

# DISTANCE EDUCATION IN GRADUATE TRAINING PROGRAMS: LESSONS LEARNED FROM SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY STUDENTS

Shannon Viola, University of Houston-Victoria  
Elina Saeki, California State University  
Elise Hendricker, University of Houston-Victoria

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## ABSTRACT

*Although online course offerings continue to expand in postsecondary institutions, little research regarding distance education in applied graduate psychology programs is available. This exploratory study evaluated school psychology graduate students' perceptions, interests, and experience with distance education. Results indicated students view hybrid/blended courses more favorably than fully online courses. While students reported challenges and disadvantages with distance education, they also expressed a desire to have more online and hybrid/blended courses for theoretical and foundational courses. Those who have taken distance education courses reported positively on its impact towards their academic progress. Implications for training programs and future research are discussed.*

*Keywords: distance education, applied graduate psychology programs, school psychology, online education*

## INTRODUCTION

With advancements in technology and the wide availability of the internet, distance education has become prominent in postsecondary education. The rate of online enrollments has increased at higher rates than overall higher education, and as of 2014, 5.8 million students were taking some or all of their courses at a distance (Allen & Seaman, 2016). Meta-analytic studies have found mixed results on the effectiveness of distance education. Some studies found wide variability in effectiveness and trivial effect sizes when examining outcomes of student achievement, attitude, and retention for online courses (Bernard et al., 2004); while others found positive results when comparing student outcomes (Liu et al., 2016; Means, Toyama, Murphy, & Baki, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

Critical to the advancement, development, and maintenance of distance courses in an institution are student needs, perceptions, and level of satisfaction (Cole, Shelley, & Swartz, 2014). Student

perceptions and experiences have been identified as important predictors of success in online settings. For example, perceived usefulness and satisfaction are linked to students' self-regulation in online learning environments (Liaw & Huang, 2013). Students' preference to take future courses in an online format as opposed to face-to-face courses has been linked to self-efficacy for learning online (Artino, 2010) and course satisfaction (Chiu, Sun, Sun, & Ju, 2007). In contrast, students with negative perceptions of the quality of teaching, course design, faculty-student interactions, and workload in online courses tend to achieve relatively poorly (Ellis, Ginns, & Piggott, 2009). These studies highlight the importance of examining student perceptions of distance education to understand how it can be useful for their learning needs. What students find useful about distance education can offer guidance on the types of distance education methodologies and tools graduate programs can incorporate to enhance their training.

Understanding learners' perspectives of distance education in postsecondary training and education is important to optimize available technologies and develop effective web-based instruction, which ultimately contribute to student success in distance education. Previous studies have identified characteristics of distance education that facilitate and enhance student learning experiences. For example, graduate students reported the following factors contribute to effective online courses:

- faculty ability to scaffold appropriate course interactions (Cho & Kim, 2013);
- organization, including the establishment of goals at the beginning of the course, clear and explicit directions, and deadlines for assignments (Song, Singleton, Hill, & Hwa Koh, 2004);
- timely, meaningful instructor feedback (Espasa & Meneses, 2010); and
- use of synchronous, interactive activities (Ward, Peters, & Shelley, 2010).

Overall, it appears that factors associated with effective face-to-face instruction are also characteristics that are valued in online courses by students.

Learning occurs in a social context, in which students are socially present and interact and collaborate with one another (Cui, Lockee, & Meng, 2013). Perceptions of online courses and the instructional quality are reported to be more favorable among students when instructors use synchronous, interactive components in their courses to facilitate student learning (Ward, Peters, & Shelley, 2010), especially because establishing a sense of community can be more difficult in online courses as compared to face-to-face courses (Song et al., 2004). Online courses that use technologies to more closely resemble face-to-face interactions (e.g., synchronous interactions) have higher levels of student satisfaction than courses that use only asynchronous methodology (Castle & McGuire, 2010). Consequently, graduate students reported that they were more satisfied with online courses when interaction was facilitated between students and the instructor (Fedynich, Bradley, & Bradley, 2015). By facilitating student-to-student and student-to-instructor interaction, students will be more likely to actively participate and report greater satisfaction with online courses (Wu, Tennyson, & Hsia, 2010).

Relevant research has explored student perceptions and experiences of distance education, but the literature offers little insight into distance education in graduate applied and professional training programs, such as programs for medical and mental health clinicians. Although the benefits of distance education are widely cited, such as convenience and flexibility, the ability to review materials and responses before responding, and the ability to work at one's own pace (Shea & Bidjerano, 2014), the applied nature of some graduate training programs pose unique challenges when translating education and training into an online format (Rudestam, 2004). Graduate training programs by definition are established to provide a deeper level of instruction and curriculum beyond an undergraduate program and often include mentoring to ensure that students have "knowledge of the literature of the discipline" and "engagement in research and/or appropriate professional practice and training" (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, 2017, p. 22). Understanding students' perspectives of the advantages and challenges of online education in graduate training programs enables faculty and trainers to better tailor their programs to ensure student acquisition of content knowledge and application of knowledge to real-life practice settings.

The limited information about student perceptions of distance education in applied graduate psychology training, especially in school psychology, presents a critical gap in the literature. Given the empirical literature regarding the importance of student perceptions and the role this plays in the acceptance of online and hybrid/blended courses (e.g., Artino, 2010), information about school psychology graduate students' perceptions of distance education can guide applied and professional training programs to tailor their courses and better support their students in becoming competent and effective practitioners.

#### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine the current status of graduate students' perceptions about distance education in the field of school psychology. To our knowledge, this is the first study to examine this topic with school psychology graduate students; therefore, this exploratory study

used primarily descriptive analyses to answer the following research questions:

1. What are graduate students' perceptions of online and hybrid/blended courses in school psychology programs?
2. Are students' perceptions of online and hybrid/blended courses related to previous experiences with these courses?
3. What are school psychology graduate students' interests in distance education courses?
4. What are students' reported benefits and challenges to distance education?
5. For students who have taken online and/or hybrid/blended courses, what are their perceptions of the impact of these courses on their educational progress and attainment?

