CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

COMMENTARY

Optimizing an online I-O program: Tips and lessons learned from launching an online master's program

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In the focal article by Kraiger et al. (2022), the authors provided a review of online graduate education, discussed multistakeholder benefits and meta-analytic evidence supporting online learning solutions (e.g., Means et al., 2013; Sitzmann et al., 2006), and raised caveats and challenges of such novel programs. We take this opportunity to share an example of an online master's program in industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology, aspiring to address the challenges outlined and to navigate barriers that may not be readily apparent or fully considered by the stakeholders of startup online I-O programs. In this commentary, we provide a brief background of our program. Then, we respond to the focal article's main points and emphasize the integrated strategic and tactical efforts executed to help mitigate some of the risk to managing online I-O programs discussed by Kraiger et al. (2022). We extend the conversation to include the important challenges in administering an online program. Our goal is to provide greater insights regarding best practices, policies, and procedures and share a realistic preview of the hurdles for those thoughtfully considering this endeavor in the broader I-O community.

Background of the program

The online I-O graduate program discussed herein is situated in an R1 university located in the Mid-Atlantic region, but students predominantly reside in the continental United States. One of our primary goals for launching a fully online I-O psychology program was to diversify the field by providing individuals from various educational, professional, and demographic backgrounds with an opportunity to pursue their educational ambitions while balancing their arduous work–life demands. As Kraiger et al. (2022) noted, online education is particularly well suited to such populations. Our program was launched during the summer of 2019 and is an accelerated 1.5-year online learning experience with blended asynchronous and synchronous components, emphasizing the scientist–practitioner model. The blended hybrid approach that many students experience involves direct and video-based instructor, peer, and thought-leader interactions and multiple instructional methods and events, and the elements of the flipped-classroom technique Kraiger et al. assert can be "13% and 20% more effective than instruction delivered strictly in the classroom" (2022, p.). We follow a rolling admission cycle, which includes new cohorts of graduate students beginning each fall, spring, and summer. The program is optimized for working professionals who are seeking to attain and apply the principles, theories, and practices of I-O psychology to shape and sustain smarter workplaces. To date, the globally distributed alumni from the graduate program represent employees of every industry as well as *Fortune* 500, *Fortune* Global 500, nonprofits, major consultancies, Department of Defense Services, and aligned

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

agencies. Several students seek to learn, transfer, and generalize powerful I-O talent practices to their current workplaces whereas others aspire to become I-O scientist–practitioners.

Key strength: Maintaining the program-wide brand

As the focal article noted, one of the main challenges with online education is ensuring equal levels of quality in instruction, student experience, and student outcomes. We agree and aspire to adhere to the same rigorous quality standards of our on-ground I-O graduate programs. Both of our on-ground doctoral and master's I-O programs are highly ranked (Beiler et al., 2014; Roman et al., 2018; Vodanovich et al., 2018). We strive to match that level of quality in our online graduate program to uphold and honor the high standards set by I-O legends from our program such as the late Edwin Fleishman.

Kraiger et al. (2022) describe the concerns of some regarding the disincentives for research-active senior faculty to lead advanced online courses, given the incremental time requirements for teaching online courses (see Singleton & Session, 2011). The distinguished faculty cadre leading and supporting our program include all core tenure-track faculty, who simultaneously teach the on-ground courses, as well as adjunct faculty who are PhD alumni and practitioners in prestigious public- and private-sector organizations. These faculty are thought leaders in their respective communities of practice studying leadership, teamwork, diversity, well-being, psychometrics, statistics, and employment litigation. Moreover, staffing core tenure-track faculty from the on-ground program somewhat mitigates the pitfalls of online education that rely on poorly compensated and overworked adjuncts (Mueller et al., 2013; Ridge & Ritt, 2017).

Second, when designing each of our fully online courses, we made careful considerations to maintain rigor while also meeting the needs of students in our student population. Our students focus on taking one course at a time following a condensed yet intensive 8-week modular schedule, which allows students to continue their full-time work commitments. Our online program is designed to be primarily asynchronous, to allow students the flexibility to complete coursework while balancing their unique work–life demands. We carefully follow best practices in online learning pedagogy, which can diverge from simulating on-ground course experiences online (e.g., Capranos & Dyers, 2020; Magda, 2018; Magda & Smalec, 2020). Courses are designed for application-based learning and transfer of student knowledge through learning activities such as assigned readings from high-impact journals, videos, practice exercises, interaction activities, knowledge quizzes, and application assessments. Applied projects focus on providing students with real-world simulations of course material (e.g., conducting a selection validation study, designing a training solution) and completing experiential activities to apply specific learning in their own work contexts immediately. The capstone experience includes students conducting a business research study across the research methods and practicum course series. All students acquire a deeper appreciation for how the scientific method, multilevel theories, multidisciplinary research study findings, metrics, and advanced data analytics are harnessed to illuminate operative workplace phenomena, inform data-driven decisions, and effect change in their organizations. Thus, the curriculum provides practical experiences in organizations, which was a key recommendation of Kraiger et al. (2022) for effective online instruction.

Third, when delivering the course, faculty work closely with students, offering detailed qualitative and quantitative individual feedback each week on course deliverables. Most importantly, students can engage in extensive weekly collective synchronous time with instructors as well as occasionally during more tailored videoconferences. Although each instructor hosts weekly synchronous time differently, these sessions can include minilectures, internal and external guest speakers, demonstrations, learning games/competitions, and opportunities to share case exemplars and experiences with one another. Faculty also supplement this time with professional development and offer both academic and career-related support. For example, both our full-time and

adjunct faculty have extended opportunities to be involved in research and applied projects. The first two courses are taught by a full-time I-O faculty member to onboard and socialize new students and provides multiple live opportunities weekly to interact with guest speakers. This element echoes Kraiger et al.'s (2022) point about incorporating sufficiently stimulating faculty contact and mentoring in an online program.

