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Choosing Between Online and Face-to-Face Courses: Community College Student Voices

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Abstract

In continually expanding the supply of online course sections (and potentially curtailing face-to-face offerings), college administrators believe they are serving the needs and demands of their students. Yet researchers have neglected to ask students whether the continued provision of face-to-face courses is important to them. In this study, community college students discussed their experiences with online and face-to-face learning, as well as their reasons for selecting online versus face-to-face sections of specific courses. Students reported that online courses had lower levels of instructor presence and that they thus needed to “teach themselves” in these courses. Accordingly, most students preferred to take only “easy” academic subjects online; they preferred to take “difficult” or “important” subjects face-to-face.

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1. Introduction

Online enrollments¹ have grown rapidly across the past decade in U.S. postsecondary education (Allen & Seaman, 2011). While four-year colleges and universities have certainly embraced this trend, the strongest growth in online learning has occurred in public two-year colleges. These open-access community colleges serve a dual purpose: for academically oriented students, these institutions provide a local, low-cost version of the first two years of a traditional higher education, while for students interested in quickly entering (or re-entering) the labor market, community colleges provide the training necessary for “middle-skill” employment. Community college students tend to be non-traditional in demographic makeup: they are more likely than four-year college students to be 25 or older, to attend school part time, and to be employed full time (Aud et al., 2011, Tables A-39-1, A-45-1 [author calculations]). In order to serve these students’ needs for flexible and convenient scheduling, community colleges have been particularly enthusiastic in the adoption of online learning; by 2007, over 97 percent of two-year colleges offered online courses, compared with 66 percent of all postsecondary institutions in the United States (Parsad & Lewis, 2008).

In order to scale online learning offerings appropriately, community college administrators need a stronger understanding of the demand for online courses among their students. Recent studies in Virginia and Washington State indicate that nearly half of community college students take at least one online course during their first four or five years of enrollment (Jaggars & Xu, 2010; Xu & Jaggars, 2011a). Yet few community college students take all of their courses online. While 22 percent of community college students were enrolled in an online course in 2007–2008, only 3 percent were enrolled in an entirely online degree program (Radford, 2011). Similarly, among students entering Virginia community colleges in the fall of 2008, only 3 percent took all their courses online in their first semester; and throughout their college career, most “online” community college students maintained a mix of online and face-to-face course enrollments (Jaggars & Xu, 2010; Xu & Jaggars, 2011a). It is not clear, however,

¹In this paper, the term online refers to fully-online courses, which incorporate little or no face-to-face classroom time. Thus results may not generalize to hybrid online courses, which incorporate regular face-to-face classroom sessions.

whether students prefer this “mix-and-match” strategy or whether they would prefer to take all their courses online and are simply thwarted by a lack of available offerings. This paper attempts to shed light on this question by examining the reasons why students take some courses online and others face-to-face.

1.1 Previous Work Examining Why Students Choose Online Courses

Several previous surveys and studies have established that convenience and flexibility are key factors that induce both traditional college students and continuing-education students to enroll in online and distance education (Benbunan-Fich & Hitz, 2003; Farris, Haskins, & Yemen, 2003; Hittelman, 2001; Flowers & Cotton, 2003; Kariya, 2003; Noel-Levitz, 2006). For example, a Noel-Levitz survey of students in entirely online programs found that *convenience* was the top factor influencing their decision to enroll in the program, followed closely by *work schedule* and *flexible pacing for completing a program*. Indeed, each of these factors was rated with an average importance above 6.5 on a 7-point scale (Noel-Levitz, 2006).

Despite the flexibility and convenience of online learning, not all students wish to take courses at a distance. Prior to the widespread availability of online coursework, studies of distance education suggested that students preferred the face-to-face learning environment and chose distance education only when necessary for the sake of flexibility and convenience (Klesius, Homan, & Thompson, 1997; Roblyer, 1999; Schlosser & Anderson, 1994; Simonson, 1997). A decade ago, as Internet use and e-learning were becoming somewhat more common, students maintained a preference for face-to-face learning. For example, in a study of executive education program students (Farris et al., 2003), respondents felt that face-to-face classrooms offered a superior instruction format. While most were still at least somewhat interested in taking online courses due to their convenience, respondents fell into two clear camps: (1) approximately one third of students who felt that the convenience of online learning outweighed its disadvantages (2) and the remaining two-thirds. The latter group, the authors summarized,

