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COMMENTARY

The overlooked role of concurrent employment in online graduate education in industrial-organizational psychology

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Current research on differences between in-person and online (or hybrid) graduate education, as summarized by (Kraiger, et al. 2022), does not adequately account for the employment status of students. This is of particular importance for online and hybrid/blended education, where it may be easier for students to remain employed at an organization throughout their studies. Though it is possible that in some ways employment during graduate school creates limitations for students (e.g., the need for a lower course load may make for slower degree progress), our opinion is that concurrent student employment works to the benefit of graduate education, particularly for a work-oriented field, such as industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology.

From our perspective as leaders of a hybrid master's program in I-O psychology, we have many students who work full-time in organizations and have witnessed positive outcomes for both students and our university program. Though most benefits mentioned in this commentary are directed toward the terminal applied master's degree within our I-O program, there are a few areas where student employment also benefits our research-focused doctoral program. We feel compelled to share some of our experiences operating a hybrid program, especially after our program was mentioned in the focal article. Of course, we are not satisfied with the anecdotes of one program and suggest research on the topics presented will benefit all I-O programs, both in-person and online/hybrid.

Benefits of concurrent employment for students

Most significantly, concurrent employment during graduate school, particularly online graduate education, may facilitate training transfer by providing opportunities to apply I-O knowledge and practices in their organization. We expect this to be the case for graduate students regardless of the type of program (master's or doctoral) and the program focus (applied or research). Instead of delaying employment until graduation and risking a decay in knowledge and skills between coursework and application, concurrently employed students can use what they study immediately, which should facilitate training transfer (Blume et al., 2010). Additionally, the student has access to their course materials and faculty if they need to make adjustments before further attempts to transfer (i.e., dynamic transfer; Blume et al., 2019). For example, consider a student who is working to modify an existing performance system but is confronted with a strong organizational desire to use a forced distribution approach. The student may be aware of the limitations of such an approach, especially in the longer term (Moon et al., 2016), but can crowdsource information on their rebuttal from fellow students or faculty and may be able to go back to the organization with alternative suggestions and respectfully articulated points about the limitations of such an

approach.[1] With these additional resources and faculty support, students may find it easier to overcome barriers to training transfer when they are concurrently enrolled in I-O education. However, we acknowledge that convincing organizations to adopt valid and reliable human resource management (HRM) practices is a recurring struggle for the field of I-O psychology as a whole.

To provide some other examples, our students have shared how covering psychometrics helped them evaluate a vendor their organization was considering hiring to implement selection tests,[2] how practice cleaning and analyzing data helped them summarize audit results, and how practicing writing interview and situational judgment questions would be helpful for a new hiring project to which they were assigned.

Additionally, working students in a graduate program can network with one another, building connections they can leverage for future job changes. Our program has a cohort approach, so each new group of students gets to know their fellow students well (which we attribute to our hybrid approach where students take their first classes in person over the summer). There are opportunities for students to engage with others in the cohorts above and below them, where each is exposed to about 32 other students (average cohort size of 11). They can also observe how other students are using their degree, see what job titles[3] are relevant for individuals with a background in I-O psychology, and learn from other students' experiences in different industries. In-person programs may rely more heavily and strictly on alumni and faculty for these job-related networking opportunities.

Finally, the research on placement for online degrees seems to overlook the role of work history. The timing of this research may miss nuances here as well. We find many of our students are able to make career shifts *prior* to the completion of their degree. The flexibility of an online degree has also allowed many of our students to make cross-country moves in pursuit of better employment opportunities. Research on postdegree job placement seems to assume that students do not have a job to begin with and/or are seeking entry-level placement (Metrejean & Noland, 2011), whereas students with concurrent employment may not be on the job market immediately after degree completion and have the experience that would make an entry-level position unattractive. Employed students may benefit from not losing momentum in their work history compared with those who stop working to complete graduate school. Last, they likely have more access to job opportunities, employee networking, and promotions through current organizations compared with students who are not concurrently employed.

Decreased need for internships

In this vein, we contest that internship experience may not be as important in the context of online graduate programs, particularly those that are applied in focus, to the extent that students are already employed full time. The focal article points out that many organizations prefer hiring students with internship experience; however, it is not clear whether this accounts for students who are currently full-time employees (Rechlin & Kraiger, 2012). Graduate students who are full-time employees may already have opportunities to implement, practice, or suggest many of the I-O practices they are learning in their coursework (Rowe, 2018). Additionally, many programs require a capstone or practicum project, which requires students to apply their knowledge. Although this is not as thorough as a full internship, the value of the practicum project and application opportunities at their current employer should not be discounted.

