

## The Great Debate: On-Campus / Off-Campus Education

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*There has been concern for years that extension credit courses offered off campus are inferior to those offered on the resident campuses. The authors compared off- and on-campus, graduate-level courses and found no differences in quality of students, professors, and the learning situation. This study suggests that off-campus courses may be different from on-campus courses, however.*

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Professors who are concerned with applied as well as theoretical issues, and who express this concern by teaching off-campus courses have a problem: their off-campus classes are considered inferior to the same courses taught on campus. Four general allegations are leveled against off-campus, graduate-level, education courses:

1. Students attending classes off campus are inferior to those who take on-campus courses.
2. Students learn less in off-campus than in on-campus courses.
3. Professors who teach off campus are inferior to those who teach on campus.
4. The teaching-learning climate in off-campus classes is infe-

rior to the climate on campus.

Such allegations don't find their way into print, but they're implicit in moves to restrict the numbers of graduate credits that can be taken off campus (in degree programs) and in the problems many students have in transferring credits earned off campus.

Because committees who make decisions about the value of off-campus classes seem to operate without data, we decided to test these allegations as if they were hypotheses. This pilot study of the alleged inferiority of off-campus, graduate-level, education courses was done by staff members of the Center for Extension Programs in Education, University Extension, University of Wisconsin. In this

study, five courses being taught both on and off campus during the same semester were selected. This means 10 groups of students were surveyed. All five courses had graduate-level course numbers.

### Quality of Students

The study looked at the quality of on-campus and off-campus students. Analysis of these data reveal several facts about the students:

1. There was no significant difference in the proportions of men and women in the courses taught on or off campus.<sup>1</sup>
2. On-campus students labeled themselves "students," while off-campus students labeled themselves "teachers" when asked for their occupation.
3. Off-campus students were older.
4. There was no significant difference in self-reported *undergraduate*, grade-point average between on- and off-campus graduate students.
5. There was no significant difference in self-reported *graduate*, grade-point average between on- and off-campus graduate students.
6. Significantly more off-campus students taking graduate-level courses had completed the bachelor's degree.
7. No significant discrepancies between on- and off-campus students were found in the number of publications they said they'd written.
8. Neither group reported spending significantly more time in class or in preparing for class during the week.
9. When on- and off-campus, graduate-level students were compared on their motivations for taking courses, on-campus students ranked "progress toward a degree" as their first concern and "certification requirement" second. Off-campus students ranked "salary adjustment" first and "intellectual curiosity" second.

In summary, off-campus, graduate-level students were older, had finished at least one academic degree, and had grade-point averages (graduate and undergraduate) about equal to their on-campus counterparts. Off-campus students received about the same number of hours of class instruction each week and did about the same number of hours of homework as their on-campus peers. On the basis of these data, the suggestion that off-campus students are inferior is questionable.

### Ability to Learn

Do on-campus students learn more? In a separate study, Clasen taught the same course on and off campus in the fall of 1969-70. Each class was given the same 85-item, multiple-choice test at the conclusion of the course. A "t" test for independent samples was applied to these test scores; it showed that neither group was significantly superior to the other.

### Quality of Faculty

Is the argument that "professors who teach off-campus, graduate-level, education courses are inferior" a valid one? No, not when you consider that University Extension extends residence department credits only with the permission of the residence department. Thus, the quality of instruction in off-campus courses is a function of the same system that decides the quality of on-campus course instruction. Also, many instructors teach both on- and off-campus courses at the graduate level.

### Learning Climate

The study also sought to delineate some of the possible learning-climate differences between on- and off-campus courses. Statements with five choices ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree were used to assess the significance of difference in attitude of students in these courses. A sample statement was: Students share the planning in this class.

Off-campus students were significantly more positive about their courses than were their on-campus counterparts when all items were pooled.<sup>2</sup> Off-campus students felt that: (1) their courses were focused on their needs, (2) their courses were influencing their thinking, (3) their courses offered opportunities for first-hand learning, (4) they were able to apply what they learned, and (5) their courses were

practical. On only one item was the attitude of the on-campus group significantly better than the off-campus group: the on-campus group reported a significantly greater likelihood of meeting with their professors during out-of-class hours.

In another question, off-campus students who had taken graduate-level courses on campus were asked to compare these two experiences. This yielded a pool of 41 statements. These were sorted into homogeneous categories and then re-sorted into positive and negative statements within the categories.

Seventeen statements were favorable to off-campus courses, 17 were unfavorable to off-campus courses, 4 indicated no differences, and 3 complained of more work in off-campus courses.

Of the 17 statements indicating problems with off-campus, graduate-level courses, 10 complained of discontinuity in learning, 4 indicated that library resources were better on campus, and 3 indicated that commuting was tiring after a day's teaching.

Of the 17 statements favorable to off-campus courses, 11 were concerned with a more relaxed climate, better instruction, and a general feeling that off-campus courses were better. Six statements indicated that off-campus courses were more "relevant."

### Different Teaching Strategies

In another segment of the study, on- and off-campus stu-

dents were asked how frequently 17 kinds of teaching strategies were used by their instructors. Off-campus students reported a higher incidence of group problem solving, paper preparation, and survey research activities. On-campus students reported a higher incidence of library research, demonstrations, and one-to-one encounters with professors.

### Conclusion

This study doesn't support the notion that off-campus education courses at the graduate level are inferior to the same courses on campus. It does, instead, suggest that off-campus courses may be *different* from on-campus courses. Some of these differences may be positive factors.

This study refutes the idea that off-campus work is the haven for second-rate professors, second-rate students, and second-rate learning. Off-campus instructors in the courses surveyed were dealing with

high-quality students who were positively motivated toward their course work.

Students indicated that off-campus courses were more relevant to their needs, more influential to their thinking, and more likely to be applied than did their on-campus counterparts.

Myths about the inferiority of educational opportunities not rooted in campus buildings must be seriously questioned. The mysticism of the residence experience as an essential part of graduate education has persevered in the face of technological advance. But, the boundaries of the campus and state can only be coterminous when off-campus courses are completely recognized.

### Footnotes

1. The significance level was  $p < .05$ , using the chi-square test of significance.
2. The significance level was  $p < .05$ , using a "t" test for independent samples.