The theoretical approach utilized within the survey was based upon prior work examining the relationship between perceived effectiveness of online learning and the following variables: student perceptions of online learning, prior online learning experiences, and interest in online learning experiences (see Haverila & Barkhi, 2009 for detailed information). Given the limited research on distance education in school psychology and the traditional nature of most programs, we expected that perceptions from school psychology students would be negative. We further hypothesized that despite negative perceptions, consistent with previous research, the primary reason most students are interested in distance education would be convenience. We anticipated that school psychology graduate students would indicate more interest in taking theory-based courses in a distance format than techniques-based courses. We hypothesized that most students would report they have taken few online or hybrid/blended courses and that the online and hybrid/blended courses they have taken would be predominately theory-based courses. We further hypothesize that students would report more challenges in taking online and hybrid/blended courses.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

This study included 223 graduate students enrolled in school psychology programs in the United States and Puerto Rico. The sample was

comprised of 85.1% full-time and 14.9% part-time students, and 88.7% of the participants were female. Of the participants, 69.5% were Caucasian/White, 11.2% were Hispanic/Latino, 4.5% were African American, 3.1% were Asian, and 10.8% were more than one race. The majority of participants described their program as a Specialist level program (60.5%), which appears representative of school psychology programs across the United States, as 68% of programs offer training at the Specialist level based on publicly accessible data published by the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). Additional demographic information is available in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Characteristics of Sample (N=223)

Demographic Variable	Category	Sample Size (%)
Biological Sex	Female	197 (88.7)
	Male	25 (11.3)
Ethnicity/Race	White/Caucasian	155 (69.5)
	Hispanic/Latino	25 (11.2)
	More than one race	24 (10.8)
	African American	10 (4.5)
	Asian	7 (3.1)
	American Indian or Alaskan Native	0 (0)
	Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0 (0)
Degree(s) Pursuing	Specialist degree	135 (60.5)
	Master's degree	87 (39)
	PhD	54 (24.2)
	PsyD	6 (2.7)
Enrollment Type	Full-time	189 (85.1)
	Part-time	33 (14.9)
Year in Program	First	66 (29.6)
	Second	66 (29.6)
	Third	69 (30.9)
	Fourth	14 (6.3)
	Fifth	6 (2.7)
	Six or more years	2 (0.9)
Location of Program	Northeast	42 (18.8)
	Midwest	60 (26.9)
	South	68 (30.5)
	West	46 (20.6)
	Puerto Rico	4 (1.8)
Online Course History	Prior to School Psych Program	79 (35.4)
	During School Psych Program	97 (43.5)
Hybrid/Blended Course History	Prior to School Psych Program	101 (45.3)
	During School Psych Program	92 (41.3)

## *Measures*

The researcher-developed School Psychology Graduate Students' Perceptions of Distance Education Survey was used to investigate trends and student perceptions. The survey was modeled after the Distance Learning in School Psychology Training Survey (Hendricker, Saeki, & Viola, 2017) and similar content areas and questions were asked. Cronbach's alpha for subscales in the Distance Learning in School Psychology Training Survey ranged from .523 to 1.00 (Hendricker et al., 2017). For this study, Cronbach's alpha was .94 for questions presented to the whole sample, excluding items with dichotomous or open-ended responses. The survey consisted of 69 items to evaluate the perceptions of school psychology graduate students regarding online and hybrid/blended courses. Student perceptions were determined by positive or negative ratings to various statements about online and hybrid/blended courses. Although there are various terms and definitions related to distance education and learning (e.g., e-learning, online learning, hybrid coursework; Moore, Dickson-Deane, & Galyen, 2011), for this study, the term hybrid/blended was defined as courses that are taught using both online technology and traditional face-to-face instruction, with no one component being more than 60%. Online courses were defined as courses that are offered completely online and do not meet face-to-face. Depending on participants' responses to certain items, not all items were administered to each participant (e.g., only the participants who indicated they have previously taken an online course were asked questions about the benefits and challenges to taking online courses).

There were nine items pertaining to participants' graduate program and their status in the program (e.g., "How far do you currently live from your university campus?" "I'm currently enrolled in my School Psychology program [part time/full time]," "I'm currently employed outside my graduate program, excluding on-campus research or teaching assistantships [full time/part time/not employed]"). Three demographic questions (i.e., sex, race/ethnicity, and state of residence) were also included.

Ten Likert scale items asked about perceptions of distance learning and hybrid/blended courses. Five items asked about perceptions of distance learning and included questions such as "Students

in School Psychology programs could learn and benefit from distance learning course instruction just as much as face-to-face instruction," and "School Psychology programs that utilize distance learning coursework are just as reputable as traditional programs that utilize face-to-face coursework." Participants responded using a four-item Likert scale ranging from 0 (strongly disagree) to 3 (strongly agree). These same five items were repeated, replacing the term distance learning with hybrid/blended courses.

Two items asked about participants' interest in and their reasons for taking online courses in their school psychology program. For participants who indicated an interest, they were presented with an additional item asking which course(s) they would like to take in an online format. For participants who answered that their program currently offers online courses, fifteen items were presented, including questions pertaining to the number of online courses that are offered, the course names, the courses they have taken as a student, the advantages and disadvantages of taking online courses, types of technology and instructional techniques used in the courses, available resources, and perceptions of the impact of taking online courses on their educational progress. These same questions were repeated, replacing the term online with hybrid/blended.

Finally, participants were presented with a scenario in which their program announces in six months that they are turning a few of their face-to-face courses into online courses. Three items asked about their reactions to this scenario (open-ended question), whether they would stay in their program (dichotomous yes/no question), and their reason for staying or leaving (open-ended question). Another scenario was presented in which their program announces in six months that they are shifting to an entirely online program. Three items asked about their reactions to this scenario, whether they would stay in their program, and their reason for staying or leaving.

## *Procedures*

Graduate students in school psychology programs across the United States were recruited to participate in an online survey assessing their perceptions of distance education in school psychology. Two hundred and forty emails were sent to all program directors identified in the NASP

database across the United States and Puerto Rico during fall 2016. Program directors were asked to share the study link with their current students by forwarding the email sent by the researchers. Based on student enrollment data available on the NASP website, these programs had a combined total of approximately 9,705 students.

