The Promising Role Of Hybrid Learning In Community Colleges: Looking Towards The Future

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ABSTRACT

In 2014, community colleges are overcrowded, underfunded, and serve a diverse population. Community colleges are looking for innovative ways to meet the growing demands of their nontraditional student body on a shrinking budget. Increasing their online offerings appeared to be a perfect solution. Unfortunately, research has shown that community college students do not fare well in online classes. However, the same research shows that community college students do as well in hybrid classes as they do in face-to-face classes.

Hybrid classes are a mix of online and face-to-face instruction. Although hybrid classes are not as flexible as online courses and do utilize some campus facilities, they offer a promising alternative to traditional face-to-face classes. The following is a discussion of hybrid learning in the community college setting.

Keywords: Community Colleges; Hybrid Learning; Hybrid Classes

INTRODUCTION

*I*n 2014, community colleges are overcrowded, underfunded, and serve a diverse population. Presently, forty-five percent of all undergraduates attend community colleges. In 2011 approximately 400,000 students were unable to enroll in community colleges due to overcrowding. The California Community College system alone estimates that it will have to 'reluctantly' turn away 129,000 students in the 2013-2014 school year.

The state funding per student in community colleges has increased only $1 since 2009. Furthermore, the average state appropriation for public community college students is much lower than for public bachelor degree students. In 2013, the average state appropriation was $4,209, per public community college student and $12,611 per public bachelor degree student.

The community college population is quite diverse. Approximately sixty percent of all community college students need remediation. The average age of a community college student is 28. Sixteen percent of community college students are single parents. Another fifty-nine percent of community college students attend part time.

In light of the aforementioned facts, in recent years community colleges have been looking for innovative ways to meet the growing demands of their non-traditional student body on a shrinking budget. One highly promising approach was to offer a greater percentage of courses in the format of online classes. As online classes do not utilize any campus facilities, it was initially viewed with great enthusiasm, representing a cost-effective solution that promised to address the educational needs of community college students. Moreover, educators reasoned that the flexibility of online classes would be very appealing to community college students who are often juggling school, work, and family. Unfortunately, research has shown that community college students do not fare as well in

online classes as in traditional course venues. However, this same research suggested that community college students do as well in hybrid classes as they do in face- to- face classes.

Hybrid classes are a mix of online and face-to-face instruction. Generally, the online portion is between 30 and 79 percent of the total class schedule. Although hybrid classes are not as flexible as online courses and do utilize some campus facilities, they offer a promising alternative to traditional face-to-face classes. The following is a discussion of hybrid learning in the community college setting.

COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS DO NOT FARE WELL IN ONLINE CLASSES

In April 2013, the Community College Research Center of Columbia University released a research overview, "What We Know About Online Course Outcomes." The overview was the culmination of research conducted over a five-year period at two large community college systems. The results indicated that community college students do not do as well in online courses as they do in face-to-face courses.

The research yielded the following results:

- Students who enrolled in online classes were typically more academically prepared, from higher socioeconomic groups and more fluent in English than the average community college student.
- Students were more likely to withdraw from or fail online courses. The withdrawal/failure rates were 8% to 13% higher in the online classes than they were in the face-to-face classes.
- Students enrolled in developmental courses were even more likely to withdraw from or fail remedial classes. The withdrawal/ failure rate was 11% to 19% higher for developmental math and 24% to 27% higher for developmental English in online classes than they were in face-to-face classes.
- Controlling for student economic and educational characteristics increased the withdrawal/failure rates.
- Students who completed online courses performed more poorly than students in face-to-face classes. Students in online courses were 3% to 6% less likely to earn a C or better than students in face-to-face classes.
- Students who took online courses were 4% to 5% less likely to return for the subsequent semester.
- Students who took a higher percentage of classes online were 4% to 6% less likely to obtain a degree or transfer to a four-year program.

RESEARCH SUPPORTS EXPANSION OF HYBRID LEARNING IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Community College Research Center of Columbia University has completed the largest and most comprehensive research study of hybrid learning in community colleges. The study results which were released in March 2011 contain compelling support for the expansion of hybrid course offerings in community colleges.

The five-year study conducted between 2004 and 2009, tracked hybrid learning across the Washington State Community College system. The study was comprised of 34 community or technical colleges in the Washington State System. In all, 51,017 degree seeking students were tracked for 19 quarters. Hybrid courses were defined in the study as courses that were fifty one percent or more online.

In particular, the study found that the students who enrolled in hybrid classes had the same baseline characteristics as the community college population as a whole and that these students did equally as well in hybrid courses as they did in face-to-face courses.

In their paper entitled, "Online and Hybrid Enrollment and Performance in Washington State Community and Technical Colleges" Di Xu and Shanna Smith Jaggers concluded, ". . . in this study, we did not find any consistent differences between hybrid and face-to-face completion rates, suggesting that hybrid courses may pose fewer challenges for students. . ."

