

Which Online Degree Programs Are in Demand: Evidence From Accounting and Marketing Majors

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We seek answers to the following research questions: 1) What online degree program attributes are attractive to college students? 2) Which individual demographic variable(s) affect students' preference for different online programs? 3) How do students' academic fields affect their online program preference and willingness to pay? Results from a survey of 314 participants suggest that college students value and are willing to pay more for online business degree programs that offer concentrations or are taught by regular full-time faculty. Regression results indicate that first-generation college students are more cautious with their education investments than their counterparts. Additionally, while accounting students prioritize online programs with concentrations or full-time regular faculty, a larger percentage of them are reluctant to pay more compared to marketing students.

Keywords: online program design, first-gen college students, accounting major, marketing major

INTRODUCTION

The 2020 pandemic accelerated digital transformation in U.S. higher education (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020), doubling the percentage of students taking online courses to 60% by Fall 2021 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). This shift has prompted university administrators, faculty, and students to reevaluate traditional in-person teaching methods and compare them to more flexible online formats (Bragg et al., 2021; Carlton, 2024). A key takeaway is the increasing demand for online learning which offers students greater autonomy over when, where, and how they learn (Clary et al., 2022; Gallagher & Palmer, 2020). This underscores the need for more research on how universities can design online programs that appeal to post-pandemic students.

This article focuses on designing an asynchronous business degree program and addresses three key research questions: 1) Which program attributes (e.g., curriculum design and faculty qualification) are most attractive to students? 2) What demographic factors influence students' preferences and willingness to pay for online programs? 3) How does students' academic field (e.g., accounting vs. marketing) affect their preferences and willingness to pay? We explore these questions through a survey study.

Our research contributes in several ways. First, unlike previous studies focusing on university and faculty roles in program design (e.g., Bigatel & Williams, 2015), we examine how students perceive and respond to various program attributes. Second, while past research focused on program attributes that

improve efficiency and satisfaction (e.g., Castro & Tumibay, 2021), our study explores factors that directly impact prospective students and enhance program appeal. Finally, our findings suggest that administrators should segment markets based on individual differences (e.g., first-generation students) and academic fields to design competitive pricing schemes.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND PROPOSITION DEVELOPMENT

Improving Online Education

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic significantly shaped attitudes toward online education among higher education stakeholders, including administrators, faculty, and students. With a generally positive outlook, a growing body of literature has explored ways to improve online education at the individual course level (e.g., Peterson, 2021; Wu & You, 2022).

However, research on enhancing online education at the program level remains limited, with much of the existing literature predating the pandemic. Liu et al. (2005) identify four key roles that instructors play in an online MBA program: pedagogical, managerial, social, and technical, with a primary focus on pedagogy. They suggest instructors should be more mindful of their social role to create a more engaging and productive online environment. Bigatel and Williams (2015) argue that faculty professional development is crucial for increasing student engagement and improving the overall quality of online undergraduate business programs. Yukselturk and Yildirim (2008) stress the importance of learning communities, well-structured course designs, and flexibility in course timing and sections for enhancing student satisfaction in online certificate programs. Sun and Chen (2016) conclude that successful online programs depend on well-designed course content, teacher-student interactions, a supportive learning community, and the integration of advanced technology. Despite the demonstrated effectiveness of the attributes mentioned, other program attributes, especially those most relatable to students and occurring prior to enrollment, such as curriculum design and faculty qualification, remain largely unexplored. Such attributes are crucial to the success of any online program, as they are often featured in marketing materials and can directly influence matriculation. Therefore, we propose:

Proposition 1: Program attributes (e.g., curriculum design and faculty qualifications) affect college students' preference for and reaction to online education programs.

Student Selection of Online Education Programs

Understanding the college selection process is a key focus for administrators and researchers. Chapman (1981) developed a model highlighting the influence of student characteristics (e.g., socioeconomic status) and external factors (e.g., program availability, location). Litten (1982) emphasized the need for tailored recruitment strategies, noting that college selection varies by race, gender, ability, parental education, and geography. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) introduced a three-stage model—predisposition, search, and choice—to explain how students make college decisions.

Recently, researchers have focused on factors influencing students' decisions to choose online programs. Mann and Henneberry (2014) found that students would pay more for online courses with videos of face-to-face lectures and topic discussions. Lansing (2017) proposed a model explaining how students decide to enroll in distance-based degree programs, identifying key factors for nontraditional learners: program quality, affordability, flexibility, and opportunities for faculty and peer interaction.