...asserted that online learning would actually need to offer at least as much learning potential (48 percent), if not more (23 percent), than a traditional classroom setting before they would prefer it and thus, be willing to encounter the negatives (e.g., lack of participant/instructor interactions)

associated with that venue. (Ferris, Haskins, & Yemen, 2003)

Across the past 10 years, qualitative studies have also suggested that some students struggle in online courses, due to factors such as technical problems (Bambara et al., 2009; El Mansour & Mupinga, 2007; Hara & Kling, 1999; Mupinga, Nora, & Yaw, 2006; Navarro & Shoemaker, 2000; Rivera, McAlister, & Rice, 2002; Wang, 2008; Zavarella, 2008), a reduced sense of instructor and peer presence (Bambara et al., 2009; El Mansour & Mupinga, 2007), and difficulties managing the degree of self-directed learning or “learner control” required by many online courses (Piccoli, Ahmad, & Ives, 2001). Moreover, quantitative studies suggest that community college students tend to perform more poorly in online than in face-to-face courses (Xu & Jaggars, 2011a; Xu & Jaggars, 2011b). In the literature, however, it is not clear whether students perceive this decrement in performance—nor if they did, whether it would affect their demand for online versus face-to-face coursework.

1.2 Community Colleges’ Response to Student Demand

During the early years of online growth, many community colleges’ online course conversions tended to be driven by individual interested faculty (Cox, 2006; Levy & Beaulieu, 2003; Threlkeld, 2006), although large community colleges tended to have a stronger strategic plan in terms of which courses to convert to the online format (based on factors such as “high enrollment entry-level courses, specialty curriculum such as nursing or electronics, or areas in which on-campus enrollment was dwindling,”; Threlkeld, 2006, p. 7). As the number of online courses expanded, traditional brick-and-mortar colleges began to see the possibility of cobbling together entirely online degree plans and pushed to fill the remaining course gaps with online offerings. An estimated 81 percent of community colleges now offer at least one degree program in which 70 percent or more of the curriculum is available online (Instructional Technology Council, 2011). However, community colleges continue to struggle in terms of offering career–technical program course requirements online, and rural colleges may find it particularly difficult to offer 100 percent of required courses online (Cejda, 2007; Instructional Technology Council, 2011).

At most community colleges, then, there was an initial effort to make available online at least one section of each key, high-demand requirement course. Having mostly succeeded in that effort, community colleges are now faced with difficult strategic decisions. Most community colleges still believe that student demand for online courses is outpacing the college's supply (Instructional Technology Council, 2011). Yet many colleges have limited resources and cannot continue to expand the supply of online course sections without also reducing the supply of face-to-face course sections. How then should colleges attempt to balance online and face-to-face course offerings?

For example, if a college has the resources to offer only six sections of Introductory U.S. History in a given semester, what mix of offerings would constitute the best match for their student population: one online section and five face-to-face sections, an equal mix of both types, or five online and one face-to-face section? How does that trade-off vary for other courses in different disciplines, such as Introductory Physics or Literature of the Romantic Period? The existing research literature provides little guidance to colleges in terms of which types of courses are a high versus low priority for online conversion and expansion. In this paper, I draw on findings from a qualitative study at two community colleges to examine the types of courses that students prefer to take online versus face-to-face and the reasons underlying those preferences.

2. Method

The data discussed in this paper are drawn from a larger study of online learning, whose methods are discussed in detail in Edgecombe, Barragan, and Rucks-Ahidiana (2013). The research team collected data at two U.S. community colleges in spring 2011, conducting interviews with 46 students who were taking at least one online course in that semester. Respondents were primarily African American or White (reflecting the ethnic makeup of the colleges), and approximately half appeared to be aged 30 or older. Most were attending college full time while also working. Three-quarters had taken an online course in a prior semester, and most reported that they expected to pass their current online course(s).

Semi-structured interview protocols focused on experiences and perceptions related to online learning, particularly on the students' learning experiences in their current online courses. Students were also asked to report why they chose to take each of their current courses in an online versus a face-to-face setting. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. For the current analysis, I developed a preliminary set of codes based on impressions from the interviews in terms of students' reasons for selecting online or face-to-face course sections, including life demands or responsibilities, structural barriers (such as lack of transportation), learning style preferences, interaction with instructors, and interaction with other students. After coding a small set of test transcripts, the codes were slightly refined and expanded. After all transcripts were coded, I organized the final set of codes according to the larger thematic areas laid out in the next section. Quotes included in the next section are presented verbatim, with the occasional excision of verbal fillers (for example, "um" or "you know") when they did not add meaning.