HYBRID LEARNING PROVIDES COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS VALUABLE BENEFITS AND SKILLS

Hybrid learning may be particularly attractive to community college students who are often juggling school, work, and family. Hybrid learning reduces the number of classroom hours, so commuting time and cost is lessened. Hybrid learning is more flexible in that the online portion can be done anytime and anywhere. Additional research has found that hybrid learning is more time efficient. A research study conducted at Northern Arizona University found that hybrid-format students took about one-quarter less time to achieve essentially the same learning outcomes as traditional-format students.

Professors at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee found that "The combination of online and traditional classroom instruction fosters a more objective-focused and time-efficient course . . ." Research has shown that hybrid learning venues provide a plethora of academic benefits including enhancement of computer, writing, and time management skills. Hybrid learning enhances writing skills in that all hybrid classes are in fact writing intensive classes. The online portion of the class requires extensive writing regardless of the subject matter. Additionally, professors can create online assignments that more effectively replicate real working world scenarios.

Professor Rachel Spilka, a business writing teacher at the University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee, found that she was able to create more effective writing assignments in her hybrid class. "I had never before been able to elicit from the students the kind of high quality analysis and thinking that I could from my hybrid students through this new way of teaching. Students working online learn to explain their thoughts more completely, and some clearly gain a certain analytical distance from their initial ideas. As a result, these students produced much more thoughtful, tactful, and sensitive memos, letters, and reports than have students in my traditional, face-to-face classes."

Hybrid classes improve students' computer skills. In hybrid classes students must use a computer operating system to fulfill the course requirements. Professor Thomas Gould of Durham Technical Community College has found that, "Hybrids train students in a variety of computer skills including file management, email use, and website navigation that will prove valuable in the workplace."

Research has shown that community college students experience a high level of frustration with operating systems in online courses. Technical difficulties with online courses cause stress that can affect student retention. Online community college students frequently expressed frustration with system failures and their own lack of computer skills. In addition, online community college students reported difficulty with navigating course management systems and following the material on the screen. In a small study of online remedial math students in a Florida community college the researchers found the 70% of the students who withdrew from online courses cited computer based technology issues.

Frustration with operating systems and technology issues in general are significant barriers to success for community college students in fully online classes. The face-to-face portion of a hybrid class can help students navigate the operating system and troubleshoot technological issues to mitigate this barrier to online success.

Students hone their time management skills and independent learning strategies in hybrid classes. Ruth Reynard, Associate Professor of Education and the Director of the Center for Instructional Technology at Trevecca Nazarene University, has researched hybrid learning for many years. She believes that well designed hybrid course increases learner autonomy, "In a hybrid model that maximizes student self-direction, content choice and organization, and heightened interaction, students become central to their own learning processes. This, in turn, increases autonomous learning skills and students become more aware of how they learn, what they want to learn, and how they need to apply their learning to their own lives or professional contexts."

Thomas Gould of Durham Technical Community College believes that the benefits of hybrid courses include the development of time management skills, critical thinking skills, and comprehension skills. Gould states, "To succeed in hybrid classes, students will necessarily develop or enhance time management skills crucial to academic and professional success. Critical thinking skills and problem solving skills are also emphasized."

Research conducted at the University of Central Florida by Charles Dziuban, Joel Hartman, and Patsy Moskal found that hybrid courses require students to be self-motivated learners with effective time management skills. The researchers concluded that "The combination of pedagogical methods seeks to encourage an active, engaged learning environment."

HYBRID LEARNING PROVIDES IMPORTANT BENEFITS FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Hybrid learning may reduce the burden on campus facilities in the extremely overcrowded community colleges. Research at the University of Central Florida found that hybrid courses allowed the university to offer more classes at peak demand times of the day. After hybrid classes were introduced, the university was able to schedule two or three course sections in the same classroom where only one could be scheduled in the traditional on-site classroom format.

Hybrid courses also reduce paper and photocopying costs as all course documents are available on the class website, eliminating the need for in-class handouts. For example, the Ontario College system found that hybrid learning decreased classroom utilization and reduced the need for parking, printed materials, and textbooks.

Community College administrators faced with increasing enrollments and decreasing or stagnant budgets are increasingly looking to hybrid learning to maximize existing resources. Ron Bleed, the Vice Chancellor of Information Technologies at Maricopa Community College, has stated, "Hybrid learning may be the only way colleges and universities can keep up with continuing population growth and the demand for lifelong learning."

HYBRID LEARNING IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES SHOULD BE EXPANDED

Research has shown that hybrid learning is beneficial to both community colleges and, more importantly, to their students. Presently, hybrid courses make up a small percentage of community college online offerings. In the 2012 Distance Education Survey, "Trends in eLearning –Tracking the Impact of eLearning at Community Colleges," respondents reported that hybrid courses make up 14% of their total online course offerings. Thus, there clearly appears to be room for expansion of hybrid learning course offerings at community colleges. Furthermore, there is strong support for hybrid learning among the leaders of community colleges.

Linda Thor, Chancellor of the Foothill-De Anza Community College in California echoed the sentiments of many of the leaders of community colleges when she stated, "I'm increasingly convinced that blending online and face-to-face learning, when done in a well-integrated fashion that capitalizes on the advantages of each, offers a practical and effective way to meet the learning needs and expectations of the multiple generations of students who populate our colleges."

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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<u>NOTES</u>