

PROGRAM REVIEW YEAR 2 REPORT DISTANCE EDUCATION

June 2008

Background

In Fall 2006, the Distance Education program began its first program review, with a clear focus on online teaching and learning. Since our online program is still in many respects in its infancy, it was challenging to narrow our focus to only one “rock”. Instead, the DE Committee chose to pursue five different areas of inquiry. Those were:

1. Who are our online students? We wanted to learn more about these students—their demographics, motivations for taking online classes, and their perceptions of Chabot’s online course offerings.
2. How can we improve online student success? We wanted to determine if there were key characteristics that differentiated successful students from non-successful students. We also wanted to develop some initial programs that might improve student success.
3. How can we improve online student retention? We know that retention rates in online classes are lower than for on-campus classes, and we wanted to determine why that occurs, and what we might be able to do to change that.
4. How can we motivate faculty to teach online? A key issue for our online program is a lack of classes relative to demand for online learning. We needed to explore why faculty are seemingly reluctant to teach online, and what we might be able to do to overcome that reluctance.
5. Are online and on-campus courses truly equivalent? There is a perception amongst some of our faculty (although not borne out in research) that workload, learning, and integrity are all inferior in online classes. We need to determine if this is true, and if so, what we can do to change that.

At this point, we believe we have made significant progress on items 1, 2, and 4, and will report on our results. In the third year of our program review cycle, we will focus on items 3 and 5.

Who Are Our Online Students?

Our first goal was to better understand our online students, as this is critical to anything we else we do to support and improve online education at Chabot. The first thing that we learned was that our online students are also our on-campus students. Three-quarters of our online students are also taking classes on campus at Chabot. A further review of our institutional research provided some important comparisons of online students vs. our on-campus students:

<i>Demographic Measure</i>	<i>Online Students</i>	<i>All Students</i>
Educational Goals: Transfer or AA/AS Degree	63%	47%
Continuing or Returning Student	79%	69%
Female	69%	57%
12+ Unit Load	41%	29%
Sophomore or Higher Educational Level	49%	41%
Resident of "Other Local Cities:	18%	14%

Source: Fall 2005 Institutional Research Data.

From this, we learned that our online students are more academically focused, more experienced students taking larger unit loads. Our online student population is also more than 2/3 female. Our hypothesis is that these students are trying to find ways to complete their education while managing their lives, and the convenience of online classes is enabling them to do just that.

We then looked at success and retention rates, and again the results were surprising:

<i>Success Measure</i>	<i>Online Students</i>	<i>All Students</i>
Success (C or higher)	59%	60%
Non-Success	11%	16%
Withdrawal	31%	24%

Source: Fall 2005-Spring 2006 Institutional Research Data.

While we had expected to find lower retention rates in online classes, we did not anticipate that non-success rates would actually be lower than in on-campus classes. This is perhaps, consistent with the stronger academic focus of online students—they don't want to fail their classes, and will withdraw if they don't believe they'll be successful.

We then worked with Sean McFarland and his team of student movie producers to develop a short film about online students. Online students were interviewed, and a 30-minute video, "Going the Distance" was produced. In this video, students explain why they need online courses, how they interact with their instructor and their classmates, and much more.

Finally, and most importantly, we surveyed our online students in Spring 2008. An astonishing 1,026 students participated in our online survey. Here's what they told us:

- Two-thirds of our online students prefer online classes because their family or work schedule makes attending on-campus classes difficult.
- Students believe online classes are equivalent to on-campus classes in terms of required time investment and difficulty.
- Students state that they participate as much or more in online discussions than they do in the classroom.
- They miss the interaction with the instructor and the lecture that occurs in the classroom, but appreciate the quick feedback they receive on quizzes and assignments. Multimedia technologies will enable faculty to provide “lectures” in online classes, and emerging tools may allow for more real-time interaction.
- They point to course organization as the single most important feature of an online class, and time management as the most important personal attribute in terms of their ability to succeed in an online class. This information gives us areas of focus in both faculty training and support and in student preparation programs.

Over the past two years, we’ve learned so much about our online students, and this learning will inform all of our work over the next few years. Although we’ll continue to update our research and probe further in specific areas, we believe that our inquiry in this area is essentially complete.

How Can We Improve Online Student Success?

As stated earlier, our starting point in this inquiry is that there is no real difference in success rates for students in our online and on-campus courses. We did, however, develop certain hypotheses about factors that might influence the success of online students, such as completion of English-1A (given the more intensive writing requirements in many online classes), prior online learning experience, and attendance at required on-campus meetings. After testing these hypotheses by analyzing Institutional Research data, it’s clear that none of these are the “silver bullet” that determines online student success. Completion of English-1A does seem to be helpful, but that is also the case for on-campus courses. Required on-campus meetings have no impact on success rates, and previous online learning experience has a very minor impact.

Based on anecdotal evidence and our own instincts, we decided to proceed to develop student support programs that might improve both success and retention. Those programs include:

1. Including online courses in our tenure-track, adjunct, and professional review course evaluations. We piloted this program in Spring 2007, and fully integrated online courses into the evaluation process this academic year, with 28 online courses evaluated and 19 evaluators completing training.
2. Conducting optional campus-wide orientations for online students. We began this in Spring 2008 with 12 sessions. 142 students participated in

Spring orientations, and another 87 in our two summer session orientations. Next fall, we'll begin to survey students on the effectiveness of the orientations, and to track their success and retention vs. other new online students.