3. Findings

Overall, respondents provided several general reasons to choose online coursework, discussed in more detail below. As expected based on the previous literature, flexibility and convenience were key reasons to take courses online; moreover, a handful of students preferred the learning environment of online learning. Despite these advantages, however, very few respondents wished to take all their courses online. In subsequent sections, I first discuss *general* reasons why students wished to take courses online or face-to-face, and then how those factors played out as students faced the decision to take *particular* courses online versus face-to-face.

3.1 General Reasons to Choose Online Courses

Students cited two broad reasons for taking courses online. First, almost all students appreciated the flexibility and convenience of online courses, and some felt that online courses allowed them to use their learning time more efficiently. In addition to these structural reasons, a few students also felt that online courses were a better match to their own learning style or interpersonal interaction preferences.

Flexibility, convenience, and time efficiency. When asked why they chose to take online courses, almost all respondents explained that they had busy lives with multiple responsibilities and that the flexibility of online learning helped them better balance their schedule. One third of the sample specifically mentioned childcare responsibilities; as one mother said:

I think one thing that influences a full-time working adult to do distance learning is: how much time are you willing to sacrifice away from your family? ... I just left Algebra II last semester, which was two days a week for two hours at night. That was tough. I missed a lot in my son's school and his sports, so it was more of a personal choice when I came back to register for the spring classes. I said, "You know, I think I'm only willing to sacrifice one night a week for school, for my family."

Over 80 percent of the sample also reported working. Interviewers did not specifically probe respondents about the nature of their employment, but as they discussed their reasons for choosing online coursework, more than half of those who were employed explained that they worked full time or longer each week. An additional 11 percent volunteered that they worked overnight shifts, and 8 percent mentioned that they had unpredictable schedules, with work shifts that varied from week to week. Several respondents who worked long or variable hours explained that without the option of online course taking, they would enroll in fewer courses each semester. As one student said,

Unless I only wanted to work part time or quit my job, I felt that [online coursework] was the only way that I was going to get my classes in, unless I wanted to take one or maybe two classes a semester.

Outside of the advantage of flexible scheduling, some students also said that they chose online learning to reduce the number of times they needed to travel to campus. About 20 percent of respondents mentioned transportation issues; most of these involved living a long distance from campus, having no car or sharing a car, or dealing with the price of gasoline. Most respondents also alluded to the comfort of working at home, with

several specifically noting that they enjoyed the ability to take breaks, have snacks, work “in your pajamas,” or avoid venturing outside during the cold winter months.

In addition to the advantages of flexibility, at-home convenience, and reduced travel time, several students said they preferred online courses because they were a more efficient use of their time. These students felt that in-class time was often wasted, sometimes due to the instructor’s choices and sometimes due to other students. For example, one student noted:

Really you have more time [in an online course], 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?”

Another student complained of his face-to-face English instructor: “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.” Students citing such complaints tended to feel that they could learn the material and complete assignments more quickly if they were able to skip the in-class portion of the course. In contrast to this view that online courses were more efficient, however, most other students felt that online courses were more challenging and difficult (for more details, see Bork & Rucks-Ahidiana, 2012), and several noted that they were more time consuming. As one student said, “I thought that distance learning was less time spent on the work, and it’s totally not. If anything you are spending more time on the work, because you have lost that face-to-face interaction.” Another student agreed, noting that there was a balance between time saved in class and time spent in extra work: “It was just a lot more than what would have to be done if I was in a class. So I think that’s the trade-off as far as that time of sitting in the class.” Indeed, of the 10 or so students who made comments to the effect that online courses used time more efficiently, about half also noted that they were equal or more amounts of work. Thus only a handful of students seemed to feel that online courses were a good choice based on inherent time savings.

Learning and interaction preferences. In addition to the structural reasons to choose online learning, several students cited learning- and interaction-oriented factors

that encouraged them to select online courses. Three students explicitly said that they learned course material more effectively in the online context. One explained that the online course materials were “way more valuable than to be sitting in the classroom having someone lecture to me”; the second said, “I just have trouble sitting, being still and listening to somebody for like a long period of time, because I’m kind of ADD.² I can’t stay on one track.” This student felt that it was “better for me to do it at home, because if I get side-tracked, at least I know I’ll come back to it.” And the third said that when she worked online,

I’m not so much distracted by other students. ... And I think the professors definitely, I just like the way they taught. So I don’t know if [online professors] learn the same way, or teach the same way I learn? I enjoy it a lot.