Participants were recruited via email and survey data were collected anonymously through a web-based survey management site. Participants received a description of the study, a consent form, and a link to complete the survey. After one week, program directors received a reminder email. No identifying information was collected and upon completion of data collection, each participant was assigned a random research identification number. All study procedures were approved by the university institutional research review board. Calculating the exact response rate is not possible due to the nature of the distribution (e.g., possibly outdated program director email addresses, redirection of recruitment email to spam folders, program directors not forwarding the email to their students); however, an estimated response rate if every school psychology student received the email would be 2.3%. This response rate is likely a significant underestimate, as it is unlikely that every school psychology graduate student obtained access to the survey.

## RESULTS

Results were analyzed using descriptive statistics and chi-square analyses and information related to each research question is noted below. In the survey, participants were asked about online courses (i.e., all components of that course are completed in an online format and students do not meet face-to-face) and hybrid/blended courses (i.e., some face-to-face components and some online components) separately. Only the participants who have taken online and/or hybrid/blended courses for their school psychology graduate program were asked about advantages, disadvantages, and challenges encountered in these courses. Most of the survey questions allowed participants to check all of the options that applied; therefore, percentages may exceed 100% for each question. Participants were also allowed to skip response questions so the total number of respondents for each questionnaire item varies.

*Research Question 1: What are graduate students' perceptions of online and hybrid/blended courses in school psychology programs?*

Participants reported on their perceptions of distance learning courses in a school psychology program compared to traditional, face-to-face classes. Seventy-two percent of participants ( $n = 160$ ) indicated they “disagree” or “strongly disagree” that school psychology distance learning courses are just as good as face-to-face courses ( $M = 1.24$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ). In contrast, 27% ( $n = 61$ ) of students indicated they “disagree” or “strongly disagree” that hybrid/blended classes are just as good as face-to-face courses ( $M = 1.87$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ). Specifically, the majority of participants (63%) reported they “disagree” or “strongly disagree” that students could adequately attend to distance learning course material to the same standard as they could in a face-to-face course, while only 26% of participants reported they “disagree” or “strongly disagree” that students could adequately attend to hybrid course materials to the same standard as face-to-face courses. A similar trend was found when participants were asked whether students could learn and benefit from distance learning and hybrid course instruction just as much as face-to-face instruction (64% and 26% reported “disagree” or “strongly disagree” for distance learning courses and hybrid courses, respectively). Table 2 summarizes participants' perceptions about online and hybrid/blended courses.

Participants reported on their perceptions about the future potential of distance education methodologies in school psychology programs as measured by the survey item, “Weighing all of the advantages and disadvantages, distance learning courses have the potential to be just as beneficial as face-to-face courses.” Forty percent of participants ( $n = 88$ ) reported they “agree” or “strongly agree” that courses offered in a predominantly online format have the potential to be just as beneficial for student learning as face-to-face courses ( $M = 1.37$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ). The same question was asked, but in reference to hybrid/blended courses and 75% ( $n = 166$ ) of participants reported “agree” or “strongly agree” ( $M = 1.91$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ). When asked whether school psychology programs that utilize distance learning and hybrid coursework are just as reputable as traditional programs using face-to-face coursework, 61% and 30% reported

Table 2. Perceptions about Online and Hybrid/Blended Courses (N=223)

Questionnaire Item	Mode of Instruction							
	Online format				Hybrid/Blended format			
	SD	D	A	SA	SD	D	A	SA
School Psychology courses are just as good as face-to-face School Psychology courses.	11% (n=24)	61% (n=136)	21% (n=47)	7% (n=15)	1% (n=3)	26% (n=58)	56% (n=125)	16% (n=35)
Students in School Psychology programs could adequately attend to course material to the same standard as they could within a face-to-face course.	10% (n=23)	53% (n=117)	29% (n=64)	9% (n=19)	1% (n=3)	19% (n=42)	61% (n=137)	18% (n=39)
Students in School Psychology programs could learn and benefit from course instruction just as much as face-to-face instruction.	7% (n=16)	57% (n=128)	28% (n=61)	7% (n=16)	1% (n=3)	25% (n=56)	54% (n=120)	18% (n=41)
Weighing all the advantages and disadvantages, overall, courses in School Psychology programs have the potential to be just as beneficial to students as face-to-face courses.	11% (n=25)	49% (n=110)	31% (n=69)	9% (n=19)	2% (n=4)	23% (n=52)	57% (n=127)	18% (n=39)
School Psychology programs that utilize _____ coursework are just as reputable as traditional programs that utilize face-to-face coursework.	12% (n=26)	49% (n=110)	31% (n=70)	8% (n=17)	4% (n=9)	26% (n=57)	52% (n=116)	18% (n=40)

Note: Each perception question was given twice; once in regard to online courses and then again in regard to hybrid/blended courses; SD=strongly disagree, D=disagree, A=agree, SA=strongly agree

“disagree” or “strongly disagree” for distance learning and hybrid coursework, respectively.

*Research Question 2: Are students’ perceptions of online and hybrid/blended courses related to previous experiences with these courses?*

Chi-square analysis was conducted to determine if the participants’ history of taking online or hybrid/blended courses affected their perceptions about these courses. Having previously taken online or hybrid/blended courses was significantly related to perceptions of online courses,  $\chi^2(1, N = 223) = 11.16, p < .05$  and hybrid/blended courses,  $\chi^2(1, N = 223) = 17.49, p < .01$ . Post hoc analyses (Beasley & Schumake, 1995; Bonferroni adjusted p-value = .004) indicated participants who have taken hybrid/blended courses were more likely to view these courses in a strongly negative light, while participants who have not taken a hybrid/blended course were less likely to view them negatively. Furthermore, participants who have previously taken an online

course had more favorable perceptions about online courses.

