Beyond Flexibility: Why Students Choose Online and Face-to-Face Courses in Community College

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Background

• Flexibility & convenience key factors
• CCs high proportion of non-traditional students with work/family demands
• Strong online growth at CCs
• Most CCs believe not meeting demand
• Most “online” students maintain a mix
VA CC Online Enrollments
% Credits Taken Online by ALL students & ACTIVELY-ONLINE students

2004 Cohort

From Jaggars & Xu (2010)
What is the student demand?

• In fall 2008, only 3% of entering students took all courses online
• Do students wish they could take more courses online? Or do they prefer a mix?
• What are student reasons for taking courses online vs. face-to-face?
• Given limited resources, how should colleges balance offerings?
The Study

• Part of larger qualitative study
• Fieldwork at 2 community colleges in Virginia
• Interviewed 46 students currently enrolled in at least one online course
  • Perceptions and experiences with online courses
  • Why chose to take this course online
• Coded interviews according to reasons (e.g., external responsibilities, structural constraints, learning preferences) and whether reason general or course-specific
General Reasons to take Online

• Flexibility, convenience
  – Approx. 30% cited childcare responsibilities
  – Approx. 80% employed (perhaps ½ of those full-time)
  – Some worked overnight or unpredictable schedules

• Transportation problems

• Time-efficiency
  – Reduced travel time
  – A few felt total learning/study time reduced
Learning/Study Time-Efficiency

• “Really [in an online course] you have more time, because you don’t have that time where a classmate may come in and disrupt the class, or somebody’s not getting it and then you’re sitting there having to listen and wait until they get it. And I’m sitting there twiddling my fingers going ‘Okay, are they going to get this thing or what are they doing?’ ”

• “Nobody has questions, so she keeps talking and talking and she fills up the whole class, instead of letting us go to work on the papers.”
General Reasons to take Online

• Comfort of being at home
  – To take breaks, have snacks, work in pajamas
  – Not venturing out in bad weather or late night

• Better match for learning preferences
  – (Cited by only 3 students)

• Avoid interactions that are not of interest
  – Seemed more common among older students
Avoiding Student Interaction

• “I think a lot of the older, mature people take online classes, because they are afraid of the classroom. I was when I first took my first class. I’m like, ‘I’m the oldest thing in here and these kids just got out of high school. I can’t remember all of this stuff.’ And I think the older person, the mature person, leans towards the online classes basically because of, you know, it’s almost like stage fright. I mean being out of school for twenty years and then going back to a classroom, it just kind of scares you. It did me.”

• “Being in a class with a whole bunch of youngsters talking about their weekend, it’s kind of like ‘I can do without.’ …That’s why when you’re online you’re like, ‘I don’t need to interact with them, so I’m not going to.’ ”
General Reasons to take F2F

• Maintaining connection to campus or other students

• “I think that being in the specific curriculum that I am, with the on-campus classes, it has given me a stronger tie to the school. I’ll be graduating both of these colleges in May, and unfortunately both of their graduations are on the same date, so I had to choose which one I wanted to do. And I choose to come to this school because my peers are here.”
General Reasons to take F2F

• Instructor-student interaction was more “distant,” less “personal,” less “immediate,” less “detailed,” less “solid” online

• In online courses, feels like you are “teaching yourself.”

• “It just seems more, when you do it online, if you need help, your teacher is basically not there. Like face-to-face, she can help you a little bit more. But then when it comes to online, you have to teach yourself, I guess you could say.”
Making Specific Course Decision

- Course availability
- Subject well-suited to online
- Course difficulty
- Course “interesting” or “important”
Subjects Not Suited to Online

• Laboratory science
  – “I don’t want to have a chemistry lab going on in my kitchen.”

• Foreign language
  – “When all you do is write your German and type in little prompts, you’re not really learning how to speak it.”

• Public speaking
  – “If I really wanted to get something out of the class, I’d want a podium and a live audience… I feel like I’m ‘getting away with it’ a little bit by just talking on the computer, where I can’t really see everybody, but they can see me.”
Difficult/Easy Courses

- Approx. 40% said would not take math online
- “Easy” courses = “mostly reading and writing,” courses you can “teach yourself”
- “Difficult” courses need more direct teacher instruction, in-the-moment demonstration, explanation, responses
Difficult Courses Require a Face-to-Face Instructor

• “I think [online] is good for some courses. Other courses, I think I’ll need to be in the classroom. You know, sometimes you just don’t get it and I think you need that ‘little extra’ instruction. And are able to ask questions right then and there.”

• “I think that the difference is, once again, being able to ask questions on the spot. Depending, of course, on the level of the class and what type of learning you are doing in there. If it’s a class where you can pretty much go off the book and you’re not going to ask a lot of questions, that’s fine, online doesn’t affect you.”
Interesting / Important Courses

• “I started to, I actually enjoyed going, or actually enjoyed the class, so I didn’t want to just take it online. I wanted to actually go sit in the classroom and actually learn about it.”

• “I think I could learn so much more [face-to-face], and those teachers, they always have other little things to talk about in the class, and stories and examples, and you don’t really get that quite as much with online.”

• “A lit class online almost just seems like a bit of a yawn. I think there’s something to being amongst a group of people for that kind of class... And then just to see your teacher’s opinion and know your opinion, it seems like a bit of a loss.”
Conclusions

• Suggests most students think they don’t learn as well online, mostly due to reduced teacher explanation / interaction

• Not willing to risk taking “difficult” courses online

• Preferred richer f2f experience when taking particularly interesting or important courses