From a different perspective, Manley et al. (2019) examine how socio-demographic variables affect students' willingness to pay for online courses, finding that factors like gender and household income have little impact. However, willingness to pay increases with work hours and decreases with commuting time. Similarly, Ryan et al. (2024) find that students were willing to pay less than the actual tuition rate during the pandemic. They also note that socio-economic factors, such as age and household income, have less influence on students' willingness to pay. Based on above literature, we propose:

Proposition 2: Individual differences (e.g., gender and age) influence how students respond to online programs with varying attributes (e.g., curriculum design and faculty qualifications).

Accounting vs. Marketing Majors

This study includes both accounting and marketing majors, two groups that differ significantly in personality traits and academic skills. Noel et al. (2003) find accounting students to be reserved, practical, and concrete in thinking, while marketing students are described as creative, easygoing, and imaginative. Pringle et al. (2010) note that marketing majors are more extroverted than accounting majors.

Past research also suggests that students with weaker quantitative skills are more likely to choose marketing, a field seen as less quantitatively demanding than accounting. Accounting students typically show stronger computational and algebraic skills (Pritchard et al., 2004). Recently, Madupu and Gunderson (2024) find that marketing students tend to be more active and visual learners, while accounting students are more reflective and sequential in their learning. Hence, we propose:

Proposition 3: Academic field (accounting vs. marketing) influences how students respond to online programs with varying attributes (e.g., curriculum design and faculty qualifications).

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Three hundred and fourteen business students (61% female; average age 29) from a Western U.S. public university participated for course credit across three semesters (spring 2023, fall 2023, spring 2024). Respondents completed an online survey about their online learning experience. Participants were recruited from nine accounting and six marketing classes, with 181 accounting and 133 marketing students participating.

The respondents lived on and off-campus, with some residing out of state, averaging 120 miles from campus. They worked 24 hours and studied 19 hours per week on average. Monthly discretionary income was under \$1,000 for 113 students, between \$1,000 and \$1,999 for 101, and \$2,000 or more for 100. GPAs were 3.50+ for 119 students, 3.00–3.49 for 134, and below 3.0 for 61. See Table 1 for details.

**TABLE 1
SUMMARY STATISTICS**

	N	Mean	Median	SD	Min	Max
<i>Price Willing to Pay</i>						
for a program with concentrations	314	476.90	468.00	33.96	373.50	578.57
for a program closer to home	314	445.88	450.00	44.50	315.00	585.00
for a program taught by regular full-time faculty	314	470.48	450.00	40.43	321.43	585.00
for a program with fewer required units to graduate	314	445.71	450.00	46.41	315.00	585.00
<i>Perceived Importance</i>						
of a program with concentrations	314	5.55	6	1.45	1	7
of a program closer to home	314	3.62	4	2.13	1	7
of a program taught by regular full-time faculty	314	4.99	5	1.68	1	7
of a program with fewer required units to graduate	314	5.25	5	1.54	1	7

	N	Mean	Median	SD	Min	Max
<i>Demographic Variables</i>						
Age	314	28.75	26	8.07	19	59
Work hours per week	314	23.95	25	17.89	0	70
Distance from home residence to school (minutes)	314	120.10	30	316.76	0	2703
Study hours per week	314	18.79	15	11.93	1	90
Gender	Female: 191; Male: 123					
Race	API: 103; Black: 23; Native: 8, Hispanic: 100; White: 131					
Major	Accounting: 181; Marketing: 133					
Student status	Non First-Gen: 126; First-Gen: 188					
Discretionary income	<\$1,000 per month: 113; \$1,000 to \$1,999 per month: 101; \$2,000 or more per month: 100					
GPA	<2.5: 2; 2.50 to 2.99: 59; 3.00 to 3.49: 134; 3.50 or higher: 119					

(The benchmark online programs are priced at \$450 per credit unit.)

Procedure

At the start of the survey, respondents were asked to offer advice to a close family friend, Alex, on choosing an asynchronous online business program. In her early 20s, Alex has completed high school and an associate degree with a GPA of 3.15. Her financial situation is similar to theirs, and she meets the admission requirements for all online programs. Attracted by the flexibility of online programs, Alex is seriously considering her options and seeks advice after doing some research.

Respondents were then presented with four pairs of online program descriptions. Each pair is identical, except for one program attribute: curriculum design (general business program vs. business program with concentrations), instructor qualification (regular full-time faculty vs. part-time lecturers with rich industry experiences), proximity (program campus being 20 miles vs. 350 miles from home residence), or remaining credit units for graduation (60 vs. 54). After reviewing the information, respondents answered questions on willingness to pay and perceptions of program attributes. The entire survey took approximately 12 to 15 minutes to complete.