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[1]Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for a similar suggestion regarding lack of organizational support for training transfer.

[2]The vendor did not supply any psychometric evidence, and the student recommended that their organization look elsewhere. We now have a vendor-vetting assignment in our selection course so all students can practice this skill.

[3]Helping students understand what to search for during a job hunt (e.g., "organizational development" instead of "training") seems to be critical in helping place graduates from an both online and in-person I-O programs

Although university programs do not have the power to combat industry biases that favor internships and in-person programs over online or hybrid programs (Rechlin & Kraiger, 2012), steps can be taken to improve online graduate student employability. University programs can work with students to find jobs that match their skill sets and communicate the many career options available to them (government, industry, external consulting, entrepreneurship, etc.). Additionally, programs should teach students how to market themselves effectively for jobs. It can be tricky to navigate job opportunities because I-O psychology is a very versatile field. Individuals with I-O degrees are qualified for a variety of roles and jobs, and many do not include "I-O psychology" in the job title (Shoenfelt, 2020). Furthermore, many companies and industries are still largely unaware of what I-O psychology and evidence-based human resource management are and the value of these approaches (Rousseau & Barrends, 2011; Ryan, 2003). To increase student employability, it is important that graduate programs help students (a) demonstrate acquired knowledge and skills and (b) communicate the benefits of I-O principles and subsequent value creation to their prospective employers. Future research could investigate how I-O programs support students in finding jobs and marketing themselves as I-O practitioners and how this relates to student employability in in-person versus online programs.

Benefits of concurrent student employment for programs

We propose that I-O programs also benefit from student employment. We suggest additional program and university benefits beyond the increased enrollment, flexible resource use, and service to student populations, as noted in the focal article. Specifically, programs may benefit from positive word of mouth across organizations in which students are employed, increased collaboration potential, and better exposure to emerging organization trends. We suggest that these benefits extend not only to programs with an applied focus but also those running both applied programs (e.g., terminal master's degree) and research programs (e.g., doctoral degree).

First, students who have positive experiences with the program may engage in positive word-of-mouth (Greenacre et al., 2014; Masterson, 2001) conversations about the program. In turn, this may help the program attract more qualified students (Schlachter & Pieper, 2019). Some organizations offering tuition reimbursement may also recommend specific programs for their employees based on prior experience of other employees with the program. In the current environment of a shrinking pool of people who are interested in higher education, this may prove invaluable. It would be interesting to compare how much word of mouth within organizations influences program application flow compared with in-person programs or programs where concurrent employment would be difficult (e.g., in-person doctoral programs).

Second, a student population that is spread across the country and has current employment offers potential collaboration benefits. Specifically, these online students may be able to collaborate on projects with their program (and its faculty). Opportunities may arise to collect data in the organizations in which students are employed. Our program encourages collaboration between our in-person doctoral students and online master's students. Again, there may occasionally be opportunities for data collection in organizations, but it can also help doctoral students learn more about "what it is really like" working in the applied world. For example, the second author, a third-year doctoral student in I-O psychology, attests that she learns as much from working with the online MIOP students as they learn from her. She can elaborate on theory and research findings when MIOP students have questions about the course material. Conversely, when students provide context for their questions and application issues, it helps her better understand the operation of organizations and issues in applying research findings to complex companies. Ultimately, this helps both the second author and the MIOP students work together to bridge the academic–practice gap. Further steps could be taken to foster connections and collaboration between the online master's students and the PhD students.

Third, and related to the point above, faculty have the chance to stay current on organizational needs and challenges by working with students who are currently employed (which is typically afforded with online and hybrid programs). This is particularly important for faculty and programs who adopt the scientist–practitioner model (Byrne et al., 2014) but do not have the opportunity themselves to engage in consulting or other applied work. We posit that this benefits not only the online program but also the department as a whole and any in-person programs by exposing faculty to emerging industry trends related to I-O psychology.

In conclusion, we believe the advantages of concurrent employment allowed by online programs has been overlooked by prior research. We suggest that students who are employed throughout their degree obtainment will have higher training transfer, more networking opportunities, and more career progression during their education than students in programs that cannot accommodate concurrent employment. Additionally, we believe that enrolling employed students has many benefits to I-O programs (including the online program itself and any additional in-person programs) such as word-of-mouth referrals, collaboration opportunities, and increased faculty awareness of organizational needs and pain points. These overlooked areas offer an exciting avenue for future research and may help I-O psychology take a more measured approach to understanding the role online education plays in training future psychologists.

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