

PROGRAM REVIEW FINAL REPORT DISTANCE EDUCATION

August 2009

Background

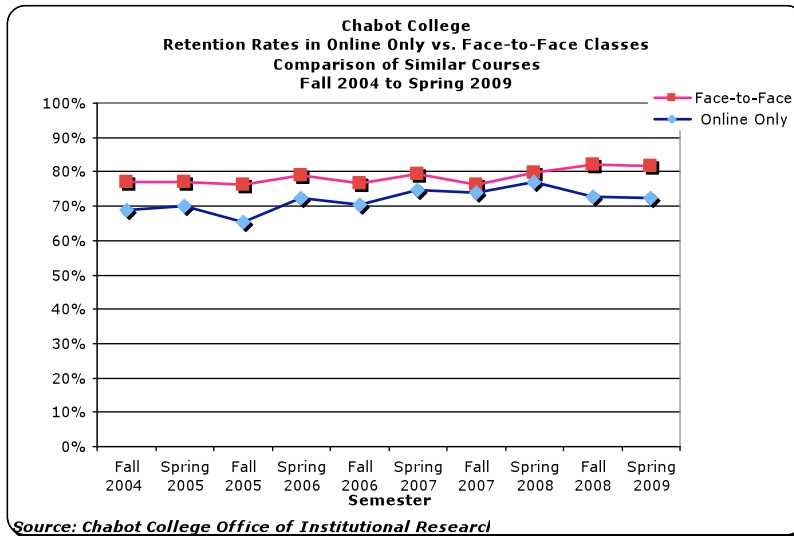
In Fall 2006, the Distance Education program began its first program review, with a clear focus on online teaching and learning. Since our online program is still in many respects in its infancy, it was challenging to narrow our focus to only one “rock”. Instead, the DE Committee chose to pursue five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

In June 2008, we reported on our learning and conclusions for questions 1, 2, and 4. In this final program review report, we will discuss questions 3 and 5, and provide recommendations for future work.

Rock #3: How can we improve online student retention?

The withdrawal rate in online classes is consistently higher than in similar face-to-face classes, ranging from 2-11 points higher over the past 10 semesters.



We also know that pre-census withdrawal rates are slightly higher, and in our one in-depth study of this, that rate was 3 points higher.

Our results are very similar to those at community colleges nationwide, where the reported retention gap is approximately 8 points. They are also similar to those at Las Positas College, where the gap was 9-10 points last year. There are many theories about the reason for this retention gap. A few leading theories are that:

1. Online students are “different” than on-campus students—less committed, different demographically. We know from our research that Chabot’s online students are quite similar to our on-campus students, and in most cases, are taking classes both on-campus and online, so this theory isn’t supported in our case.
2. Online students are taking an online class as an “extra” class to try to achieve their academic goals more quickly, and may be less emotionally committed to the online class if their workload becomes overwhelming—leading them to drop the online class and stay in the on-campus classes. This is a plausible theory given our research on Chabot online students.
3. Online students might actually be *more* responsible, and thus choose to drop online classes rather than risk failure. This theory seems to be true at Chabot, as our “non-success” rates are consistently lower in online courses. To illustrate, in Spring 2009, of every 100 students that began a course, 59 succeeded in the on-campus class and 57 succeeded in the online class. In the online class, 27 withdrew and 16 failed. In the on-campus class, 18 withdrew and 22 failed.

Chabot College
Success Rates in Online Only vs. Face-to-Face Classes
Comparison of Similar Courses
Fall 2004 to Spring 2009

		Success		Non-Success		Withdrawal		Total	
		Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Fall 2004	Online Only	386	57%	82	12%	210	31%	678	100%
	Face-to-Face	2,690	62%	640	15%	1,002	23%	4,332	100%
Spring 2005	Online Only	491	60%	82	10%	247	30%	820	100%
	Face-to-Face	1,761	62%	425	15%	656	23%	2,842	100%
Fall 2005	Online Only	421	53%	96	12%	274	35%	791	100%
	Face-to-Face	1,998	57%	682	19%	834	24%	3,514	100%
Spring 2006	Online Only	430	64%	54	8%	185	28%	669	100%
	Face-to-Face	1,315	60%	401	18%	458	21%	2,174	100%
Fall 2006	Online Only	635	56%	169	15%	335	29%	1,139	100%
	Face-to-Face	1,852	57%	627	19%	757	23%	3,236	100%
Spring 2007	Online Only	1,069	59%	277	15%	460	25%	1,806	100%
	Face-to-Face	2,728	60%	897	20%	941	21%	4,566	100%
Fall 2007	Online Only	1,227	58%	329	16%	554	26%	2,110	100%
	Face-to-Face	2,933	57%	1,020	20%	1,235	24%	5,188	100%
Spring 2008	Online Only	1,466	59%	452	18%	566	23%	2,484	100%
	Face-to-Face	3,276	59%	1,136	21%	1,128	20%	5,540	100%
Fall 2008	Online Only	1,467	55%	482	18%	726	27%	2,675	100%
	Face-to-Face	3,215	61%	1,137	21%	957	18%	5,309	100%
Spring 2009	Online Only	1,843	57%	517	16%	893	27%	3,253	100%
	Face-to-Face	3,500	59%	1,324	22%	1,088	18%	5,912	100%

Notes: Data are for courses that were offered both Online Only and Face-to-Face. Online Only classes do not require an on-campus meeting. Success is a grade of 'A', 'B', 'C', or 'CR'. Non-Success is a grade of 'D', 'F', 'NC', or 'I'. Withdrawal is a grade of 'W' or 'MW'.