*Research Question 3: What are school psychology graduate students’ interests in distance education courses?*

Participants were asked if they would like to take more classes (a) in an online format and (b) in a hybrid/blended format in their school psychology program. Only 34% (n = 75) indicated they would like to take more online courses, whereas 48% (n = 107) indicated that they would like to take more hybrid/blended courses. Participants who indicated interest in taking more distance education courses were then asked what types of course(s) they would like to take in both an online and a hybrid/blended format. The majority reported a preference for theory-based courses to be delivered in online and hybrid/blended formats (83% and 83%, respectively). Table 3 summarizes which courses participants would like to take in each modality.

Participants who indicated they did not want to take online and/or hybrid/blended courses were then asked about factors impacting their preference. The most commonly cited reason was their desire to interact with the instructor and

Table 3. Student Preferences for Course Content in Online and/or Hybrid/Blended Format

Type of Course	Mode of Instruction and Percent of Students Endorsed	
	Online format (N=75)	Hybrid/Blended format (N=107)
Theory	83% (n=62)	83% (n=89)
Consultation	47% (n=35)	51% (n=55)
Intervention	43% (n=32)	51% (n=55)
Assessment	32% (n=24)	48% (n=51)
Practicum	28% (n=21)	33% (n=35)
Internship	31% (n=23)	30% (n=32)

Note: Only students who reported they wanted more online and/or hybrid/blended courses in their program were asked about their preferences for course content in the coordinating modality.

Table 4. Reason for Not Wanting More Online and Hybrid/Blended Courses

Reasons	Mode of Instruction and Percent of Students Endorsed	
	Online format (N=151)	Hybrid/blended format (N=117)
Want to interact with the professor and other students more frequently	94% (n=142)	79% (n=92)
Feel that classes are lower quality instruction	66% (n=99)	49% (n=57)
Lack the self-discipline needed for the courses	30% (n=45)	31% (n=36)
Lack training/experience with this format of class	9% (n=13)	14% (n=16)
Do not have access to the technology required for course	1% (n=1)	1% (n=1)

Note: Only students who reported they did not want more online and/or hybrid/blended courses in their program were asked about their reasons in the coordinating modality.

classmates more frequently and their belief that online and hybrid/blended courses offer lower quality instruction. Table 4 summarizes additional reasons for participants' lack of interest in online and/or hybrid/blended courses.

*Research Question 4: What are students' reported benefits and challenges to distance education?*

Only students who indicated they had taken online (n=95) and/or hybrid/blended (n=83) courses in their graduate program completed additional survey items on the advantages, disadvantages, and challenges that they have faced in distance education courses. A list of perceived advantages, disadvantages, and challenges were given and participants were asked to identify what they have personally experienced. Participants were also given the option of writing qualitative responses.

Eighty-two percent (n = 78) of participants who have taken online courses indicated they have seen advantages to taking online courses (M = 2.06, SD = 0.71). Slightly more participants (88%, n = 73) indicated they have seen advantages to taking hybrid/blended courses (M = 2.12, SD = 0.67). Similar advantages were endorsed for both online and hybrid/blended courses, with flexibility and convenience as the most commonly cited advantage (90% and 86% of participants reported as an advantage for online and hybrid/blended courses, respectively).

Of the participants who reported taking an online course in school psychology, 78% (n = 74) reported disadvantages (M = 1.92, SD = 0.69), whereas 53% (n = 44) reported disadvantages with hybrid/blended courses (M = 1.52, SD = 0.82). Commonly cited disadvantages reported with online and hybrid/blended courses included limited interaction with students and staff, perceptions of lower quality instruction, and lack of mastery of skills. Of the participants who have taken online course(s), 74% reported challenges (n = 70, M = 1.88, SD = 0.70), compared to 58% of those who have taken hybrid/blended course(s) (n = 48, M = 1.61, SD = 0.81). Commonly cited challenges reported with online and hybrid/blended courses included staying motivated and self-disciplined and feeling isolated. Advantages, disadvantages, and challenges endorsed are summarized in Table 5.

*Research Question 5: For students who have taken online and/or hybrid/blended courses, what are their perceptions of the impact of these courses on their educational progress and attainment?*

The majority of participants (72%, n = 68) who have taken an online course in school psychology reported they felt positively about how it affected

Table 5. *Advantages, Disadvantages, and Challenges of Online and Hybrid/Blended School Psychology Courses*

	Mode of Instruction and Percent of Students Endorsed	
	Online format (N=95)	Hybrid/Blended format (N=83)
<b>Advantages</b>		
Flexibility & convenience	90% (n=87)	86% (n=71)
Increased efficiency	43% (n=41)	43% (n=36)
Practiced self-discipline	53% (n=50)	35% (n=29)
Lower total cost	30% (n=28)	18% (n=15)
Greater individualized attention	2% (n=2)	15% (n=12)
<b>Disadvantages</b>		
Limited interaction with students and staff	78% (n=74)	51% (n=42)
Lower quality instruction	43% (n=41)	24% (n=20)
Lack of mastery of skills	37% (n=35)	25% (n=21)
Difficulty applying concepts	36% (n=34)	21% (n=17)
Lower grade obtained	0% (n=0)	2% (n=2)
<b>Challenges</b>		
Staying motivated and self-disciplined	52% (n=49)	39% (n=32)
Feeling isolated	45% (n=43)	23% (n=19)
Time management	37% (n=35)	21% (n=17)
Technology	19% (n=18)	16% (n=13)
No challenges encountered	11% (n=10)	30% (n=25)

*Note: Only students who reported they had taken online and/or hybrid courses in their program were asked about advantages, disadvantages, and challenges in the coordinating modality.*

their educational progress and attainment. This sentiment was also mirrored in regard to hybrid/blended courses, as 78% (n = 65) endorsed positive progress.

## DISCUSSION

While the use of online education has been studied in various fields, there is limited research related to distance education in applied and professional graduate training programs like school psychology. Despite limited research, results from this survey indicate that distance education methods are currently being utilized in some school psychology programs, as 41.3% of the sample reported taking hybrid/blended courses and 43.5%

reported taking online courses in their current program. Understanding students' perceptions of distance education methodologies may guide faculty in designing and implementing effective online and hybrid/blended courses in graduate training programs.

