

A RESEARCH NEED

Student Time Commitment and the Three-Semester Credit Online Course

Michael Simonson
Editor

Lipka (2010), in a recent front-page article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* titled, “Academic Credit: A Currency With No Set Value,” wrote about problems with how college credits are assigned in colleges, especially credits for online or blended courses. Of primary concern was the issue summarized in the statement “How much time should a typical student be expected to allocate to an online course?”

There is an answer to this question and generally this is it. First, let us look at time commitments for traditional college courses. The most-widely recognized standard for secondary and college courses is the “Carnegie Unit” or “Course Unit,” which is based on student time in class. This approach expects that for every semester credit there should be 750 minutes of in-class time; which normally translates into fifteen 50-minute class sessions during a semester. Therefore, a three-semester credit college-level course would have 2,250 minutes of class time; this translates into forty-five 50-minute class sessions, or three class sessions per week during a 15-week semester.

Additionally, the general guideline for student *out-of-class* effort is somewhere between 1 hour to 3 hours outside of class for every hour in class. These are 50-minute hours. This out-of-class time would be dedicated to readings, projects, assignments, and preparation for examinations, for example. Thus, for a three-semester credit college-level class a student would spend on average 4,500 minutes outside of class (using an average of 2 hours outside of class for every hour in class); this translates into 6 hours outside of class each week for a typical 15-week semester. In a traditional, classroom-based college-level course, a student has long been expected to allocate, on average, 3 hours in class, and 6 hours outside of class, each week for 15 weeks (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2012).

Now let us look at time commitments for online students who do not attend face-to-face classes—the comparison between traditional and online classes should be simple. If a student in a traditional course is expected to spend approximately 135 hours (of 50-minutes each) in class and studying each semester, then an online student should also be expected to dedi-

cate a similar amount of time to an online class; 135 hours per semester, or 9 hours per week for 15 weeks.

Certainly, some students would dedicate considerably more time to a class, and some students might do acceptable work in less time. However, a general guideline is for an online student to commit about 9 hours per week to each three-semester credit class in which they enroll.

It is interesting to note that the widely discussed U.S. Department of Education's review of online learning studies noted that "online and classroom conditions differed in terms of *time spent*, curriculum and pedagogy ... online learning is much more conducive to the expansion of learning time than is face-to-face instruction" (Means, 2009, p. xvii, emphasis added). Unfortunately, the report does not provide information about *why* students in online classes spent more time than their face-to-face counterparts.

Once again, research often identifies more questions than answers. Rigorous research

dealing with time allocated by learners in online courses is needed—surveys, observations, self-reports, experiments, and blogs might be effective approaches for studying the class-time phenomenon. The editors and editorial board of the *Quarterly Review of Distance Education* would encourage the submission of research that investigates the "class-time phenomenon."

REFERENCES

- Lipka, S. (2010). Academic credit: A currency with no set value. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 57(9), 1.
- Means, B., Toyama, Y., Murphy, R., Bakia, M., & Jones, K. (2009). *Evaluation of evidence-based practices in online learning: A meta-analysis and review of online learning studies*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- Simonson, M., Smaldino, S., Albright, M., & Zvacek, S. (2012). *Teaching and learning at a distance: Foundations of distance education* (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.