Over the past few years, we have implemented a number of programs designed to improve both student success and retention, including our campus-wide online learning orientations, extended Blackboard student support hours, our Introduction to Online Learning course, online learning information web pages for each course, and mini-tutorials on online learning and Blackboard that instructors can add to their courses. We will continue to develop programs to encourage retention. There is some evidence that the use of multimedia tools in online courses can improve retention (although no evidence of improved learning) by engaging students more in the course, and development of multimedia training is a current priority for the Committee on Online Learning.

So, what have we learned? First, we've learned that there are no easy solutions to closing this retention gap, either at Chabot or elsewhere in the country. We've tried many different approaches, and the gap is not closing. Second, and perhaps more importantly, we've learned that it may be wiser to focus on the lower failure rate in online courses than on the lower retention rate. If the college as a whole could

convince students to drop courses instead of fail them, and reduce the non-success rate by 3, 4, or 5 points, we would do that. As long as success rates remain roughly equivalent in online and on-campus courses, there is no disadvantage for students in online learning vs. on-campus learning. Chabot should be very, very proud of this equivalence, as it is not the national norm. At Las Positas, that success gap is consistently in double digits, so we are clearly doing something right at Chabot.

Rock #5: Are online and on-campus courses truly equivalent?

A number of faculty have indicated concern that student learning in online courses does not match that of an on-campus course. There is no data to support this concern, either from our own success data, or student self-reports, or national research. As discussed earlier, success rates in online classes are equivalent to those same classes when taught on-campus. A major survey of 1000 Chabot online students conducted in Spring 2008 revealed that online students believe they spend an equivalent amount of time completing online and on-campus courses, and that the on-campus and online courses are identical in terms of level of difficulty. A report just released by the U.S. Department of Education, *“Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning: A Meta-Analysis and Review of Online Learning Studies”*, concluded that:

“Students who took all or part of their class online performed better, on average, than those taking the same course through traditional face-to-face instruction.”

The study supported this conclusion for both undergraduate and graduate coursework, and hypothesized that the reasons for this learning advantage were greater time on task, additional learning materials, and additional opportunities for collaboration in online courses.

Some faculty are concerned that cheating occurs more frequently in online courses; again, there is no evidence from the research literature to support this concern. And, there are many tools available that can increase instructor confidence in the level of academic integrity of an online course, including randomized test questions, randomized test order, more authentic assessments, and plagiarism detection software.

Perhaps the final piece of evidence to support what appears to a consensus among educators nationwide that online learning is equivalent will be our own assessment of SLO's, which is just now underway.

The Committee on Online Learning will continue to monitor success rates and student perceptions, and will ask for input from faculty once SLO assessment data is available.

Our Conclusions

We began the first program review of online learning in Fall 2006. At that time, we offered 51 sections of 37 online and hybrid online courses. As we conclude our program review cycle, we're planning to offer 158 sections of 110 courses in Fall 2009.

Along with this incredible growth in online course offerings has been incredible growth in our understanding of online students and their needs, and significant growth in support programs available to those students. For online faculty, we've provided strong internal training and incentives to encourage faculty to participate in external training opportunities.

Our future challenges are many, but key issues appear to be:

1. Uncertain institutional commitment to online teaching and learning. It's unclear that developing a great online curriculum at Chabot is a significant priority. That uncertainty is demonstrated by the absence of an ongoing budget commitment, by uneven commitment by administrators (or at least an uneven demonstration of that commitment), and by uneven commitment by faculty. These make planning and goal-setting very challenging, and not as productive as they could be. For example, although we would like to be able to offer our students online degrees, or online transfer GE, that is not currently possible given the absence of course offerings in key degree and transfer requirement areas.
2. A lack of integration of online learning into all facets of the college. Much of our work is on a parallel path to the ongoing work of the college. This includes staff development, academic services, counseling, possibly tutoring, retention efforts, and many other student support services. At some point, everyone at Chabot needs to "own" online education, and it needs to be integrated into the "normal" work of the college. Near-term priorities include development of online tutoring and online academic advising—critical support services for students.
3. The ongoing need to support faculty development in a rapidly changing online world. Online teaching tools are quickly developing, and it's important to support faculty as they consider using these new tools. We have not expanded our Instructional Technology staff in the past 10 years, even as online courses have increased from a handful to over 150 courses, and as the technology available to support student learning has rapidly evolved. Examples include multimedia (video, podcasts, narrated Powerpoints), online journaling, blogs, wikis, and more, plus the constant changes to Blackboard. Keeping current with these instructional tools is critical to continuing the success of our online programs.

Program review has proven to be a great structure for investigating and addressing the needs of our online learning program. We thank the Program Review Committee for their support over the past 3 years.