Measures

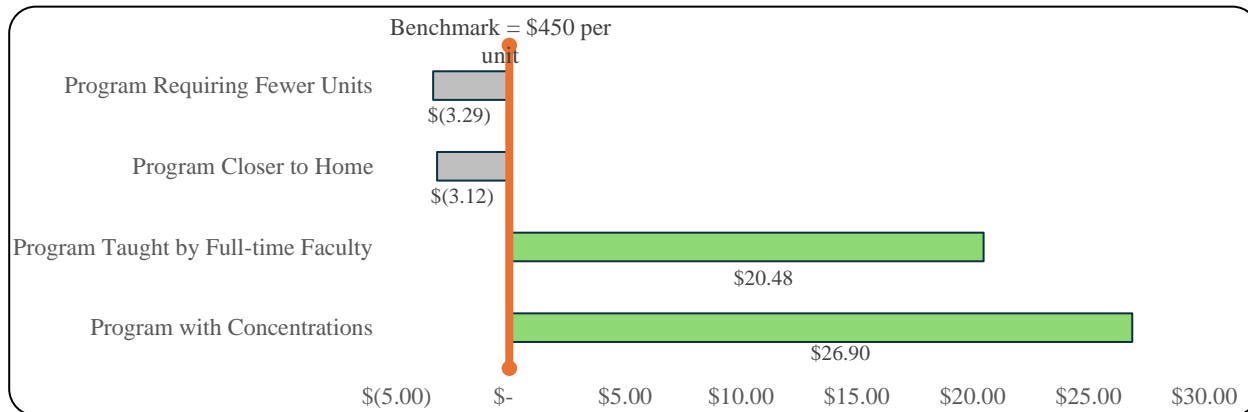
Respondents' preferences for online programs were measured by their "willingness to pay," using two questions. For example, when comparing two programs (A and B) with different instructor qualifications, respondents were asked: 1) "Program A is taught by full-time professors, and Program B by lecturers with industry experience. I (Alex) can't find tuition for Program A. How much should it cost compared to Program B (\$450 per credit unit)? Program A should charge _____" ("more than," "equal to," or "less than" Program B). 2) (If "more than" or "less than" was selected) "How much more (or less) would you pay for Program A compared to Program B (in %)" Respondents' views on program attribute importance were also gathered using a seven-point scale (1 = not important at all, 7 = very important). In the final section, demographic and individual information was collected.

RESULTS

Figure 1 shows students' willingness to pay for online program attributes compared to a \$450 per credit unit benchmark. On average, they would pay \$26.90 more (5.98%) for a program with concentrations and \$20.48 more (4.55%) for one taught by full-time faculty. However, they preferred to pay \$3.12 less (-0.69%) for a program closer to home and \$3.29 less (-0.73%) for one with fewer required units. Further one-sample t-tests show no significant difference in willingness to pay for the latter two attributes,

compared to the benchmark program. Therefore, the following analysis focuses on curriculum design and instructor qualification.

FIGURE 1
WILLINGNESS TO PAY FOR DIFFERENT PROGRAM ATTRIBUTES



(Measured by perceived price difference, with benchmark programs priced at \$450 per credit unit)

A series of t-tests examined how student characteristics relate to attitudes toward online programs with concentrations or taught by regular full-time faculty. As shown in Table 2, non-first-generation students are willing to pay slightly more for concentrations (\$480.90 per credit unit) than first-generation students (\$6.68 difference, $p < .1$). Younger students also prefer concentrations, willing to pay more (\$483.56 per credit unit) than older students (\$13.67 difference, $p < .01$). Non-white students value full-time faculty more, paying \$475.49 per credit unit, \$11.99 more than white students ($p < .01$).

Although accounting students seem to value concentrations more than marketing students (Importance_concentrations_accounting = 5.76 vs. Importance_concentrations_marketing = 5.26, $p < .01$), they are less willing to pay extra for such programs. Similarly, male students place more importance on full-time faculty (Importance_Faculty_Male = 5.24; Importance_Faculty_Female = 4.83, $p < .05$), but their willingness to pay is similar to that of female students.

