The use of 3D virtual world platforms in higher education represents a sea change in the kinds of learning environments and simulations that can be easily and inexpensively staged. Still, there are very real impediments to the more widespread use of virtual worlds in online education. For example, learning how to navigate within a virtual world requires a significant investment of time on the part of faculty and students alike. This presentation will highlight the findings from student surveys over a three year period, including ways to enlarge the portion of students willing and able to venture into [optional] virtual world learning simulations. Also, this presentation will detail how students rate different virtual world simulations and activities (on the level of interactivity, level of engagement, and contribution to student understanding of the course concepts and materials).

Looking specifically at the survey findings, students rated the virtual world learning simulations as more engaging than traditional online course learning activities and more engaging than classroom-based learning. In addition, while interactivity is highly correlated with engagement in all three instructional delivery modes (read: classroom, online, and virtual world delivery modes), the correlation between engagement and increased learning outcomes was the highest for virtual world learning simulations (as well as only strongly correlated with the online and virtual world learning activities). Additional findings include the surprisingly high rating for the virtual world resource materials (like simulated vocabulary flashcards, in-world slide shows, and a "meet the economist" display). In turn, the unexpected finding that the resource simulations are highly valued by students led to the development of a prototype virtual world simulation consisting of layered virtual world learning components.