

The Effectiveness of Distance Education
in California Community Colleges

By

Clay Rooks

10 February 2007

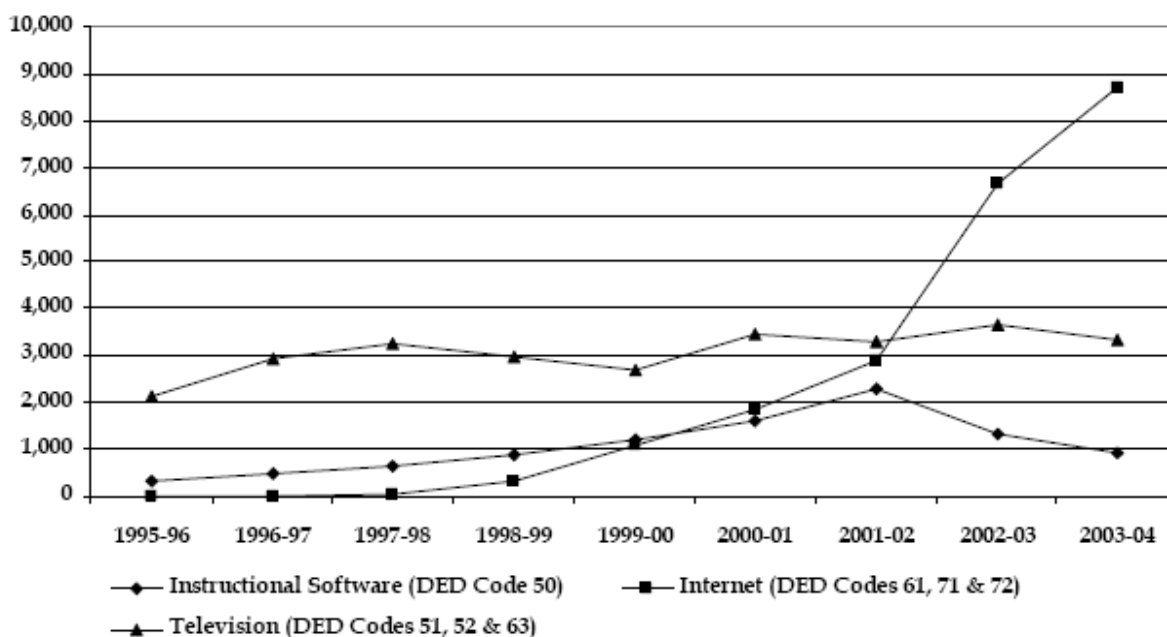
The California Community College system is the largest in the world, serving over 2.5 million students at over 100 colleges. It also has a reputation for being one of the most innovative. According to the Educational Services Division of the California Community College Systems Office, in order “to meet changing state demographics and address the educational needs of the students served by this system, more and more community colleges are offering courses through distance education (DE)” (i).

Some believe distance education to be a recent innovation, but as Dr. Farhad Saba, Professor of Educational Technology at San Diego State University, explains in his article “Distance Education: An Introduction,” “Distance education is not a new phenomenon; it has been a mode of teaching and learning for countless individuals for at least a hundred years (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Before the widespread use of electronic communications, educators used print technology, and the postal service for what became known as correspondence education.” The idea isn’t new; it is the delivery system that has changed.

The innovation in distance education that has made it a recent, wide spread phenomenon is teaching by electronic media. The Management Information Services (MIS) office of the Educational Services Division in Distance Education Report: Fiscal Years 1995-96 through 2003-04 defines four categories of distance education delivery systems: Distance Education, Delayed Interaction; Distance Education, Simultaneous Interaction; Distance Education, Passive Medium; Distance Education, Internet-based (see appendix for complete definitions), which they group into three types of course delivery: Instructional Software, Television, and Internet. According to the Fresno City College website, the State Center Community College District (SCTCCD) uses two types of distance education delivery systems: videoconferencing (which is live) and online instruction (which is asynchronous).

The MIS office has been tracking the trend in distance education teaching since 1995 after regulations were adopted by the Board of Governors allowing California community colleges, “to explore and develop educational initiatives using advanced communication and computing technologies to address student access issues related to geographical, cultural, or facility barriers” [and they] “established a Distance Education Technical Advisory Committee to evaluate the status of DE [distance education] in the system” (iii). What the research has shown is that in the year 2000, Internet and web-based course delivery surpassed television and telecourses, then grew phenomenally, increasing 189% (5,715 course sessions) between 2001 and 2004. Internet and web-based courses are now the preferred method of distance education by far in the California Community College system.

Chart 4
Comparison of Three Types of Distance Education Courses by MIS Code
 1995-2004



(Distance Education Report, page 9)

This trend seems to be accelerating at an even faster rate as the “Student Survey Statewide Results--Spring 2005,” published on the Chancellor’s Office website reports that of 5,180 distance education students surveyed, 92% (4,778) said they were presently enrolled in a online or web-based distance education class.