In contrast, most other students seemed to feel that they learned better in face-to-face courses, a theme that will be explored in more detail in subsequent sections.

Finally, some students, particularly older students, noted that they tended to prefer online courses due to the lack of face-to-face interaction with other students. As one older student explained:

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 toward the online classes basically because of, you know, it’s almost like stage fright. I mean being out of school for 20 years and then going back to a classroom, it just kind of scares you. It did me.

A half-dozen students of non-traditional age echoed this theme, with one underlining the fact that

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.”

² *ADD* is a common abbreviation of the term *attention deficit disorder*.

3.2 Why Not Take All Courses Online?

Overall, despite the fact that most students strongly appreciated the flexibility and at-home accommodation that online learning provides, only five students said that they would take all their courses online if they could. Perhaps not coincidentally, three of these students were the same respondents who said they learned better online than in the face-to-face setting, and the fourth was one of the students who felt they could complete coursework significantly more quickly in the online setting. For the fifth student, the overriding benefit of online courses was their flexibility, given that she was a single parent with two children who also worked full time. Given the clear advantages of online coursework, why did the rest of the sample feel it was important to take at least some courses on campus?

General reasons to take courses face-to-face. Students provided two general reasons why they took at least some courses face-to-face: to maintain a connection to the campus and their peers and because of the stronger student–instructor connection inherent in face-to-face courses.

First, several students implied that it was important to maintain a connection to the physical campus or to other students. A few articulated their distaste for purely online colleges with no campus; one student noted that she simply felt more “comfortable” going to a college with a physical campus: “I feel like I can still take online courses, but still have [the campus] here if I have any questions. I have somewhere to come in person to ask questions or whatever.” For others, the importance of the physical campus seemed tied to the importance of a face-to-face connection with other students. Respondents generally agreed that online courses included lower levels of student–student interaction than face-to-face courses—although, as might be evident from the preceding discussion on older students, opinions were mixed as to whether this reduced interaction was a positive, negative, or neutral aspect of online learning. For those who valued interactions with other students, however, the limited student interaction in online courses provided a reason to take at least some courses face-to-face. For example, a student who was attending two colleges (taking online and face-to-face courses from the college under study as well as online courses from another college) explained:

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 chose to come to this school because my peers are here.

Second, almost all students noted that the nature of the student–instructor interaction was more “distant,” less “personal,” less “immediate,” less “detailed,” or less “solid” online. In particular, they missed the direct instruction that they received in face-to-face courses, and many alluded to the notion that without that component, they felt as though they were “teaching themselves.” One student explained,

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.

Other analyses based on the larger study discuss the nature of student–instructor and student–student interaction in more detail (see Bork & Rucks-Ahidiana, 2012; Edgecombe et al., 2012). In this paper, I focus on the impact of these weaker interpersonal connections in terms of students’ decisions to take a particular course online versus face-to-face, as discussed in more detail in the following section.

3.3 Reasons to Take Specific Courses Online Versus Face-to-Face

While students were pulled toward online courses due to their flexibility and convenience (and for some, personal learning preferences), they were also pushed away from online courses due to the weaker instructor presence (and, to a lesser extent, the weaker student–student interaction). Each student had idiosyncratic ways of balancing between these sets of considerations when faced with the choice of whether to take a particular course online or face-to-face. In some cases, there was no choice: A needed course was simply not available face-to-face at a time when the student could attend, and the student thus found it necessary to enroll in an online section. In most cases, however, students made a conscious decision to enroll in a particular course online versus face-to-face, based on three factors specific to the academic subject area: (1) whether the subject

area was well suited to the online context, (2) whether the course was “easy” or “difficult”, and (3) whether the course was “interesting” and/or “important.”

Suitability of the subject area. The first category of courses students preferred to take face-to-face was subject areas that they judged to be poorly suited to online learning. Several students mentioned laboratory science courses in this context. While one respondent enthused about the excellence of the at-home chemistry materials provided through her online course, others were not convinced. As one noted, “It’s kind of like, ‘No, that seems a bit much.’ I don’t want to have a chemistry lab going on in my kitchen.” Some also preferred not to take science courses online because they classified them under the heading of “difficult” courses, as discussed further in the following section.

