political issues	73%	68%
Engage with students from different fields of specialization	85%	No Difference
Already volunteering before this course	38%	No Difference
Continue to volunteer	18%	No Difference

100% 80% 60% 40% 20% 0% — 0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%

Student Experience with Online Aspects of Capstones

During the 16-17 academic year, online Capstone students were asked some additional questions as part of their course evaluation. **75% of students agreed that the Capstone instructor was easily accessible.** Students showed the least agreement that their online Capstone courses were easy to navigate.

	%
The instructor was easily accessible- via email, phone, online discussion forum, or online chat	75%
The discussions in this course were relevant to the course goals	71%
The instructor used technology effectively to engage students	70%
The instructor used technology effectively to facilitate achievement of the learning objectives	68%
I think the web was used in effective ways to teach the class	67%
Navigation throughout the online components of the course was logical, consistent and…	62%

0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%

REFLECTION

SINQ

It is not surprising to see that our online SINQ offerings provide students with even more ample opportunities to hone their writing skills. Because online learning is often heavily text based, students become highly skilled in both informal (through discussion forums) and formal (through submitted writing projects) writing.

While writing is an area of strength, we often see online students struggling to find a sense of community and to work in teams online. The logistics of connecting asynchronously with peers, a predominance of independent work, and the difficult logistics of connecting in teams make these areas particularly challenging online. While these areas are challenging, they are not impossible, as many online professionals network, collaborate, and work in teams using project management software, video conferencing, chat, and other tools that streamline the experience. This is an area for improvement in our courses.

In terms of the teaching aspects of the course, students in SINQ were consistently more satisfied with clarity around instructions, grading, and feedback. Online courses make the grading process more transparent through online gradebooks; feedback between instructor and student is not only evaluation but also relationship building as it is a frequent point of contact; and in order to have stability in an online course, instructors must carefully communicate assignment instructions to avoid frustration and confusion on the part of students.

When it comes to the role of online mentors in online SINQ courses, our findings for 16-17 closely mirror previous years, which indicate that across all categories, face-to-face mentors score higher than online mentors in every category. While there has been improvement in some categories for online mentors, the overall picture indicates that more work to train and support online mentors is needed.

CAPSTONE

For Capstone courses, we see many areas where there are no significant differences in the experiences of students in online versus face-to-face courses. This means that overall the online and face-to-face offerings do not differ substantially in terms of student outcomes/experience. We continue to do exceptionally well in the area of improving communication skills, which is likely due to the fact that online students must communicate in order to be seen as present in the course AND because online courses often require much more extensive practice of written communication skills, in addition to verbal skills exercised in synchronous video chats or phone exchanges.

It is clear, however, that attention is needed in the area of online courses addressing political issues or issues of diversity. As the requests for additional online Capstones continue, we should be cognizant of the variety of courses we offer and how they explore these particular crucial issues.

From 2016-2017 students, we were able to glean even more details about the online Capstone student experience. With 70% or more of students agreeing that the faculty member is accessible, discussions relevant to the course goals, and effective use of technology to engage students. One area for improvement is in the arena of course design; students indicated that navigation through course materials/experiences could be a barrier to their learning in 38% of online Capstone offerings.

ACTION STEPS

ONLINE SINQ INSTRUCTION
Sense of Community:
More work around instructor presence.
Looking at ways technology can support a richer sense of community
Consider the way community building activities are woven into the course
Working group or workshops around building community online

Teamwork:
SINQ/Capstone faculty partnerships and work around scaffolding teamwork online.
 Look to Capstone best practices.

SINQ MENTORS

Additional research/analysis around online mentor training, support, and practices so that we can narrow focus on ways to support online mentors.

More discussion with and training for faculty around how to use their online mentors successfully. Look to successful models from the program; sharing session with those pairings that make it work well online.

CAPSTONE INSTRUCTION

Course Design

Logical, consistent course design and the ability for students to navigate easily through the course materials and learning experience is key to student success in online courses. It is recommended that all online Capstone instructors undergo OAI's Universal Design for Learning training and course revision. This training is invaluable in that it both addresses course navigation/logic and ways to remove other barriers to learning in the online course.

Peer review and feedback sessions on course design from other Capstone instructors would also be useful in this process of understanding better course design, as would specific feedback from students as they navigate our courses. Perhaps, research on the ways that students navigate our courses would be helpful as well.

Addressing Political Issues/Issues of Diversity

When it comes to addressing political issues and issues of diversity, the Capstone must take a serious look at the differences between face-to-face course offerings and their online counterparts. Here are a few suggestions for working toward less disparity:

- Closely analyze our current online offerings. What types of community work are we offering? Where does diversity/politics get surfaced in these courses? Are there types of courses that are missing from our host of online offerings?
- Take a look at the types of discussion opportunities in our online offerings. A "discussions" working group would be a useful endeavor for our online instructors. Sharing platforms, prompts, and techniques for engaging students in discussions on politics and diversity is key in supporting this work.
- Bringing more explicit conversations on equity and inclusion into our online courses and directly addressing the challenges of having complex discussions around issues like race is central to doing better work in this area. A cohort or workshop series on this type of conversation, supporting and expanding this work, is recommended.