However, the major debate regarding distance education has not been which delivery system to use, but whether or not distance education is as effective as classroom, face-to-face education. This concern still generates controversy in some educational circles, but as instructors have learned to adapt their courses to the distance education environment, the research is showing that distance education is not inferior to face-to-face teaching, it is just different, and today’s students seem to be comfortable with electronic media and instruction.

According to Charlotte Thomas, Career and Education Editor for Peterson’s, in her article, “Online or Face to Face: Which is the Better Way to “Talk”?”

Comparing face-to-face and online communication, Frank Mayadas, Program Director at the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation's Asynchronous Learning Networks..., observes that in a conversation with someone in the same room, facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice certainly add to the connection. On the flip side, he notes that participants in an online conversation can reflect about what they want to say before replying. "They never have to give off-the-cuff answers," he contends. This benefits shy people or those who like thinking before speaking. People who would ordinarily dominate classroom discussions can't readily do so when discussing topics on line.

The dynamic between instructor and student changes in the distance education environment. While it is true that the face-to-face interaction is lost in distance education classes, most, if not all distance education classes and instructors require each student to respond to electronic class discussion, which is counted as participation. In most classrooms, a student needs to simply be present, some never utter a word, but in distance education classes each student must respond to the discussion. "Online students have very spirited discussions when the professor puts up a question, and everyone is required to participate," says [Jeff] Edwards, [Director of Marketing at Western Governor's University]. Distance students might be scattered geographically but their professors seem to maintain closer contact with them and talk to them on a more regular basis than they would with the students in a classroom setting," writes Thomas.

The instructor/student relationship shifts in another important way with distance education instruction:

The assumption is that in distance education, the instructors are removed from the experience. But just the opposite also can be true, says [Mary Beth] Almeda, [Director of the Center for Media and Independent Learning at the University of California Extension in Berkeley]. "In the distance education model, it's more of a tutorial relationship, which is especially true for print-based distance learning," she states. In addition, outside professionals can be electronically brought in to offer their expertise, explains Thomas.

The true test of the effectiveness of distance education is performance. There is no doubt that distance education has become popular. According to the Educational Services

Division, “Distance education continues to grow to include more course sessions, more students and more services” (iii) [and distance education] “course sessions have sustained an average growth rate of 23% during the nine year period [1995-2004]” (v). In 2003-04 215,459 students took distance education classes of the 13,346 course sessions offered in California’s community colleges. Of these, 7,264 course sessions were asynchronous Internet-based, followed by 2,708 telecourses, followed by 908 computer-assisted course sessions. Other methods rounded out the total offerings (v-vi).

As the success and value of distance education instruction has grown, more and more institutions have been adding full degree or certificate programs for distance learners, making these programs more accessible. By 2003-04, forty-one (41) California community college campuses reported offering degrees or certificates through distance education courses.

The explanation for the growth and popularity of distance education courses, according to student satisfaction surveys, is “convenience, followed by the need to fulfill requirements for an associate degree or transfer” (vi). According to the surveys, 90% of the students strongly agreed or agreed that they would take another distance education course and 90% also strongly agreed or agreed that the community colleges should offer more distance education courses (42). Another, perhaps unanticipated, benefit of distance education is its accessibility and flexibility for disabled students. One important group of students enrolled in distance education courses at California community colleges is disabled students, and the benefits are impressive. Nine categories of disabled learners are listed in the Educational Services Division report including: Acquired Brain Injury, Developmentally Delayed, Hearing Impaired, Learning Disabled, Mobility Impaired, Other Disabled, Psychological Disabled, Speech/Language Impaired, and Visually Impaired. In every single category from 1995 to 2004, enrollments and

completion rates have steadily risen. Complete rates for disabled students taking distance education classes average almost 50%.

Students are not the only ones attracted to distance education. Faculty surveys in the Educational Services Division report also show a rapidly growing acceptance of distance education classes, especially online classes. The most common reasons given for teaching distance education classes were convenience to the students (26%) and to expand student learning opportunities (20%) (45). However, teaching distance education classes are not necessarily easier. “Eighty percent of faculty found that they spent more time developing a lesson plan for a technology-mediated course. Relative to the faculty members’ perception of the frequency of one-on-one communication with students in distance education, 45 percent felt they spend much more time with their distance education students...” (45). As for retention and success among distance education students, “Forty-six percent of the faculty perceived the retention rate of distance education students to be about the same as their on-campus counterparts,” [and] “when considering the distance education student’s performance compared to a classroom-based student, 59 percent of the faculty respondents felt the performance was about the same, while 31 percent viewed the student’s performance as being better than their classroom-based counterpart” (45). As would be expected, the majority of faculty teaching distance education courses teach online or web-based classes (88%) (46).

Over half of the faculty surveyed identified five major “significant” or “somewhat” significant barriers to student success which were highlighted by the faculty surveys: inadequate technology skills, inadequate technical support, inadequate language skills, lack of student motivation, and lack of student time management skills (46). Whereas these are worthy of concern, arguably, only “inadequate technology skills” and “inadequate technical support” are

unique to the distance education environment. Overall, the faculty survey results are positive and predict a growing distance education acceptance and presence in California community colleges.