Finally, we have learned the importance of peer learning, group entitativity, and collective commitment to the discipline of I-O psychology. In the spirit of promoting a collaborative culture, we foster intentional connections for online students with their peers, on-ground doctoral and master's students, and the broader I-O community. Students in our program follow a cohort model, but critical intercohort bonds are also formed and sustained via discussion boards, synchronous class time, team projects, study groups, Slack channels, and professional and informal face-to-face gatherings. Moreover, all of the online students also benefit from the thought and demographic diversity of their peers through these collaboration mechanisms. Students also connect with other cohorts through monthly program-wide synchronous sessions and serving in the MPS Program Student Advisory Board. During one of the monthly sessions, a student was able to network and connect with a student working at the prestigious consulting firm to which she was applying. Through the advisory board, students form teams across different cohorts developing deeper connections while working on program-wide initiatives, such as developing a learning community, team charter, and mentoring program.

Students have also developed connections with on-ground students by attending weekly learning series open to students across the three programs, holding a position in the I-O program-wide student board (IOPSA) and other student government and association boards within the university, and supporting research projects with doctoral students (e.g., Commisso & Zhou, 2021). Students also submit to and participate in the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) conference, consulting challenges, and other events hosted by domain-relevant external entities. In summary, Kraiger et al. (2022) noted several processes such as teamwork, practical problem solving, and interpersonal influence and persuasion that are perceived by some as less developed in online programs. The cross-cohort and cross-program interactions described here address such challenges.

Key challenge: Administration load

The focal article provided a number of helpful recommendations for educators seeking to start or expand their own online I-O courses and programs. One element that was not explicitly discussed, which we believe to be essential to launching and maintaining a high-quality online I-O program, is the consuming behind-the-scenes administrative side of program management. In our experience, the administrative load associated with establishing and maintaining the program was much greater than anticipated but also much more important than one might initially expect. These administrative tasks serve various stakeholders, including applicants, students, faculty, departments, colleges, and university personnel, and they are crucial to ensuring high-quality instruction and enduring student learning experiences.

First, it is imperative for online graduate programs to have designated full-time faculty member(s) leading the program. There are many unique features of an online program that increase the administrative tasks to which on-ground programs may not be accustomed. For example, to meet the needs of full-time working professional students, a single course is taken during an 8-week intensive schedule, requiring administrators to be available evenings and weekends. To facilitate students graduating in 1.5 years, courses are offered throughout the year, including summers, with only a 1-week break in the summer and a 2- to 3-week break in the winter. With three cohorts coming in each year, it is necessary to host three open-house sessions, ongoing admission cycles orientations, socialization phases, and graduations each calendar year. This creates an enormous administrative burden.

Second, we have learned that strategic, effective, and accurate marketing of the program is essential. With many fully online programs only a click away, applicants need to decide on one that is the best fit for them. Consequently, graduate programs will need to invest in their targeted media initiatives to reach unique applicants nationally and globally. This includes partnering with a marketing team familiar with cutting-edge strategies and social media outreach. Casting a wide net in the marketing approach also results in greater inquiries and contact required prior to an individual even submitting a completed application. An admissions team needs to be available via email, chat, and the phone to meet the demands of applicants who need responses around their schedules.

Third, once students are accepted into the program, extensive retention efforts are made. Program administrators work closely with a success coach team to ensure students acclimate to the processes and procedures of the university. This includes directing students to the appropriate channels across the university, such as registration, student accounts, and IT services. Programs should also consider investing in course-related technical support to support unanticipated challenges that may occur in a fast-paced course.

The administrative load for faculty teaching courses in the online program also differs from on-ground teaching experiences. The relative lack of in-person interaction means that greater pressure is put on other communication media (e.g., email, synchronous class time, timely feedback on assignments, intuitive learning management system). For example, students can no longer walk up to a professor after a lecture to discuss an assignment. In order to emulate that kind of rich learning experience, instructors need to be extremely organized to respond to emails promptly, given that deliverables are due each week, and hold helpful office hours at times that meet the needs of students, including evenings and sometimes weekends.

As mentioned earlier in the strengths, program administrators need to be cognizant and build time to facilitate social connections both within the program and beyond. In addition, program administrators need to advocate for their online students at the departmental, college, and university-wide levels. Providing a high-quality online experience to students requires programs to proactively plan for and invest in meeting administration demands.

Conclusion

It is strikingly apparent from the programmatic efforts of the focal article authors (e.g., Grossman & Sanchez, 2020; Kraiger, 2008; Sitzmann et al., 2006) that the education of I-O scientist–practitioners is being fundamentally reshaped by an evolving nexus of student market demands, emerging technology capabilities, and employer mandates for accelerating proficiency. This commentary recounts select formative experiences with overcoming challenges to seize the opportunity to build a high-quality online I-O master's program from start-up to downstream strategic sustainment. We provide background information about our program to discuss the focal article's main points and emphasize some of the core competitive differentiators of our novel educational offering. We extended the dialogue to scrutinize some especially taxing administrative challenges. This note is offered to the broader I-O community seeking actionable policy, practices, and procedures optimized for nontraditional adult learners, leveraging online learning environments. We celebrate the progress achieved to date and welcome the collaborations to come as we strive collectively forward to help ensure the viability and vitality of I-O psychology as a vibrant discipline.

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