3. Expanding Blackboard support hours, which began in Spring 2008. We added evening and weekend help request coverage, and also provided evening walk-in support for the first few weeks of the semester. We believe this support can improve success, retention, and satisfaction, and plan to continue this program. We've also begun a discussion with Las Positas College about possibly collaborating to provide even stronger support.
4. Developing an Introduction to Online Learning 0.5 unit class, which was offered for the first time in Spring 2008. This course is intended to give students an overview of Blackboard and of online student success skills. We have scheduled 3 sections of this class for Fall 2008.
5. Developing "mini-modules" that can be placed in any online course at the discretion of the instructor. Funded by a Basic Skills grant, the SearchPath Information Literacy tutorial was piloted in Fall 2007, and expanded in Spring 2008. This summer, we offered two additional modules—an introduction to Blackboard, and an online student success tutorial. These mini-modules can improve student preparation for their online course, and success in the research projects required in many online classes.
6. Improving the information we provide to potential students about our online classes. We have revamped the printed schedule information, and are working with faculty to provide expanded web information about their online classes that can help students make wiser class choices. This is an ongoing process, and we need to continue to develop our web information for prospective students.

We are also beginning to explore online counseling and online tutoring options, and to expand faculty training opportunities. We believe that all of these efforts will help our students to make better decisions about whether to take online classes, which classes to take, will improve retention, and may enhance success.

So, what have we learned in this inquiry? We've learned that we have much to do to make the college fully accessible to our online students. We've also learned that success rates per se are not an issue unique to online classes, and that a stronger focus on retention is likely to pay bigger dividends. That stronger focus will occur in the 2008-09 academic year.

How Can We Motivate Faculty to Teach Online?

As we began our Program Review, we were clear that there would be no online program if faculty were not motivated to teach online. There was considerable opposition to online teaching from some faculty, and a lack of interest from quite

a few others. Others were interested, but didn't know where to begin, or just didn't have the time or the support of their colleagues and administrators to take on this new teaching modality.

We began a four-tiered effort: learning about faculty concerns, widely sharing what we were learning about our online students and the initiatives we were beginning, providing training and mentoring opportunities to interested faculty, and providing some modest incentives to faculty that developed new online courses.

In Fall 2007, we surveyed our faculty, and learned from those that replied that:

- 29% were already teaching online, and an additional 31% planned to teach online at some point in the future.
- Faculty were evenly split on whether online and on-campus courses provide equivalent learning experiences for our students.
- The vast majority of faculty believed that online courses enhanced accessibility to a community college education, and also believed that it helped our overall enrollment.
- Faculty wanted to learn more about student learning in online courses, about retention issues, and about academic integrity in online courses.

Although this wasn't a statistically valid survey, this information gave us some directional clues, and encouraged us to continue sharing our learning with faculty. We did this through a series of Online Learning Newsletters (5 to date) containing information about our online students, our initiatives to better support students, learning about cannibalization of on-campus enrollments by online classes, opportunities for training, an analysis of online offerings at key Bay Area community colleges.

We also began an incentive, training, and mentoring program in Fall 2006, offering a small monetary incentive, plus an incentive for completing an @One training program, and providing paid, experienced online mentors to faculty that developed a new online class. This program continued through Spring 2008, and will likely be renewed for the next academic year.

We have also expanded training opportunities for faculty, with FLEX workshops, College Hour and other training workshops, and the purchase of a Sloan college pass that enables our faculty to take Sloan workshops at no cost.

All of this has contributed to a dramatic increase in the number of Chabot faculty teaching online, from 21 in Fall 2006 to 58 in Fall 2008. Although these efforts must continue, we believe we now understand how to meet the needs of those faculty that are open to online teaching, and will continue to fine tune our programs.

What's Next?

Next year, in the third year of our program review cycle, we will continue to learn about our students, continue to focus on ways to help our students succeed, and continue to support online faculty. Our emphasis, however, will shift slightly to the two “rocks” on which we’ve made the least progress: improving student retention and demonstrating online vs. on-campus course equivalency.

We know that retention is an issue in online courses, not just at Chabot but nationally. The post-census withdrawal rate is 7 points higher in online courses, and the pre-census withdrawal rate is 3 points higher in online courses than in their on-campus equivalents. Of every 100 students that register for an online course, only 55 complete that course (vs. 62 for on-campus courses). We have some ideas on how to improve this, including helping students understand before they register for a course if online learning is right for them, and better preparing those who do register through orientations and tutorials on how to succeed in online classes. We’ve identified classes with very high retention rates, and plan to gather best practices from those instructors and share them with all online faculty.

We also know that there is a concern among some faculty that online courses are not providing equivalent learning to our students. Research doesn’t validate this concern, and we need to better communicate the research that has been conducted nationally, and the self-reports from our students. We also would like to identify disciplines that would be willing to share information from next fall’s SLO assessments for courses that are offered both online and on-campus. Finally, we need to address academic integrity concerns, which may be a key factor underlying the faculty concerns. We just adopted one tool, SafeAssign, that can help prevent and detect plagiarism. We need to explore other tools that can help ensure academic integrity, and to more broadly communicate the tools we already have.

We have an ambitious agenda for next year, and will communicate our learning and the impact of that learning on the development of a strong online program in next year’s final program review report.