Going The Distance

By Paul Bradley, Editor, Community College Week /
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Through good times and bad, during recessions and boom times, one thing has been constant in the world of community college distance education over the past decade: enrollment in online courses has grown faster than overall enrollment at colleges and universities.

Most online programs today are no longer seeing the double-digit growth they experienced only five years ago. According to the Instructional Technology Council's annual survey of community college distance education administrators, distance education enrollment increased by 4.7 percent in 2013-14.

So even as overall community college enrollment declines, the popularity of online learning continues to grow. In 2012, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, almost 675,000 students were enrolled exclusively in online courses at two-year public colleges while another 1.2 million enrolled in some distance education courses.

Taken together, those numbers equate to 1.8 million students, or 27.1 percent of all community college students, a higher percentage than any other higher education sector.

But those numbers come with a caveat.

Academic researchers and college administrators consistently have found that students are significantly less likely to complete a course if they take it online rather than face-to-face.

In its annual survey and report, the ITC, made up of distance learning administrators at 350 colleges, identified lower student retention and completion rates and a lack of preparedness for online learning as among the primary challenges for distance learning administrators.

"Distance education administrators must pay attention to this issue as colleges increasingly hold them accountable for students who do not attend and/or complete their online courses," said the report, authored by Fred Lokken, dean of the Web- College Division at Truckee Meadows Community College, and Christine Mullins, ITC executive director.

"Nationally, student retention in online courses tends to be eight percentage points lower than that of face-to-face instruction. Online students need to be self-disciplined to succeed. Many underestimate how much time online coursework requires. Others fall behind or drop out for the

same reasons they enrolled in online courses in the first place — they have other responsibilities and life challenges, such as work and/or family, and are too busy to prepare for, or complete, their online coursework."

Distance Education Enrollment

Number and Percentage of Students Enrolled in Title IV Colleges by Distance Education Status, Student Level and Level of Institution

	TOTAL	Students enrolled exclusively in distance education courses		Students enrolled in some distance education courses		Students not enrolled in any distance education courses	
		Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total	**21,147,055**	**2,642,158**	**12.5**	**2,809,942**	**13.3**	**15,694,955**	**74.2**
STUDENT LEVEL							
Undergraduate	18,236,340	2,002,815	11	2,582,475	14.2	13,651,050	74.9
Degree-Certificate Seeking	16,225,545	1,807,860	11.1	2,446,785	15.2	11,950,900	73.7
Non-Degree/Certificate Seeking	1,623,082	192,594	11.9	113,683	7	1,316,805	81.1
Graduate	2,910,715	639,343	22	227,467	7.8	2,043,905	70.2
CONTROL AND LEVEL OF INSTITUTION							
Public	14,996,482	1,249,135	8.3	2,406,908	16	11,340,439	75.6
4-year	8,092,727	574,709	7.1	1,223,442	15.1	6,294,576	77.8
2-year	6,845,174	674,134	9.8	1,182,801	17.3	4,988,239	72.9
Less than 2-year	58,581	292	0.5	665	1.1	57,624	98.4
Private nonprofit	3,975,542	467,528	11.8	259,843	6.5	3,248,171	81.7
4-year	1,470,191	901,601	61.3	121,684	8.3	1,106,345	50.9
2-year	47,524	798	1.7	2,198	4.6	44,528	93.7
Less than 2-year	11,662	0	0	46	0.4	11,616	99.6
Private for-profit	2,175,031	925,495	42.6	143,191	6.6	1,106,345	50.9
4-year	1,470,191	901,601	61.3	121,684	8.3	446,906	30.4
2-year	413,377	21,711	5.3	19,749	4.8	371,917	90
Less than 2-year	291,463	2,183	0.7	1,758	0.6	287,522	98.6

SOURCE: NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS

ITC's survey found that 66 percent of respondents said their retention rate is lower for online classes than for face-to-face instruction, up from 53 percent in 2013; 25 percent of respondents reported that their retention is comparable for online and face-to-face instruction at their college, down from 35 percent in 2013; and 2 percent said retention is higher for online classes than for face-to-face instruction at their college, unchanged from 2013.

The reason for the gaps can be found in poor academic preparation and students who don't fully understand the demands of online learning.

"Students can often misunderstand the online learning environment and lack the requisite study and student success skills they need to succeed," the report said. "They can be tech-savvy when using social media and communications tools, but lack the necessary basic computer skills to take online courses."

The ITC findings add to a growing body of evidence that even as the popularity of online learning continues to grow, and policymakers continue to expand online courses to meet

burgeoning demand, online learning is falling short, especially as policy makers demand better results from community colleges Studies by the Community College Research Center focusing on Washington state (2011) and Virginia (2013) found worse outcomes for students who took courses online.

