How Ready Are Nazareth Students for Online Learning?

Kate Collier, Teaching and Learning Technologies

Introduction

During the first year of Moodle at Nazareth, the Teaching and Learning Technologies department in the Lorette Wilmot Library and Media Center focused on preparing faculty to use Moodle for teaching online or face-to-face. As faculty developed their Moodle courses, the question arose: How ready are Nazareth students to undertake online courses? Teaching and Learning Technology's initiative to measure how prepared Nazareth students are to undertake and succeed in online and hybrid courses was motivated by the following related interests:

◆ Retention of students in online courses
◆ Student success with learning outcomes in online courses
◆ Need for academic support for online learners
◆ Need for technical support for online learners

With these aims in mind, Teaching and Learning Technologies developed an online survey starting with questions from existing online surveys about "student online readiness." Faculty and staff involved in online teaching reviewed and added to the questions.

The resulting pilot Online Student Readiness Survey consisted of 3 categories with 8-9 questions each:

Questions about Technical Ability (9)
✧ Comfortably use computers and applications
✧ Have access to high-speed Internet
✧ Successful using a web browser to research information
✧ Successful searching library databases for articles
✧ Able to format a paper in APA/MLA/etc. using Word
✧ Able to communicate electronically (email, chat, etc)
✧ Able to find, view/play, download multimedia
✧ Can organize files and backup work
✧ Can download/install plug-ins and applications

Questions about Study Habits (9)
✧ Work independently, without structured class time
✧ Strive to do well
✧ Procrastinate
✧ Submit assignments without being reminded
✧ Contribute online multiple times per week
✧ Persevere and asking for help
✧ Interact with classmates for class work
✧ Schedule time to meet commitments

Questions about Communication Skills (8)
✧ Read and comprehend websites
✧ Paraphrase, quote, and credit ideas of others
✧ Confident in writing skills
✧ Collaborate at a distance
✧ Communicate with images, sound, and video
✧ Communicate emotion online
✧ Use Netiquette
✧ Read and write college-level English

Results

During the month of September 2011, the Online Student Readiness Survey was administered via SpeedSurvey in 6 online and hybrid courses at Nazareth. Fifty students participated:
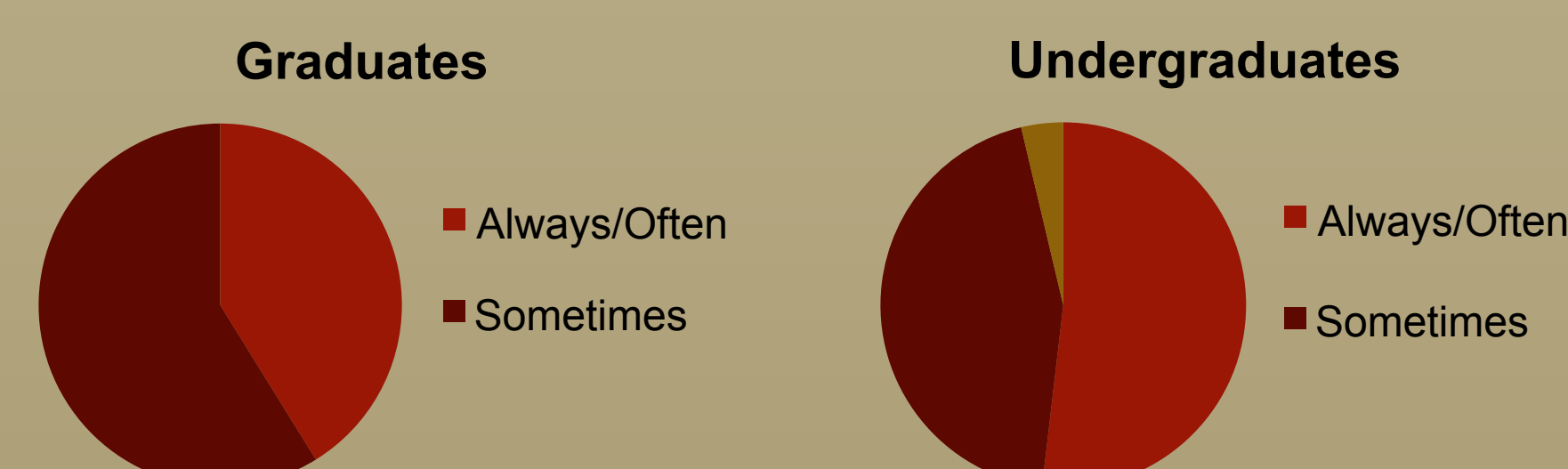◆ 17 graduate students
◆ 33 undergraduates

