



## Comparing Perceptions of Effectiveness of On-Campus and Hybrid Apparel Ph.D. Programs

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**Introduction:** Programs within the field of textiles and apparel now offer distance-format master's degree options, which have been positively assessed by participating students (Manikowske, Lyons, LeHew, & Bennur, 2015). However, only one distance textile and apparel-related Ph.D. program presently exists. It is offered in a hybrid format, which entails on-campus summer courses, and asynchronous and synchronous online courses. Formative assessment of this Ph.D. program option was undertaken to ensure not only student satisfaction, but also that the program's academic competencies are met (Dooley, Kelsey, & Lindner, 2003; Winston & Fields, 2003) for the sake of student preparedness and maintenance of the program's reputation. Hence, the purpose of the present study was to compare perceptions of the program's effectiveness between samples of (a) on-campus and hybrid students and (b) students and faculty members who work within both formats of the Ph.D. program.

**Literature Review:** Graduate students desire programs that support their academic careers and offer a sense of community (Broome, Halstead, Pesut, Rawl, & Bowland, 2011; Manikowske et al., 2015). Student satisfaction is influenced by perceived effectiveness of a program at fostering academic and professional connections; graduate students are looking for knowledgeable faculty who will mentor them in teaching, research, and publication development (Broome et al., 2011; Manikowske et al., 2015). Hybrid graduate students desire additional interaction with faculty and peers and more program flexibility to allow them to balance family commitments and accommodate full-time work schedules (Bolliger & Halupa, 2012; Broome et al., 2011). Challenges of distance course delivery are course format (Grable, 2011), communication from a distance (Broome et al., 2011), and use of unfamiliar or unreliable technology (Dooley et al., 2003). In addition, hybrid students' self-assessment of skills, knowledge, and ability-related competencies tends to be lower than on-campus students (Lindner, Dooley, & Murphy, 2001).

**Method:** Researchers administered a qualitative online survey to a purposively selected sample of faculty, hybrid graduate students, and on-campus graduate students in the textile and apparel Ph.D. program. Fourteen qualitative surveys were completed and analyzed, realizing a response rate of 100% for students ( $n=10$ ) and 80% for faculty ( $n=4$ ). Three researchers coded the data and achieved an inter-rater reliability of 88%. To identify overarching themes, the researchers employed the constant comparative method throughout the coding process.

**Results and Discussion:** Whereas hybrid students perceived the challenges they face to be unique, the same issues were expressed by on-campus students. Both groups reported satisfaction

with the program's effectiveness, but were concerned with work/life balance, stress management, university procedures, and skill development. Research, teaching, grant writing, and service activities were noted by both student groups as essential in preparing for their roles as future faculty, as was the opportunity to interact inside and outside the classroom with professors, staff, student peers, and undergraduates. Some hybrid students did not recognize that these opportunities were open to them and not solely for on-campus students. Interestingly, some on-campus student respondents also felt excluded and were unsure how to participate in activities.

Student and faculty respondents appreciated the uniqueness of the hybrid program (i.e., the beneficial combination of distance and on-campus experiences). All respondents spoke very positively about the summer sessions, where hybrid students attend classes on campus, identifying the face-to-face meetings as crucial in developing a greater sense of community and inclusion. During fall and spring semesters, hybrid students typically attend class synchronously via web conferencing software. Students and faculty alike identified technology, and the fact that hybrid students are not located with the rest of their classmates, as having a negative impact on hybrid student engagement. Faculty noted the need for increased effort to ensure equal engagement among the two student groups, to overcome technological problems, and to manage the compressed nature of summer courses.

**Conclusion:** Most respondents were complimentary of the program's effectiveness; however, the following recommendations are offered to program administrators to enhance the hybrid Ph.D. program. To ensure student competency achievement, the current student handbook should be expanded to clearly identify skill development opportunities and guide students through required university procedures. Continued scheduled maintenance of the program's software and technical equipment, as well as regular upgrades to enhance the technology's capabilities, is advised. Lastly, administrators must continue to review and revise course offerings and formats to increase the effectiveness of the program in meeting the needs of both faculty and students.

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