TABLE 2
WILLINGNESS TO PAY FOR AND PERCEIVED IMPORTANCE OF DIFFERENT PROGRAMS BY INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCE VARIABLES

Individual Difference	Price Willing to Pay for		Perceived Importance of	
	Program with Concentrations	Faculty Qualification	Program with Concentrations	Faculty Qualification
Accounting majors ($n = 181$)	475.53	470.94	5.76	5.08
Marketing majors ($n = 133$)	478.78	469.87	5.26	4.87
<i>t-value</i>	-0.85	0.25	3.10***	1.10
Non FirstGen ($n = 126$)	480.90	471.85	5.47	4.91
FirstGen ($n = 188$)	474.22	469.57	5.60	5.05
<i>t-value</i>	1.70*	0.50	-0.75	-0.70

Individual Difference	Price Willing to Pay for		Perceived Importance of	
	Program with Concentrations	Faculty Qualification	Program with Concentrations	Faculty Qualification
Age (≤ 26) ($n = 161$)	483.56	473.39	5.47	5.12
Age (> 26) ($n = 153$)	469.89	467.43	5.63	4.86
<i>t-value</i>	3.65***	1.30	-1.00	1.40
White ($n = 131$)	475.84	463.50	5.59	4.89
Non-white ($n = 183$)	477.66	475.49	5.51	5.07
<i>t-value</i>	-0.45	-2.60***	0.45	-0.90
Female ($n = 191$)	478.05	470.98	5.60	4.83
Male ($n = 123$)	475.13	469.71	5.46	5.24
<i>t-value</i>	0.75	0.25	0.80	-2.10**

*** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .1$

(The benchmark online programs are priced at \$450 per credit unit.)

We further examine the mismatch between perceived importance and willingness to pay. A “mismatch” occurs when students rate the importance of a program with concentrations (or taught by regular full-time faculty) above four but are unwilling to pay more. The survey results show that 32% (or 27%) of the participants value business programs with concentrations (or taught by full-time faculty), but are unwilling to pay a premium for such programs. Chi-squared tests reveal accounting students are more likely to exhibit “mismatch” for programs with concentrations ($X^2 = 10.11$, $p = 0.001$). However, no significant relationship is found between gender and “mismatch” for programs with full-time faculty ($X^2 = 1.77$, $p = 0.183$).

Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression analyses explore factors influencing willingness to pay for programs with concentrations or taught by full-time faculty. We hypothesize that factors like first-generation status, demographics, academic major, financial constraints, and perceived importance of program attributes impact students’ willingness to pay. Acknowledging the differences between accounting and marketing students, we include interaction terms between students’ major and three key variables, first-generation status, age, and race, to capture potential variations in their impact on willingness to pay. Notably, the results show that first-generation, older, and white students are willing to pay significantly lower prices than their peers. The following models (1) and (2) are employed:

$$Price = \alpha + \beta_1 * Major + \beta_2 * FirstGen + \beta_3 * Age + \beta_4 * Race + \beta_5 * Major * FirstGen + \beta_6 * Major * AgeCentered + \beta_7 * Major * Race + \beta_8 * Gender + \beta_9 * Income + \beta_{10} * Imp + \varepsilon$$

in which

Price: Tuition rate a student is willing to pay for an online business program (1) with different concentrations or (2) taught by full-time faculty, compared to a baseline program priced at \$450 per credit unit

Major: 1- accounting major; 0- marketing major

FirstGen: 1- first-generation college student; 0- otherwise

Race: 1- non-Caucasian; 0- otherwise

Gender: 1- male; 0- otherwise

Income: 0- monthly discretionary income less than \$1,000; 1- monthly discretionary income between \$1,000 and \$1,999; 2- monthly discretionary income equal to or more than \$2,000

Imp Perceived importance of attending an online business program (1) with different concentrations or (2) taught by regular full-time faculty.

To address multicollinearity, we create an alternative age variable (*AgeCentered*) by centering the original *Age* variable around its mean and generate an interaction term between *Major* and *AgeCentered*. For both models (1) and (2), we conduct the Breusch-Pagan test for heteroskedasticity (BP = 2.61, $p = 0.1065$; BP = 1.50, $p = 0.2207$) and the Ramsey's RESET test for specification errors (RESET = 0.53, $p = 0.6633$; RESET = 0.11, $p = 0.9552$). The results confirm that the regression models do not suffer from heteroskedasticity or misspecification. Additionally, we control for semester fixed effects. Table 3 presents the OLS regression results.

In Model (1), the baseline price (*FirstGen* = 0 and *Major* = 0) is \$471.03, i.e., non-first-generation marketing students on average are willing to pay \$471.03 per credit unit for an online program with business concentrations. Non-first-generation accounting students (*FirstGen* = 0 and *Major* = 1) are willing to pay \$8.23 more per credit unit, bringing their average to \$479.26. In contrast, first-generation accounting students (*FirstGen* = 1 and *Major* = 1) are willing to pay the least, averaging \$464.59 per credit unit. This suggests that first-generation accounting students are the most price-sensitive group.