A large emphasis of school psychology practice, like other professional training programs, is on applied skills, such as evaluating data to understand client needs, collecting data to measure client outcomes, consulting and collaborating with other professionals, and delivering therapeutic interventions (NASP, 2010). These skills have been reported to be difficult to teach and master in a distance education environment according to training directors (Hendricker et al., 2017). However, positive perceptions of hybrid/blended courses were reported by students, as these courses offered flexibility for students who cannot access traditional face-to-face courses while also maintaining direct contact with faculty, increased student mastery of course content, provided the ability to ask questions in real time, and increased student engagement, all of which are key features of effective distance education course delivery (e.g., Castle & McGuire, 2010; Ward et al., 2010). Student desire to access courses through blended methods offers an opportunity for this learning methodology to be explored, implemented, and measured in more applied and professional training programs, particularly for theoretical coursework that is needed to lay a solid foundation prior to advanced clinical work.

Distance education methodologies are often accompanied by challenges. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Song et al., 2004), the results from this exploratory study indicated that numerous disadvantages for fully online courses, including limited interaction with other students and faculty, feelings of isolation, difficulty maintaining motivation and self-discipline, and a perception of a lower quality of instruction. These challenges were reported to a lesser degree with hybrid/blended courses. Interestingly, despite challenges regarding fully online courses, the majority of students reported these courses to positively impact their educational attainment. Students who are engaged in this type of learning noted disadvantages, but they endorsed several positive impacts, such as flexibility, which may increase their ability to hold

employment and maintain a work/life balance. Balancing challenges with opportunities and increased attention to factors that contribute to effective online courses appears to be instrumental in designing an effective learning environment that would meet the training standards and high quality instruction needed for effective psychological service delivery.

#### *Implications for Training and Education*

This study's findings highlight several implications for applied and professional training programs. Programs considering incorporating distance education should consider conducting needs and resource assessments to determine if distance education methods are needed and how this may benefit student populations. For example, surveying current students and alumni on their preferences for online or hybrid/blended courses, as well as exploring institutional resources to develop and maintain distance education methodologies, can enable programs to determine if and how to move forward with distance education methodology.

Programs that would like to incorporate more distance education methods, as well as those that already employ these methods, may consider hybrid/blended courses as a preliminary option to meet student needs. Not only did students rate these courses as more preferable, they also showed interest in taking more hybrid/blended courses. Programs should consider the content objectives of each course and which teaching methods are most appropriate to assist students in mastering these goals. For example, courses that cover theories and are more knowledge-based may be good candidates as a preliminary method of incorporating distance education within existing programs.

Programs that utilize hybrid/blended courses may also consider the reasons why students choose distance education in an effort to balance training standards and learning competencies with a student-centered environment. Stevens (2017) discusses a number of themes that emerge when analyzing why working adults may choose distance education programs that employ hybrid/blended methods. Variables such as how hybrid/blended programs are designed, how course instruction is delivered, the content and quality of communication, and the achieved balance between work, school, and family life are all significant needs identified by working adults. As such, programs that utilize hybrid/

blended courses should be aware of these variables and may consider them within the recruitment and retention of students.

When incorporating distance education, variables of student learning must be carefully considered. It appears that student interaction with faculty is an important variable that may predict student outcomes (Cho & Kim, 2013). In this study, the desire to interact with instructors and other students was the most commonly cited reason for not wanting to take online and hybrid/blended courses. Faculty may carefully consider how hybrid/blended courses are designed in an effort to maximize student interaction with faculty and their peers and increase student engagement. For example, designing schedules that encourage more in-person meetings at the beginning of a course may build classroom rapport and encourage collaborative and mentoring relationships. Once students have the requisite knowledge, more distance learning methods can be incorporated towards the latter stages of courses to assess skills through case studies, group assignments, or other written products. Integration between the classroom and online learning experiences, or "blending" of course content across face-to-face and online interactions, is recommended (McGee & Reis, 2012). Hybrid/blended courses may also require more project-based learning or group work as a method of keeping students engaged in the course content and active with their peers and instructors. Instructors should clearly explain how these online interaction methods promote student learning, as the perceived benefits of these types of activities are correlated with the quality of online interactions (Diep, Cocquyt, Zhu, & Vanwing 2017). The pedagogy behind distance education should be carefully crafted to decrease barriers that are commonly noted in the literature (Fetzner, 2013). Furthermore, theoretical frameworks, such as Quality Matters (see <http://www.qualitymatters.com>) and Community of Inquiry (Garrison & Akyol, 2013), should guide online and hybrid/blended course development. Faculty who use distance education must be cognizant of ongoing research and available supports to assist students engaged in distance learning methodologies.

When considering distance education, programs may take into account student characteristics that are linked to success in distance learning

instruction. Students noted their own challenges related to motivation and self-discipline, and research suggests that students who are successful in online courses report higher metacognitive self-regulation (Lee, Choi, & Kim, 2013). To ensure student success in distance education, programs may consider specifically assessing for factors such as self-discipline, self-regulation, and motivation, and providing additional strategies and supports for students who struggle in this area. For example, applying the principles of self-determination theory to motivate distance learning students has been found to be effective (Chen & Jang, 2010).

### *Limitations*

There were several noteworthy limitations to the current investigation. First, the small sample size ( $N = 223$ ) prohibits a full understanding of school psychology graduate students' perceptions and experiences with distance education. Due to the low response rate, the sample may not adequately reflect the graduate student population in school psychology. For example, responses were not received from every U.S. state and the majority of the sample were Caucasian, female, full-time students. While these factors are reflective of school psychology practitioner demographics, it is unclear if this is an adequate representation of current graduate student demographics. These factors limit the generalizability of results.

In addition, program directors were solicited to share this survey with their students. Program director perceptions of distance education could have influenced and skewed the response rate, leading to sampling error and potential over-identification in the sample. Additional studies using varying sampling techniques are needed to better understand student experiences and perceptions of distance education in various applied and professional training programs.