The results of the pilot Online Student Readiness Survey at Nazareth showed that:
◆ Nazareth students who participated in the survey are generally well-prepared for online learning
◆ However, responses in four specific areas have an impact course design and online pedagogy at Nazareth:
 ✧ Students' discomfort with unstructured learning
 ✧ Students' tendency to procrastinate
 ✧ Reluctance to interact with classmates online
 ✧ Reluctance to collaborate (on group projects) online
◆ There is a need for online academic and technical support
◆ There is a need for consistent messages from instructors, advisors, and others about the expectations and demands of online learning
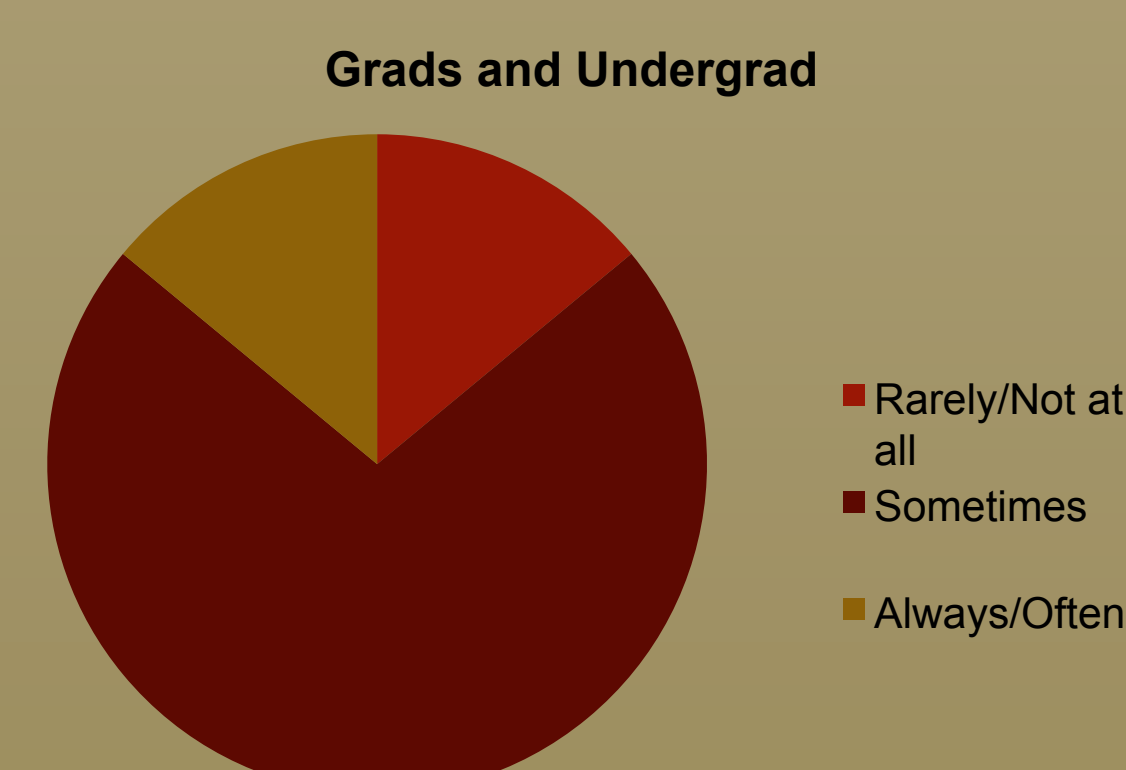
Need for Structure.
In response to the statement, "I am comfortable working and learning independently- that is, without structured class time", fewer than half the graduate students and barely half the undergraduates said this is always/often the case. To insure student success in an online course, instructors will need to provide structure in their courses (e.g. week-to-week schedules and clearly defined assignments) and continually monitor and give feedback to students on their progress toward learning outcomes.

I am comfortable working without structure

Graduates | **Undergraduates**
■ Always/Often
■ Sometimes

I procrastinate about beginning my work

Grads and Undergrad
■ Rarely/Not at all
■ Sometimes
■ Always/Often

Discussion

Lessening the Impact of Procrastination.
Graduate and undergraduate students both acknowledged they procrastinate. In response the the statement "I procrastinate about beginning my work", 7 of 55 said they "Always/Often" procrastinate; 7 of 55 said they procrastinate "Rarely/Not at all"; 36 respondents or 65%said they "Sometimes" procrastinated. Knowing that this student trait is generalized in their students, instructors can plan their instruction in a way that sidesteps the potential pitfall. For the online instructor whose course features a semester-long project, it is important to get students started early, provide measurable milestones, and monitor student progress toward the final product. Similarly, when an instructor has set up a discussion forum as a vehicle for student learning, the instructor can insure that students begin their participation in a timely and meaningful way so that responses and interaction can unfold.

**Teaching and Guiding Students to Collaborate.**
Two related questions highlighted reluctance on the part of many Nazareth students– both undergraduate and graduate students– to engage online and to work collaboratively on group projects:

✧ "I enjoy interacting with fellow classmates both individually and in group projects."
✧ "I am willing and able to use the computer to collaborate with students at a distance for a group project."

In both questions, about 30% of graduate students and about 45% of undergraduates said they only Sometimes or Rarely/Not at all enjoy interacting online and are not always willing to collaborate in group projects online. Since collaborative learning and learning through discussion are important instructional strategies in online teaching, instructors need to take time early in their courses to model, teach, and reinforce collaboration and effective discussion techniques.