TABLE 3
ORDINARY LEAST SQUARED (OLS) REGRESSION RESULTS

Model #	DV: Price willing to pay for	
	A Program with Concentrations (1)	A Program Taught by Regular Faculty (2)
Major	8.23 (1.07)	-1.91 (-0.22)
FirstGen	7.65 (1.30)	2.74 (0.41)
Age	-.80** (-2.03)	-.91** (-2.02)
Race	-0.75 (-0.13)	6.13 (0.92)
Major*FirstGen	-22.32*** (-2.88)	-11.39 (-1.28)
Major*AgeCentered	.41 (.81)	1.60*** (2.74)
Major*Race	1.30 (0.17)	8.93 (0.99)
Gender	-4.79 (-1.22)	-4.53 (-1.00)
Income	4.41* (1.90)	.94 (0.35)
Imp	3.28** (2.49)	6.91*** (5.32)
Constant	471.03*** (31.64)	444.37*** (26.35)
<i>N</i>	314	314
Semester fixed effects	Yes	Yes
Adjusted R ²	0.056	.127

t-statistics are in parentheses

*** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .1$

Age also has a significant impact. Among marketing students (*Major* = 0), willingness of pay for an online business program with concentrations decreases by \$0.80 for each additional year of age. For a 28.75-year-old marketing student, the average willing to pay is approximately \$448.03 per credit unit. As age increases, the price willing to pay continues to decline. Conversely, willingness to pay for an online program with concentrations increases significantly as monthly discretionary income shifts to a different range. For every additional \$1,000 in discretionary income, students are willing to pay \$4.41 more for the program.

For an online program taught by regular full-time faculty, the effect of age on price to pay differs between marketing and accounting students. Among marketing students (*Major* = 0) aged 28.75, the average willingness to pay is \$418.21 per credit unit, \$31.79 less than the benchmark program. Each additional year of age decreases their willingness to pay by \$0.91 per credit unit. In contrast, age has the opposite effect among accounting students: each extra year increases their willingness to pay by \$0.69 per credit unit. At age 28.75, accounting students are willing to pay \$416.30 per credit, \$33.70 below the benchmark. While their willingness to pay at this age is similar to marketing students, accounting students increasingly value and are willing to pay more for an online program taught by regular full-time faculty as they age.

As expected, the perceived importance of program attributes significantly impacts students' willingness to pay, though the magnitudes vary across attributes. For each additional point in perceived importance, students are willing to pay \$3.28 more per credit for an online program with concentrations, compared to \$6.91 more per credit for a program taught by regular full-time faculty.

DISCUSSION

The current study with 314 college student participants highlights which online program attributes appeal to prospective students. Generally, students value online business programs with concentrations or those taught by regular full-time faculty. They are willing to pay a premium for such programs: 5.98 percent more for programs with concentrations and 4.55 percent more for those taught by regular faculty. In contrast, attributes like proximity to home and a lower number of required units are much less appealing.

Our survey results also reveal that: 1) first-generation college students are more cautious with their educational investments, less inclined to pay extra for online programs with concentrations (5.38 percent more than the benchmark program charging \$450 per credit unit, compared to 6.87 percent more among non-first-generation students.); 2) Younger students are more inclined to invest in their education, willing to pay 7.46 percent more for programs with concentrations, while their elder counterparts are willing to pay only 4.42 percent more; 3) non-white students are willing to pay 5.66 percent more for programs taught by full-time faculty, compared to 3.00 percent more by white students; 4) while accounting students place more value on online programs with concentrations compared to marketing students, they are less willing to pay a premium for such programs; and 5) first-generation accounting students are especially price-sensitive, even though they recognize the importance of programs with concentrations.

These findings offer university administrators and faculty valuable insights when designing online degree programs. Specifically, universities can leverage program attributes, such as curriculum design and faculty qualifications, to justify higher tuition fees. When higher tuition is not feasible, universities should emphasize these attributes in their marketing materials, as prospective students value them and may help boost enrollment. University administrators are encouraged to develop tailored scholarships for groups like first-generation and accounting students, who recognize the value of online programs but are generally more conservative in their educational investments. The scholarships help alleviate financial burdens for these students, ultimately boosting enrollment and fostering a sustainable, mutually beneficial strategy for both universities and students.

Our research was conducted within one business school from accounting and marketing disciplines. Therefore, generalizing the findings must be performed with caution, especially when the survey participants were enrolled college students, not prospective students. In addition, we largely relied on student self-reporting measures, which are subject to social desirability biases (Francescucci & Rohani,

2019). To strengthen the external validity of our findings, future research needs to incorporate perspectives from universities and faculty and more objective student data such as enrollment number and tuition paid.

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