PRESS RELEASE

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Student Demand for Online Courses May Not Be as Strong as Colleges Think, New Study Finds

NEW YORK, NY (April 25, 2013) - Most community colleges believe that student demand for fully online courses is outpacing the college's supply, but a new study suggests that colleges may be overestimating students' desire for more online learning, particularly in certain subjects.

The study, from the Community College Research Center at Columbia University's Teachers College, interviewed dozens of students who had taken at least one online course at two community colleges. Few students—at these colleges and nationally—take all their classes online: most maintain a mix-and-match of online and face-to-face courses. The researchers set out to understand whether students preferred this strategy, or if they were inhibited from taking more online courses because of limited availability.

The study found that while students appreciated the flexibility of online learning, most would not want to take all their classes online. Students indicated they valued the more intimate connection with teachers and fellow students offered in traditional classrooms.

Students had very clear reasons for choosing to take courses online or face-to-face. They reported that they only took courses online if they felt they could learn the material on their own: If they expected a course to be difficult, or "really wanted to learn something," they preferred face-to-face courses. Students often equated "difficult" with science and math courses, and many mentioned a reluctance to take these subjects online.

Students indicated a strong preference for a traditional classroom when taking courses they considered interesting or important, particularly those in their major. They also felt that certain subjects, such as languages, public speaking and counseling, were particularly unsuited to the online setting.

The study suggests that overall, many students feel they don't learn course material as well online, and that this deficit is due to reduced teacher explanation and interaction in online courses. Without substantial improvements in online teacher-student interaction, it is likely that students will continue to prefer face-to-face courses in subjects they perceive as more challenging or incompatible with the online format.

Community college administrators are working within constrained budgets and, as the study's author argues, these results suggest that an expansion of online courses may not benefit students if it requires a concomitant decrease in face-to-face offerings. While students appear to welcome the option of taking courses online, they may feel less well-served if online classes are offered as a replacement to traditional courses.

For more information, and to read the complete study, please visit http://bit.ly/13xgMab.

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