Student Preferences for Seeking Course Assistance

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Abstract

Common methods for students seeking assistance with course material outside of regularly scheduled class time include: in person (face to face) office hours or appointments, email, phone conversations, text chat, video chat, and blogs/FAQs. This paper presents preliminary findings on student preferences for seeking assistance outside of regularly scheduled class time.

Students' method of seeking assistance and the type of assistance sought by the student was tracked by the author during the fall 2014 academic semester. In addition to tracking the methods students' used to seek assistance, an end of semester survey was given to determine student preferences for how they prefer to get course assistance and to verify that the observed patterns were consistent with how students' remembered seeking assistance.

The survey results are compared with the observed methods of assistance and conclusions on student preferences for method of seeking assistance and whether the type of assistance required influences the method used to seek assistance.

Keywords

Office hours, student-faculty interaction, course assistance

Introduction

Office hours can be valuable for students to get to know their instructors, obtain help with confusing/difficult course material, gauge how they are performing in the course, and make special requests. Colleges and Universities typically offer tips/pointers to beginning students for why to use and how to take advantage of faculty office hours[1 - 5]. Office hours are commonly viewed by faculty as unused time where they are tied to their office and occasionally students will come by for assistance. With an assumption that students do not take advantage of office hours, faculty are often reluctant to schedule more the required minimum number of office hours and to schedule them at times that are more convenient to the faculty than the students.

Armstrong State University (Armstrong) requires faculty have five posted office hours per week and be available for an additional five per week by appointment[6]. A sampling of Armstrong faculty posted office hours for fall 2014, either on doors or faculty websites, yielded office hours ranging from four to 13½ hours per week with an average of 5.875 hours. The faculty office hour postings typically came with a statement that additional times were available by appointment.

During the fall 2014 semester, the author tracked: how often students sought assistance outside of class time, the students' method(s) of seeking assistance, and the type of assistance sought by the students. Data for the semester, excluding finals week, was collected including: the number

of students in the group seeking assistance, what course(s) assistance was sought for, the date the assistance was sought, the method used to seek assistance, what type of assistance was sought, and whether there was follow up the same day/following day.

Students were surveyed during the last week of the semester to obtain the methods they used to seek assistance throughout the semester, their preferences for seeking course assistance, if they knew the professors scheduled office hours, and were there other methods they would like to see the professor use for providing course assistance. The survey results were compared with the observed methods of assistance and findings are presented on student preferences for the method of seeking assistance and whether the type of assistance required affects the method used to seek assistance.

Student Course Assistance Usage

The author kept track of the students' method of seeking assistance and the type of assistance sought during the fall 2014 academic semester. Students included in the assistance tracking were students in the author's courses and the author's advisees (who may or may not have also been in one of the author's courses that semester). Data collected included: the number of students in the group seeking assistance, what course(s) assistance was sought for, the date the assistance was sought, the method used to seek assistance, what type of assistance was sought, and whether there was follow up the same day/following day.

Casual conversation not involving course material, academic advising, or professional development was not tracked. Instances where the instructor sought student(s) out to deliver messages were not tracked. The time spent answering questions during face to face meetings, email, etc. was also not tracked. Only two occurrences of phone assistance occurred during the semester: one for advisement and one for a project submission issue. These are not included in Table 1.

Table 1 shows the number of occurrences of students seeking assistance for each method by type of assistance sought. Office hours refers to in person (face-to-face) assistance during scheduled office hours or by appointment. Outside office hours refers to assistance in person not during scheduled office hours (office door was open, student knocked on closed office door, student encountered the professor when he was outside of his office). Before/after class refers to assistance in person before or after one of the instructor's courses but on material for another course. Email is via email and back and the number of back and forth emails are not included in the number of occurrences. Emails were typically answered within one business day; first thing in the morning if the email came the previous evening or right after lunch or right before the end of the day depending upon when the author received the email.

General help includes: assistance on confusing/difficult topics, questions on course performance, and going over/making up excused missed work. Assignment help includes assistance on projects and labs that would be submitted for grading. Advising/registration was course or career advisement. Other includes: late assignment submission, obtaining lab access to complete assignments, and anything not covered by the other types.

Method	General help	Assignment help	Advising/ registration	Other	Total
Office hours	26	36	9	6	87
Outside office hours	9	12	2	7	30
Before/after class	3	18	3	3	27
Email	17	20	10	31	78

Table 1, Occurrences of Assistance by Method and Type and Assistance

The Before/after class method does not include assistance sought for that class. In retrospect, it would have been better to include this in the tracking as students regularly sought assistance on course projects either before or after the regular class meeting. It would have been very difficult for the author to track this assistance and still answer a reasonable number of questions before and after class.

Table 2 gives the percentage of total occurrences by method used to seek assistance.

Method	Number of Occurrences	Percentage of Total Occurrences
Office hours	87	38.8%
Outside office hours	30	13.4%
Before/after class	27	12.1%
Email	78	34.8%
Phone	2	0.9%
Total	224	

Table 2, Percentage of Assistance Occurrences by Method

Student Reported Course Assistance Preferences

A survey was given to all students in the author's fall 2014 courses (Computing for Engineers, Introduction to Signal Processing, Digital Design Laboratory) during the last week of classes. The survey was a hand written survey given at the beginning of class time. The survey was anonymous and students were told the survey would be used to improve student-instructor interaction for course material help in subsequent semesters.