Institutional surveys also tend to show that distance education will become more popular and more prominent in community college education. In fiscal year 2002-03, 88 of 90 community college locations that responded indicated that they offer distance education courses in some form. Yet several challenges face those institutions that wish to implement distance education courses and programs. According to the Educational Services Division report, "Start-up costs for distance education courses continue to be ranked as higher in all cost categories than comparative costs for traditional modes of instruction. However, once implemented, the institutions find the replacement costs of distance education to be about the same as the comparative traditional modes of instruction" (29).

Faculty training is another concern when implementing distance education classes and programs. Few campuses have the ability or means to train their own faculty to handle the challenges of teaching with technology. "The primary mode of training faculty in the institutions continues to be based on the faculty's own initiative, either through seminars or courses followed by faculty receiving training through the California Virtual Campus (CVC) program" (29). However, the CVC program is now impacted and it is difficult to get the training necessary. Some campuses, like Fresno City College of the State Center Community College District, are striking out on their own and are setting up programs to train faculty. According to Don Lopez, Director of Technology at Fresno City College, FCC plans to have a program in place by fall of 2007. A set of courses specifically geared to training faculty to teach distance education classes on Blackboard is being developed.

However, despite any difficulties, it is clear that distance education, especially online courses, is the wave of the future in community college education in California and, since California is a leader in educational innovation, in the rest of the nation as well. The research shows that distance education can be as successful as face-to-face classes in many instances, students like distance education classes and completion rates are good, faculty are moving more and more toward accepting distance education as a viable alternative to the classroom and are receiving training to teach online classes, and institutions are willing to spend their resources to provide distance education courses and programs.

Distance education is becoming an effective alternative to traditional classroom education. The Educational Services Division report sums up the research findings succinctly, “Distance education [in California community colleges] continues to grow to include more course sessions, more students and more services” (iii). As educators our challenge is to make distance education a viable choice, another opportunity, for our students so they can continue to achieve and succeed.

Works Cited

- Chancellor's Office. "Student Survey Statewide Results—Spring 2005." California Community Colleges. 2007. 3 Feb. 2007 < <http://www.cccco.edu/division.tris/mis/reports.htm> >
- "Comparison of Three Types of Distance Education Courses by MIS Code." Chart 4. Distance Education Report: Fiscal Years 1995-96 through 2003-04. System Office, California Community Colleges, 2005.
- Educational Services Division. Distance Education Report: Fiscal Years 1995-96 through 2003-04. System Office, California Community Colleges, 2005.
- Lopez, Don. Personal interview. 2 Feb. 2007.
- Moore, Michael, and Greg Kearsley. Distance Education: A System's View. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1996.
- "Online/Distant Education." Fresno City College. 2007. 1 Feb. 2007 < <http://www.fresnocitycollege.edu/online/index.asp> >
- Saba, Farhad. "Distance Education: An Introduction." 3 Feb. 2007. < <http://www.distance-educator.com/intro.htm> >
- Thomas, Charlotte. "On Line or Face-to-Face: Which is the Better Way to "Talk"?" Peterson's.com 3 Feb. 2007 < <http://www.petersons.com/distancelearning/code/articles/distancelearnface7.asp> >

Appendix:

MIS Definitions for Distance Education Delivery Methods

After July 1, 2002

Distance Education, Delayed Interaction (Code converted as follows)

Current Code 50 (Previously Code 30) Session under supervision of instructor not available by line-of-sight using medium where the content varies depending upon student response without the immediate involvement of the instructor (e.g., various types of instructional software, computer assisted instruction; digitized visual, audio or text selected in response to student input; or specially structured audio tapes, web-enhanced television, etc.)

Distance Education, Simultaneous Interaction (DED code remains the same)

Session under supervision of instructor not available by line-of-sight using medium that provides an immediate opportunity for exchange between participants (any technology that allows immediate two-way interaction, e.g., satellite, video conferencing)

- 51 Two-way interactive video and audio
- 52 One-way interactive video and two-way interactive audio
- 53 Two-way interactive audio only
- 54 Other simultaneous interactive medium not coded above

Distance Education, Passive Medium (DED codes were converted as follows:)

Session under supervision of instructor not available by line-of-sight using one-way medium where the medium used precludes simultaneous interaction.

- Current 61 (Previously Code 60) Text one-way (e.g., newspaper, correspondence, etc.)
- Current 62 (Previously Code 70) Audio one-way (e.g., audio cassette, radio, etc.)
- Current 63 (Previously Code 80) Video one-way (e.g., ITV, video cassette, etc.)
- Current 64 (Previously Code 81) Other passive medium not coded above

Distance Education, Internet-based (DED Codes newly established)

- 71 Simultaneous Interaction: Session under supervision of instructor not available by line-of-sight using the Internet with immediate opportunity for exchange between participants.
- 72 Delayed Interaction: Session under supervision of instructor not available by line-of-sight using the Internet without the immediate involvement of the instructor.