The majority of analyses were conducted using descriptive statistics. Variables related to quality and instructional delivery of previous distance instruction were not controlled. This preliminary information is vital, given that data on this topic, particularly in school psychology, is limited. Further investigation on this topic using more sophisticated analytic techniques should be considered in the future.

Finally, this study focused specifically on the perceptions of graduate students in school

psychology programs across the nation. While school psychology is a specific subfield, there may be overlap in training considerations across different applied psychology fields, such as clinical, counseling, or forensic psychology programs that continue to offer traditional face-to-face training programs. Additional research in other applied psychology fields is warranted to further investigate the current state of distance education in various graduate training programs.

### **CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

The capacity of technology continues to grow and its impact on education is likely to expand. Online courses have the capacity to reach a broad audience who may not otherwise pursue higher education (Simon, Burton, Lockhart, & O'Donnell, 2014). This study examined the perceptions and experiences of school psychology graduate students and distance education and found that despite some negative perceptions, many students still indicated a desire to take more online and hybrid/blended courses. Applied and professional training programs that incorporate more online and hybrid/blended courses may be able to serve a higher number of students, which may attract a more diverse population into the field.

The survey's findings highlighted some areas for further growth and opportunity in relation to course offerings. However, additional research in this area should examine the quality and methods of instruction in these courses to further identify components that students find helpful and beneficial to their online experience. Improved distance education techniques to ensure student competencies in applied fields is also an area of further research.

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## Appendix A

### School Psychology Graduate Students' Perceptions of Distance Education Survey

<p>1. The School Psychology program in which I'm currently enrolled offers the following degrees (please check all that apply): Response options: (1) Ph.D., (2) Psy.D., (3) Master's (e.g., M.A., M.S., M.Ed.), (4) Specialist (e.g., Ed.S.)</p>
<p>2. I'm pursuing the following School Psychology degree (please check all that apply): Response options: (1) Ph.D., (2) Psy.D., (3) Master's (e.g., M.A., M.S., M.Ed.), (4) Specialist (e.g., Ed.S.)</p>
<p>3. How long have you been enrolled in your current School Psychology program? Response options: (1) First year, (2) Second year, (3) Third year, (4) Fourth year, (5) Fifth year, (6) Six or more years</p>
<p>4. When you enrolled in your current School Psychology program, how long had it been since you were last enrolled in school full time? Response options: (1) Enrolled in School Psychology program immediately after completing Bachelor's degree or other graduate program, (2) Less than 5 years since last formal education, (3) 5–10 years since last formal education, (4) More than 10 years since last formal education</p>
<p>5. I'm currently enrolled in my School Psychology program Response options: (1) Part-time, (2) Full-time</p>
<p>6. How far do you currently live from your university campus? Response options: (1) 15 miles or less, (2) 16–30 miles, (3) 31–45 miles, (4) Over 45 miles</p>
<p>7. I'm currently employed outside of my graduate program (exclude on-campus research or teaching assistantships) Response options: (1) Full time (average 40 hours or more a week), (2) Part time, (3) Not employed</p>
<p>8. I am currently completing a practicum or internship Response options: (1) Yes, (2) No</p>
<p>9. My biological sex is: Response options: (1) Male, (2) Female</p>
<p>10. In which state is your program located? Response option: open comment box</p>
<p>11. My race/ethnicity can best be described as (please select all that apply): Response options: (1) American Indian or Alaskan Native, (2) Asian, (3) African American, (4) Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, (5) White/Caucasian, (6) Hispanic/Latino, (7) Other (please specify)</p>
<p>12. I have taken an online class prior to enrolling in my current School Psychology program Response option: (1) Yes, (2) No</p>
<p>13. I have taken a class that is a combination of online and face-to-face components prior to enrolling in my School Psychology program. Response options: (1) Yes, (2) No</p>
<p><b>When the term distance learning is used, we are referring to courses that are primarily taught using online technology (85% or more of the course is taught online through web-based systems or methods such as Blackboard or Moodle). Students are not attending classes in a traditional face-to-face classroom setting but may meet with professors in real time through online technology such as Skype or Adobe Connect. Response options are on a 4-point Likert scale: 1 (strongly agree), 2 (agree), 3 (disagree), and 4 (strongly disagree).</b></p>
<p>14. School Psychology distance learning courses are just as good as face-to-face School Psychology courses.</p>
<p>15. Students in School Psychology programs could adequately attend to course material to the same standard in a distance learning course as they could within a face-to-face course.</p>
<p>16. Students in School Psychology programs could learn and benefit from distance learning course instruction just as much as face-to-face instruction.</p>
<p>17. Weighing all the advantages and disadvantages, overall, online courses in School Psychology programs have the potential to be just as beneficial to students as face-to-face courses.</p>
<p>18. School Psychology programs that utilize distance learning coursework are just as reputable as traditional programs that utilize face-to-face coursework.</p>
<p><b>When the term hybrid/blended is used, we are referring to courses that are taught using both online technology and traditional face-to-face instruction, with no one component being more than 60%. For example, students may attend traditional face-to-face classes every other week and complete the other half of the coursework through web-based systems such as Blackboard or Moodle. Response options are on a 4-point Likert scale: 1 (strongly agree), 2 (agree), 3 (disagree), and 4 (strongly disagree).</b></p>