Students also tended to agree that foreign language courses were not suitable to online learning. Based on students’ explanations, it appeared that language practice in these courses was purely textual, with little opportunity for listening and no opportunity for spoken practice. As one student explained, “When all you do is write your German and type in little prompts, you’re not really learning how to speak it.” Along similar lines, several students felt that public speaking was inappropriate to take online. Although this college’s online public speaking course did provide opportunities for students to perform video-based speeches, one student reported that the video-based speech activities sometimes suffered from technical difficulties and were not sufficient to fully capture the experience of public speaking. She said,

If I really wanted to get something out of the class, I’d want a podium and a live audience. ... I think it would be very good if she did just let us get together a couple times to do our speech. It might be hard for some people, so it may be that she needs to make it a hybrid class and say, “These are certain times when you have to come to class to make your speech,” whether it’s in the middle of a day or at night, like from 6 to 8 or something. That would make me more nervous, [but I would] realize, “well yeah, that’s what it’s all about.” 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.

Course difficulty. Most students reported that they preferred to take courses online only when they thought the subject area would be easy for them; they preferred to take more difficult courses face-to-face. For example, 40 percent of the respondents volunteered that they would prefer not to take a math course online because it would be too difficult. As one student said, “There’s no way I could do algebra online. I’m barely making it through algebra right now, face-to-face, so I know I could not do it online.”

When students cited courses that they would avoid taking online due to the difficulty of the subject area, they consistently alluded to the notion that these were subjects in which they could not “teach themselves.” As one student said,

Sometimes I can teach myself something out of the book, and sometimes I can’t. It just depends on your strengths. I could never teach myself math, it’s not my strong point. I would suffer. But I could probably teach myself, I could probably do history and survive.

Although different students found different subject areas easier or harder, for many students it seemed that the words *easy* and *difficult* were code words for *humanities* versus *math and science*. These respondents tended to provide explanations similar to that of the following student, as she summarized which courses she would take online this semester:

I knew I had to take my math on campus. I knew I couldn’t take it online. And I wanted to have as much credits as I could get this semester, so my advisor told me certain classes I could take. And then she said, “Well these are online,” and I figured that they are mostly reading. Which they are, health is mostly reading. And college composition, it’s reading and writing. I figured I could do those online.

When pressed to explain why they would not take math courses online, students offered explanations such as this one:

Just because with math I would rather be face-to-face. That way I can see what the teacher does, how she does it, and get some more one-on-one help rather than having the material and trying to figure it out for myself.

Another student explained it similarly: “Math, for me personally, I will not get it looking at numbers. I need somebody to stand in front of me and teach me and explain as they go, and let me ask questions.”

Few of the sample reported having a strong aptitude for math or science, but those who did used similar reasoning to explain which courses were easy for them; for example, when asked to explain which courses he would be willing to take online, one said, “It could be something easy, like science is just reading and you’ve got to study. It’s not like you have to actually do work. It’s just facts and definitions, it’s really not hard.”

Overall, students felt that they could “teach themselves” courses if they felt competent to learn the subject matter strictly from a textbook or other readings, with little or no explicit instruction. For more difficult courses, they felt that stronger instructor guidance was necessary. For example, one student explained that “if you took a class you were uncomfortable with” online, then “you wouldn’t have anything to really base it off of, whereas with a teacher being there next to you could really just break it down for you so much better.” Another said,

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 [you] are able to ask questions right then and there.

Students felt that in difficult courses, they needed the immediate question-and-answer context of a face-to-face course. As one student said, “It’s just easier to talk to them about any issues that you’re having face-to-face, rather than emailing somebody who you have no idea who they are, and then waiting for a response, however long it’s going to take.” Another explained that in online courses,

I think that communication barrier is the hardest one. 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.

In general for students across the sample, the weaker student–instructor interaction in the online context was a strong argument against taking difficult courses online. Fewer students alluded to student–student interaction when explaining why they avoided taking difficult courses online; this theme arose only a handful of times. But as one student, who said that she would prefer to take English courses face-to-face, explained:

I guess with English, I'm not really good. I have to read a story probably three or four times before I really grasp what it's about. Where in a classroom you can get different opinions, different ideas, and draw a better conclusion yourself; where [online] I didn't really have that. Yeah, you have the peer review board, but it's not the same as being there like you and I are talking right now.