Instructors who are informed about the disconnects between the demands of online learning and the preferences of their students can address the disconnects in their course design and teaching.

I enjoy interacting… I am willing/able to collaborate…

Graduates | **Undergraduates**
■ Always/Often
■ Sometimes
■ Rarely/Not at all
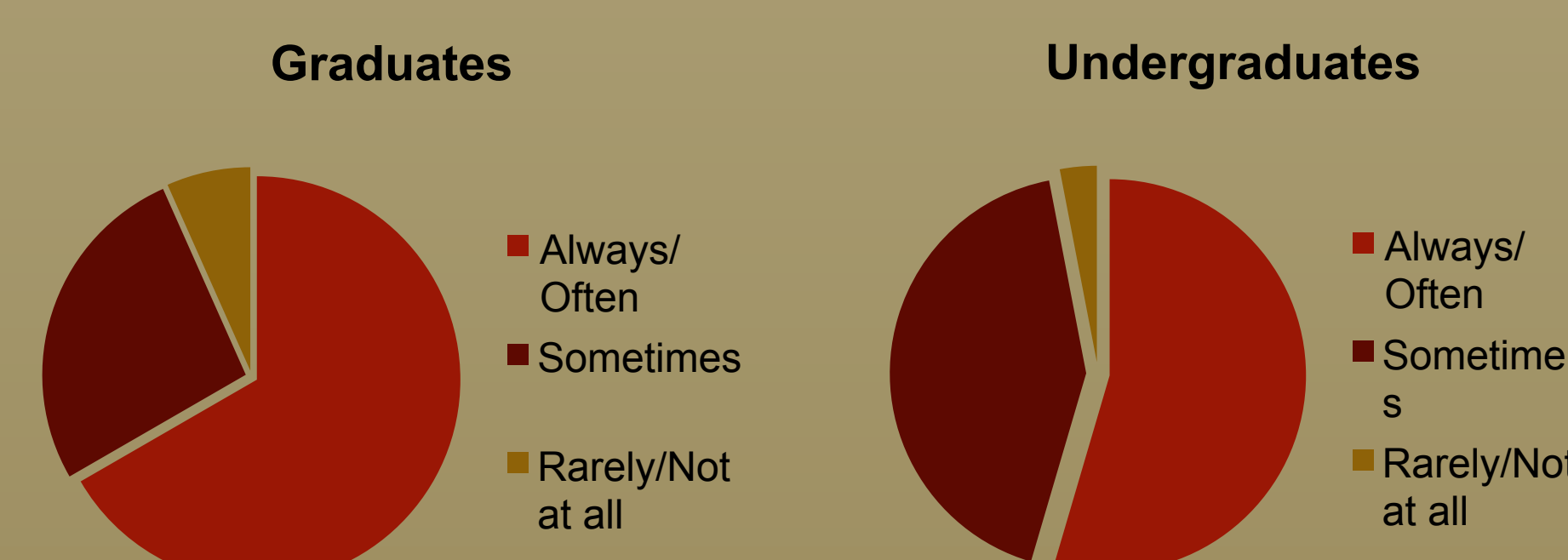
Implications

It is important for faculty and for the college as a whole to test assumptions in online/hybrid courses, particularly concerning literacy and academic skills.
◆ Writing skills: 30% of grads and 40% of undergrads lack confidence in their writing skills
◆ Reading websites: almost 20% of grads and 30% of undergrads have difficulty comprehending websites
◆ Information Literacy: 45% of undergrads are not always successful when they search library databases when doing papers and projects
◆ Paraphrasing, Quoting, Giving Credit: 24% do not always know how to do this properly
◆ Note taking: 60% of grad students and 45% of undergrads do not routinely take notes
◆ College-level English: 18% of grads and 33% of undergrads say reading and writing college-level English are not always easy for them

Four of the technical skills targeted by the survey showed the need for technical support at a level that can be accommodated by a combination of tutorials, instructor support and Helpdesk support:

◆ Organizing and finding files; routine backup
◆ Downloading and installing plug-ins
◆ Incorporating images, audio, video
◆ Practicing Netiquette

There is a need for instructors and advisers to set expectations for online learning, using consistent messages about the skills and demands of online learning:

◆ Only 62% of students were definitely willing to contribute online more than once per week
◆ Only 56% enjoy interacting with classmates
◆ 22% may not persevere or ask for help when confronted with challenges

Successful online courses and programs at Nazareth College will require effort by instructors, advisers, and the students themselves. Knowing how ready students are for online learning and what shortcomings our students bring with them positions all of us to insure success.

Sources

The following colleges have instruments for measuring online student readiness that were used as sources of questions for the Nazareth pilot survey:
✧ Illinois Online Network
✧ Lesley University
✧ Middlesex Community College
✧ Pennsylvania State University
✧ San Diego Community College
✧ University of Oklahoma