## Appendix A (cont.)

19. School Psychology hybrid/blended courses are just as good as face-to-face School Psychology courses.
20. Students in School Psychology programs could adequately attend to course material to the same standard in hybrid/blended courses they could within a face-to-face course.
21. Students in School Psychology programs could learn and benefit from hybrid/blended course instruction just as much as face-to-face instruction.
22. Weighing all the advantages and disadvantages, overall, hybrid courses in School Psychology programs have the potential to be just as beneficial to students as face-to-face courses.
23. School Psychology programs that utilize hybrid/blended coursework are just as reputable as traditional programs that utilize face-to-face coursework.
<b>The following questions relate to courses that are offered completely online and do not meet face-to-face.</b>
24. I would like more classes in my School Psychology program to be offered in an online format. Response options: (1) Yes (continue below), (2) No (skipped to question #42)
25. What is the most influential reason that you want to take online School Psychology courses? Response option: Open comment box
Please indicate which of the following types of course(s) you would want to take online. Please check all that apply. Response options: (1) Assessment, (2) Consultation, (3) Theory courses (Theories of Counseling, Learning, Development, Psychopathology, etc.), (4) Intervention, (5) Practicum, (6) Internship, (7) Other (please specify)
26. Currently, are there fully online classes in your School Psychology program (i.e., all components of that course are completed in an online format and students do not meet face-to-face)? Response options: (1) Yes, (2) No (skipped to question #43), (3) Not sure
<b>The following questions are for students who attend a School Psychology program that offers online courses (answered by those who responded “Yes” to question #26)</b>
27. How many of your School Psychology program’s courses are online? If you’re not sure, please estimate. Response options: (1) 16 or more courses, (2) 11–15 courses, (3) 6–10 courses, (4) 5 or fewer courses
28. Please indicate which of the following types of courses your program offers online. Please check all that apply. Response options: (1) Assessment, (2) Consultation, (3) Theory courses (Theories of Counseling, Learning, Development, Psychopathology, etc.), (4) Intervention, (5) Practicum, (6) Internship, (7) Other (please specify)
29. I have taken a course for my School Psychology program in an online format. Response options: (1) Yes (continued), (2) No (skipped to question #43)
30. I have taken _____ online course(s) in my current School Psychology program. Response options: (1) 1, (2) 2–5, (3) 6–10, (4) 11 or more
31. I have seen advantages to taking online School Psychology courses. Response options: (1) Strongly Agree, (2) Agree, (3) Disagree, (4) Strongly Disagree
32. Which of the following were advantages of taking online School Psychology courses? Please check all that apply: Response options: (1) Flexibility and convenience, (2) Increased efficiency, (3) Lower total costs, (4) Greater individualized attention, (5) Practiced self-discipline, (6) No advantages encountered, (7) Other (please specify)
33. I have encountered challenges while taking online School Psychology courses. Response options: (1) Strongly Agree, (2) Agree, (3) Disagree, (4) Strongly Disagree
34. Which of the following were challenges of taking online School Psychology courses? Please check all that apply: Response options: (1) Technology, (2) Time management, (3) Feeling isolated, (4) Staying motivated and self-disciplined, (5) No challenges encountered, (6) Other (please specify)
35. I have seen disadvantages to taking online School Psychology courses. Response options: (1) Strongly Agree, (2) Agree, (3) Disagree, (4) Strongly Disagree
36. What were the disadvantages of taking online School Psychology courses? Please check all that apply: Response options: (1) Lower grades obtained, (2) Lack of mastery of skills, (3) Difficulty applying concepts to real world problems, (4) Limited interaction with students and/or staff, (5) Lower quality of instruction, (6) Other (please specify)

## Appendix A (cont.)

<p>37. How has taking online School Psychology courses affected your educational progress and attainment? Response options: (1) Positively, (2) Negatively</p>
<p>38. What types of technology are utilized in your online School Psychology classes? Please mark all that apply. Response options: (1) Blackboard, (2) Moodle, (3) Sakai, (4) Skype, (5) Adobe Connect, (6) Tegrity, (7) Google Hangout, (8) Eschool, (9) Other (please specify) 38a. Please explain or specify trends noticed (open comment box)</p>
<p>39. What instructional techniques and resources are most helpful in an online School Psychology course? Please check all that apply: Response options: (1) Group projects, (2) Vignettes/Case Studies, (3) Live chat sessions, (4) Announcements, (5) Live meetings (e.g., Adobe Connect), (6) Video recorded lectures, (7) Emails and Blackboard messages, (8) Videos, (9) Interactive documents (e.g., Wiki), (10) Hard copies of materials, (11) Web links, (12) Discussion boards, (13) Peer mentor, (14) Test/quizzes/assignments, (15) Other (please specify)</p>
<p>40. Of the instructional techniques and resources you marked above, please rank order the top 5 components of online School Psychology courses that you find to be most valuable in facilitating learning: Response options: (1) Group projects, (2) Vignettes/Case Studies, (3) Live chat sessions, (4) Announcements, (5) Live meetings (e.g., Adobe Connect), (6) Video recorded lectures, (7) Emails and Blackboard messages, (8) Videos, (9) Interactive documents (e.g., Wiki), (10) Hard copies of materials, (11) Web links, (12) Discussion boards, (13) Peer mentor, (14) Tests/quizzes/assignments, (15) Other (please specify)</p>
<p>41. What resources are available to you as you take your online course(s)? Please check all that apply: Response options: (1) Face-to-face meetings with the professor available upon request, (2) Access to advanced technology programs (e.g., Blackboard, Skype, Adobe Connect, etc.), (3) Training on how to use advanced technology programs, (4) Technology support staff, (5) University equipment (e.g., computers, microphones, webcams, etc.), (6) Other (please specify) -All responses were skipped to question #43</p>
<p><b>The following questions are for students indicated that do not want to take online courses (answered by those who responded “No” to question #24)</b></p>
<p>42. Why wouldn't you want to take online School Psychology courses? Please check all that apply: Response options: (1) No access to the technology required (e.g., internet, computer, etc.), (2) Lack of training and/or experience with online classes, (3) I feel online classes are lower quality instruction, (4) Lack of self-discipline needed for an online course, (5) I want to interact with the professor and other students, (6) Other (please specify) -All responses were skipped to question #27</p>
<p><b>The following questions relate to courses that are taught using both online technology and traditional face-to-face instruction.</b></p>
<p>43. I would like more courses in my School Psychology program to be offered in a hybrid format. Response options: (1) Yes (continue to next question), (2) No (skipped to question #60)</p>
<p>44. What is the most influential reason that you want to take hybrid School Psychology courses? Response option: Open comment box</p>
<p>Please indicate which of the following types of course(s) you would want to take in a hybrid format. Please check all that apply. Response options: (1) Assessment, (2) Consultation, (3) Theory courses (Theories of Counseling, Learning, Development, Psychopathology, etc.), (4) Intervention, (5) Practicum, (6) Internship, (7) Other (please specify)</p>
<p>45. Currently, are there courses that your School Psychology program offers in a hybrid or blended format (i.e., some face-to-face and some online components)? Response options: (1) Yes, (2) No (skipped to question #61), (3) Not sure</p>
<p>46. How many of your School Psychology program's courses are offered in a hybrid/blended format? If you're not sure, please estimate. Response options: (1) 16 or more courses, (2) 11–15 courses, (3) 6–10 courses, (4) 5 or fewer courses</p>
<p>Please indicate which of the following type(s) of course(s) your program offers in a hybrid/blended format. Please check all that apply. Response options: (1) Assessment, (2) Consultation, (3) Theory courses (Theories of Counseling, Learning, Development, Psychopathology, etc.), (4) Intervention, (5) Practicum, (6) Internship, (7) Other (please specify)</p>
<p>47. I have taken a course for my School Psychology program in a hybrid/blended format. Response options: (1) Yes, (2) No (skipped to question #61)</p>
<p>48. I have taken _____ hybrid course(s) for my current School Psychology program. Response options: (1) 1, (2) 2–5, (3) 6–10, (4) 11 or more</p>