Last year, the Public Policy Institute of California issued a sobering report on the state of online education in the nation's largest community college system. The PPI found, on the one hand, that online education had greatly increased access to higher education of California residents. Online learning at California's community colleges, both in terms of courses offered and students enrolled, has grown exponentially.

In 2002-03, online course enrollment was 114,000 students. Since then, online course enrollment has increased by almost a million students, while traditional course enrollment has declined by about 285,000 students. Online course enrollment as a share of all enrollments at the community colleges increased from 1.4 percent to 10.7 percent over the same time period.

But the report also found that overall online course success rates are lower than those for traditional courses. In 2012, 60.4 percent of all students enrolled in online courses completed them with a passing grade — 10 percentage points lower than the average success rate of 70.6 percent in traditional courses.

Share of Credit Courses Offered Online

Online learning is more popular in some subjects than in others. In California, almost one-third of enrollment in business courses and more than one-third of enrollment in information technology courses are online. Online courses are uncommon in engineering, the physical sciences and the biological sciences.

Course	% Offered Online
Information Technology	33.8
Business and Management	30.2
Media and Communications	15.9
Social Sciences	15.1
Psychology	15.1
Family and Consumer Sciences	14.2
Public and Protective Sciences	7.8
Health	7.0
Humanities	7.7
Education	6.5
Foreign Language	6.5
Interdisciplinary Studies	6.3
Mathematics	6.0
Biological Sciences	4.6
Physical Sciences	4.4
Engineering and Industrial Technologies	2.3

SOURCE: CALIFORNIA PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE

The report also found an oddity: Students who took at least some of their classes online were more likely to earn a credential than students who didn't take any online courses.

That finding mirrors research conducted by Peter Shea, associate provost of online learning at the University of Albany SUNY. His study of 16,000 first-time community college students found that community college students who take at least some online courses were 25 percent more likely to earn a degree.

"The students who took online courses early on graduate at significantly higher rates," he said. "Even though their grades were lower, they were still able to navigate their way through and earn a degree."

The California Community College System is trying to do just that, and more, with its ambitious Online Education Initiative.

With $57 million in funding spread out over several years, the state's Online Education Initiative was announced in 2013 and launched the next year with the goal of dramatically increasing the number of students who obtain associate degrees and transfer to four-year colleges. It's hoped that extra technology resources and more centralization will dramatically improve student success rates online.

OEI aims to produce better results by implementing a common course management system for community colleges, providing more and better faculty professional development in online course design and making more student support tools available.

Pat James, the OEI executive director, explained the approach in a recent blog post.

"We...know that students who most need access to education are very often community college students," she wrote. "We also recognize that quality of our online courses has historically been inconsistent, mostly due to lack of sufficient resources. Funding for the Online Education Initiative is used to provide centralized technology resources to both ensure high-quality course offerings and that students are prepared to learn online, while respecting and supporting the significant local-college online education efforts.

Specifically, James wrote, the OEI will address students' needs by:

• Offering an online course exchange through which students can take required classes for credit from other California community colleges if they are not available locally;

• Creating readiness assessments and assistance to help students understand and prepare for the online learning environment; Providing access to 24/7 online tutoring services;

• Building consistent quality of online courses by offering teachers and course designers course design support.

Currently, 24 colleges are involved in the OEI's pilot program, which will run through spring 2016. They are divided into three groups of eight colleges each.

One will focus on the development, delivery, quality assurance and support of online courses, including a Common Course Management System. This group of colleges will be responsible for informing the development and publishing of an online course exchange system where students

from the pilot colleges will be able to enroll in courses offered by the OEI. The first set of courses will be offered this summer.

The second group will focus on revamping student orientation to help students succeed in the online education environment.

Among its tasks: devising assessments that can diagnose a student's readiness to take and succeed in an online course.

The third group is focusing on development of effective online tutoring services for students enrolled in OEI courses. Student tutoring services will be launched inside the exchange system during this fall.

Participation in the initiative, including the course exchange, will be voluntary. Some smaller colleges are hesitant because they fear that by participating, they will lose students to other bigger schools.

In a blog post late last year, James said the concern is valid but urged educators to focus on student success.

"We have always put student learning and progress at the forefront of our work and this not a time to change that!," he said.

Devising effective assessments that can predict how students will perform in an online setting -- and giving them robust support once they get there -- is critical to California's effort, Shea said.

"Community colleges need to address the kind of support that community college students need to succeed at the course level," he said. "It's a huge system, and they need standards and better professional development. But having student support like effective and accessible tutoring is critical."