As a final summary of the problems involved with taking a difficult course online, one student explained:

If you're not comfortable learning the material on your own and teaching yourself, then you should be in class. That's the biggest thing, because even with all the handouts, all the notes, you're the only one that's really holding yourself responsible for the material. And if you find that you have a lot of questions or need another person's point of view on a subject, then it's best to be in class. That way you can have your point of view, the teacher's, and all the comments of the students around you to help support your learning. If you don't need that information and you're really able to pick up on general concepts on your own, then I would say definitely be outside of class. Because some things ... I can pick up general concepts and I don't need to be in class. Others, I need to be in class. So each person has to really look at themselves to figure out, "Is this a good subject for me? Is this not a good subject for me? Does this sound like something I can do on my own?" Because that's really how it is. Even though you can email the teachers, you're really on your own.

Course importance and interest. In terms of the third category of courses that students were reluctant to take online, several respondents said they preferred to take "important" courses (including courses in their academic major) or "interesting" subjects face-to-face. For example, one student said that she had initially signed up for a particular

course online, “But 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.” As these students discussed why they preferred to take such courses face-to-face, they consistently stressed the importance of instructor presence. For example, a student said she preferred taking psychology courses face-to-face because “I think I could learn so much more, 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 few students also added that, in addition to the instructor’s presence, the presence of other students was important in these particular courses. One student explained:

The class I’m taking this evening is not offered distance, just because it can’t. It’s a group therapy class and you’ve got to be there with other classmates, and you need a teacher. And he relies a lot on his day-to-day experiences and relaying them to the class. There would be a lot that would be missed if it were given as a distance class.

Another student, referring to an English literature course, said:

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. ... I have Shakespeare Histories and Comedies, I can’t imagine doing that online, because there is so much there to discuss and interpret. And then just to see your teacher’s opinion and know your opinion, it seems like a bit of a loss [to take a literature course online].

4. Discussion and Conclusion

In weaving together students’ perspectives on course-specific and subject-specific reasons to select online versus face-to-face sections, there seemed to be a strong underlying pattern: Most students felt they did not learn the course material as well when they took it online. For most students, this deficit was due to reduced teacher explanation and interaction; for some respondents, the weaker student–student interaction was also

problematic. As a result, students did not want to risk taking difficult courses online and preferred the richer experience of the face-to-face classroom when learning about subjects they felt were particularly interesting or important.

In a companion paper, Edgecombe et al. (2013) provided detailed examples of online interactive technology that students found compelling and laid out recommendations for colleges in terms of how to implement such technologies on a consistent and effective basis. The findings of the current paper suggest that, without such improvements, student demand for online learning may increase in introductory humanities courses and other subject areas that are generally regarded as “easy”—that is, courses that are primarily reading-based and require little hands-on application. However, until online instruction and interaction is improved to better approximate the richness of a face-to-face course, there is unlikely to be a high level of student demand for online math, science, and advanced topic-area courses.

The results of this paper also suggest more specific implications for two types of subject area courses: language-oriented courses and mathematics courses. Until colleges are able to vastly improve their implementation of interactive technology, language and speaking courses should perhaps be offered only in face-to-face or hybrid modalities. In terms of mathematics, instructional software (which was incorporated into most of these online courses) may eventually be equally or more helpful than a teacher’s direct instruction and real-time responses, but it seems that time has not yet come. This qualitative observation appears to be supported by the fact that community college students perform more poorly in math when they take the subject online (Xu & Jaggars, 2011b; Xu & Jaggars, 2011c). Until instructional software can more closely approximate student–instructor interactions, institutions may wish to limit their sections of online mathematics and take care to inform potential online students that they are more likely to perform well in a face-to-face section. Institutions can also strengthen this recommendation by enforcing a prerequisite for online math courses based on the student’s previous math course grades or score on a math achievement exam.

In recent years, as Internet-based technologies such as social network services and mobile “apps” have exploded in terms of innovation, sophistication, ease of use, and integration into users’ daily lives, e-learning proponents have increasingly asserted that

online learning now provides an equivalent or superior learning experience to the face-to-face setting. The results of this paper suggest that such assertions are too broadly stated, at least for some postsecondary settings. While it is important to respect and accommodate the flexibility needs of busy students by offering online options, it is clear that the majority of students still prefer to take many types of courses in the face-to-face setting. Accordingly, colleges need to take care to avoid curtailing the availability of face-to-face course sections, particularly in academically challenging or advanced areas of study.

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