Table 3 shows the number of students completing the survey by course. For the Computing for Engineers course, two students withdrew from the course before the survey was given and three students did not attend class the day the survey was given. For the Introduction to Signal Processing course, one student withdrew from the course before the survey was given. There was overlap between the courses: one student was taking both Computing for Engineers and Introduction to Signal processing and three students were taking both Introduction to Signal processing and Digital Design Laboratory. Students were asked to only fill out the survey once if

they were taking multiple courses from the author. Approximately 54% of the respondents were in ENGR 1371 only, 23% were in ENGR 2025 only, and 12% were in ENGR 2031 only.

Course	Number Taking Survey
Computing for Engineers (ENGR 1371)	15/20
Introduction to Signal Processing (ENGR 2025/2025L)	9/10
Digital Design Laboratory (ENGR 2031)	6/6
Total	26

Table 3, Number of Students Taking Survey by Course

Tables 4 and 5 show the methods used to seek assistance (self-reported) and the preferences for seeking course assistance respectively. The preferences are 1 for most preferred and 5 for least preferred.

Method	Number Using
In person during office hours	14/26
In person, at times other than scheduled office hours	12/26
Email	11/26
Phone	0/26
Before, during, or after class	21/26

Table 4, Self-Reported Methods of Seeking Assistance

Three of the student responses are not included in the results of Table 5. They did not properly fill out the preference ranking portion of the survey. Three students who also did not properly fill out the preference ranking portion of the survey are included: one had two 5s and no 4s in the rankings, one had two 3s and no 2s, and one had two 1s and three 3s.

Method	Average Rank	1s and 2s	4s and 5s
In person during office hours	2.39	16	5
Email	2.87	6	4
Phone	3.74	3	17
Text or video chat	3.78	4	14
In person, before, during, or after class	1.83	18	2

Table 5, Student Ranking of Preferred Methods to Seek Assistance

Only 3/26 respondents knew the instructors office hours with an additional four students getting some of the days/times correct. Additional methods of providing assistance that were suggested were: internet/YouTube, review sessions, and stop by tutoring center to help.

Student Reported Preferences versus Actual Usage of Course Assistance

The students in these courses are predominantly freshman and sophomore level students. The students are all traditional students from the standpoint that they are predominantly enrolled in campus face to face courses. A few of the students have taken some online courses though. Four of the students would be considered non-traditional from an age standpoint and two students are military veterans both non-traditional age also).

The survey of student preferences was consistent with the tracked assistance for the fall 2014 semester. The lower number of occurrences of assistance before or after class from the tracking is due to assistance provided for that course was not included in the tracking. It would have been very difficult for the author to log all the course questions the author received during and right after a class meeting.

The majority of assistance sought by students was for general course help (getting difficult/confusing topics clarified, going over assignments/exams, discussing course performance) and assignment help and the assistance was typically sought either during office hours or via email. Students seeking advisement and registration assistance predominantly used email. Note: our program now does most of its course schedule advisement in several group advisement sessions and only students with complex cases typically need additional advisement apart from these.

Office hours were predominantly used to seek general help (29.9% of visits) or for assignment help (41.4% of visits). In person, outside of office hours assistance use was similar (30% for general help and 30.4% for assignment help). Before or after class assistance was predominantly for assignments in another of the instructors courses (66.7%) although if the assistance for the same course had been tracked one the percentage of help for assignments would be even higher as many students asked assignment questions before, during, and after class. Late assignment submission was done almost exclusively via email. Email was also heavily used for assignment help. Students seeking to determine how they were doing in class almost always did this face to face during scheduled office hours.

Conclusions

Students took advantage of the author's office hours more than he expected (and probably more than in recent past semesters). This may be due to smaller than usual course enrollments allowed students to become more comfortable with the professor or the way that class is run encourages more students to use office hours for help.

The author found it surprising that text/video chat was rated so low and that phone was rated as high. One student commented in class after the survey that she did not realize that professors answered their phones, so student expectations probably play a role in the actual observed usage. With all of the author's current students owning smartphones and most with notebooks/tablets in addition, it was surprising that more students did not want the option of text or video chat.

The in person assistance almost always involved additional follow up questions and a deeper discussion of the topic/assignment whereas email assistance involved much less follow up and typically very specific questions. It would be useful to track both the level and depth of

questions/discussion along with the time spent providing assistance for the various methods but this would be very cumbersome and time consuming and was not attempted for this work.

This study would be more complete if the author had a range of class sizes and if discussion boards were set up for use in the courses' eClassrooms. Armstrong's typical class size is 20 to 30 and most engineering courses are typically smaller than the university average. Studying the difference in assistance preference based on course size was not possible in this study. Even though all the author's course syllabi indicated that students could request assistance via discussion boards, no student requested this so the boards were never set up. Student's would most likely be more willing to use a mechanism such as a discussion board already set up rather than have to make a request (maybe seen by them as a special request) for the mechanism to be set up.

Even though the initial results are interesting, the author will probably not attempt to continue this study due to the difficulty of logging the day/time and type of assistance sought, especially during office hours when busy or before/after class. At times, the author felt that the logging of the assistance was degrading his ability to help students before/after class and during office hours. Email assistance was easy to log.

References

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