## Appendix A (cont.)

<p>49. I have seen advantages to taking hybrid School Psychology courses. Response options: (1) Strongly Agree, (2) Agree, (3) Disagree, (4) Strongly Disagree</p>
<p>50. Which of the following were advantages of taking hybrid School Psychology courses? Please check all that apply: Response options: (1) Flexibility and convenience, (2) Increased efficiency, (3) Lower total costs, (4) Greater individualized attention, (5) Practiced self-discipline, (6) No advantages encountered, (7) Other (please specify)</p>
<p>51. I have encountered challenges while taking hybrid School Psychology courses. Response options: (1) Strongly Agree, (2) Agree, (3) Disagree, (4) Strongly Disagree</p>
<p>52. Which of the following were challenges of taking hybrid School Psychology courses? Please check all that apply: Response options: (1) Time management, (2) Feeling isolated, (3) Staying motivated and self-disciplined, (4) No challenges encountered, (5) Other (please specify)</p>
<p>53. I have seen disadvantages while taking hybrid School Psychology courses. Response options: (1) Strongly Agree, (2) Agree, (3) Disagree, (4) Strongly Disagree</p>
<p>54. What were the disadvantages of taking hybrid School Psychology courses? Please check all that apply: Response options: (1) Lack of mastery of skills, (2) Difficulty applying concepts to real world problems, (3) Limited interaction with students and/or staff, (4) Lower quality of instruction, (5) Other (please specify)</p>
<p>55. How has taking hybrid School Psychology courses affected your educational progress and attainment? Response options: (1) Positively, (2) Negatively</p>
<p>56. What types of technology were available to you as you took your hybrid/blended School Psychology course(s)? Please mark all that apply. Response options: (1) Blackboard, (2) Moodle, (3) Sakai, (4) Skype, (5) Adobe Connect, (6) Tegrity, (7) Google Hangout, (8) Eschool, (9) Other (please specify)</p>
<p>57. What instructional techniques and resources are most helpful in hybrid School Psychology course(s)? Please check all that apply: Response options: (1) Group projects, (2) Vignettes/Case Studies, (3) Live chat sessions, (4) Announcements, (5) Live meetings (e.g., Adobe Connect), (6) Video recorded lectures, (7) Emails and Blackboard messages, (8) Videos, (9) Interactive documents (e.g., Wiki), (10) Hard copies of materials, (11) Web links, (12) Discussion boards, (13) Peer mentor, (14) Face-to-face lectures, (15) Test/quizzes/assignments, (16) Other (please specify)</p>
<p>58. Of the instructional techniques you marked above, please rank order the top 5 components of hybrid courses that you find to be most valuable in facilitating learning: Response options: (1) Group projects, (2) Vignettes/Case Studies, (3) Live chat sessions, (4) Announcements, (5) Live meetings (e.g., Adobe Connect), (6) Video recorded lectures, (7) Emails and Blackboard messages, (8) Videos, (9) Interactive documents (e.g., Wiki), (10) Hard copies of materials, (11) Web links, (12) Discussion boards, (13) Peer mentor, (14) Other (please specify)</p>
<p>58a. Please explain or specify trends noticed (open comment box)</p>
<p>59. What resources were available to you as you took your hybrid School Psychology course(s)? Please check all that apply: Response options: (1) Face-to-face meetings with the professor available upon request, (2) Access to advanced technology programs (e.g., Blackboard, Skype, Adobe Connect, etc.), (3) Training on how to use advanced technology programs, (4) Technology support staff, (5) University equipment (e.g., computers, microphones, webcams, etc.), (6) Other (please specify) -All responses were skipped to question #64</p>
<p><b>The following questions were completed for students who indicated they would like to take a hybrid course (answered "No" to question 43).</b></p>
<p>60. Why wouldn't you want to take a hybrid School Psychology courses? Please check all that apply: Response option: (1) No access to the technology required (i.e., internet, computer, etc.), (2) Lack of training and/or experience with hybrid classes, (3) I feel hybrid classes are lower quality instruction, (4) Lack of self-discipline needed for hybrid course, (5) I want to interact with the professor and other students more frequently, (6) Other (please specify) -All responses were skipped to question #45</p>
<p><b>The following questions were asked of all respondents.</b></p>
<p>61. Imagine in 6 months your program says that they are going to turn <b>a few</b> of their face-to-face courses into online courses. What are your initial thoughts and questions? Response option: Open comment box</p>
<p>62. Would you stay in your program? Response option: (1) Yes, (2) No</p>

## Appendix A (cont.)

63. Please explain your primary reasons for staying or leaving the program if it turned <b>a few</b> of their face-to-face courses into online courses? Response option: Open comment box
64. Imagine in 6 months, your program says they are going to shift towards an <b>entirely</b> online program. What are your initial thoughts and questions? Response option: Open comment box
Would you stay in your program? Response option: (1) Yes, (2) No
65. Please explain your primary reasons for staying or leaving the program if it turned an <b>entirely</b> online program? Response option: Open comment box

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