Withdrawal Survey Report

Fall 2011

Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness

Introduction

Success rates are generally lower in college credit classes taught via distance learning versus traditional classes taught live in a classroom. In the 2010-11 academic year, among courses with at least one online and one traditional section scheduled during the same term, credit classes taught in a pure online format had a success rate of only 68%, as compared to a 76% success rate for the traditional format.

A closer look reveals that much of this difference can be found in the withdrawal rates. Sixteen percent of online class attempts resulted in withdrawals, compared to only 11% for their live-taught counterparts.

Concerned with this differential attrition rate, Palm Beach State College launched a survey in Fall 2010 to determine why students withdrew from their classes. This report summarizes the responses given in the Fall, 2011 term.

Methodology

The survey was administered online to students between August 22 and November 28, 2011, as part of the withdrawal process. Students were permitted to submit a survey for each class from which they were withdrawing. Participation was voluntary. A total of 2,263 valid responses were recorded in credit and college preparatory classes, including 1,847 in classroom and web enhanced classes, 378 in pure online classes and 60 in classroom/online hybrid classes.

Students first were asked to give the primary reason for their withdrawal from a list of 13 pre-coded reasons, followed by any other reasons that contributed to the withdrawal. Respondents were given the opportunity to write additional reasons aside from those listed. Open-ended responses were scanned for text that could be edited back to pre-coded responses.

Discussion

Survey results showed some difference between online and traditional students in their reasons for course withdrawal. Online students were more inclined to cite work responsibilities, falling behind in assignments and internet/computer issues as reasons for withdrawing from courses. Traditional students indicated more problems with instructors and getting to campus than online students. Online students provided an average of 2.0 reasons for withdrawal, whereas traditional students, an average of 1.7 reasons.

Results

Reasons for course withdrawal, total sample

As shown in Figure 1 below, respondents as a whole gave four reasons - work responsibilities (24%), family responsibilities (23%), falling behind in assignments (21%), and class difficulty (19%) - most frequently as either primary or secondary reasons.

Figure 1
Reasons for course withdrawal
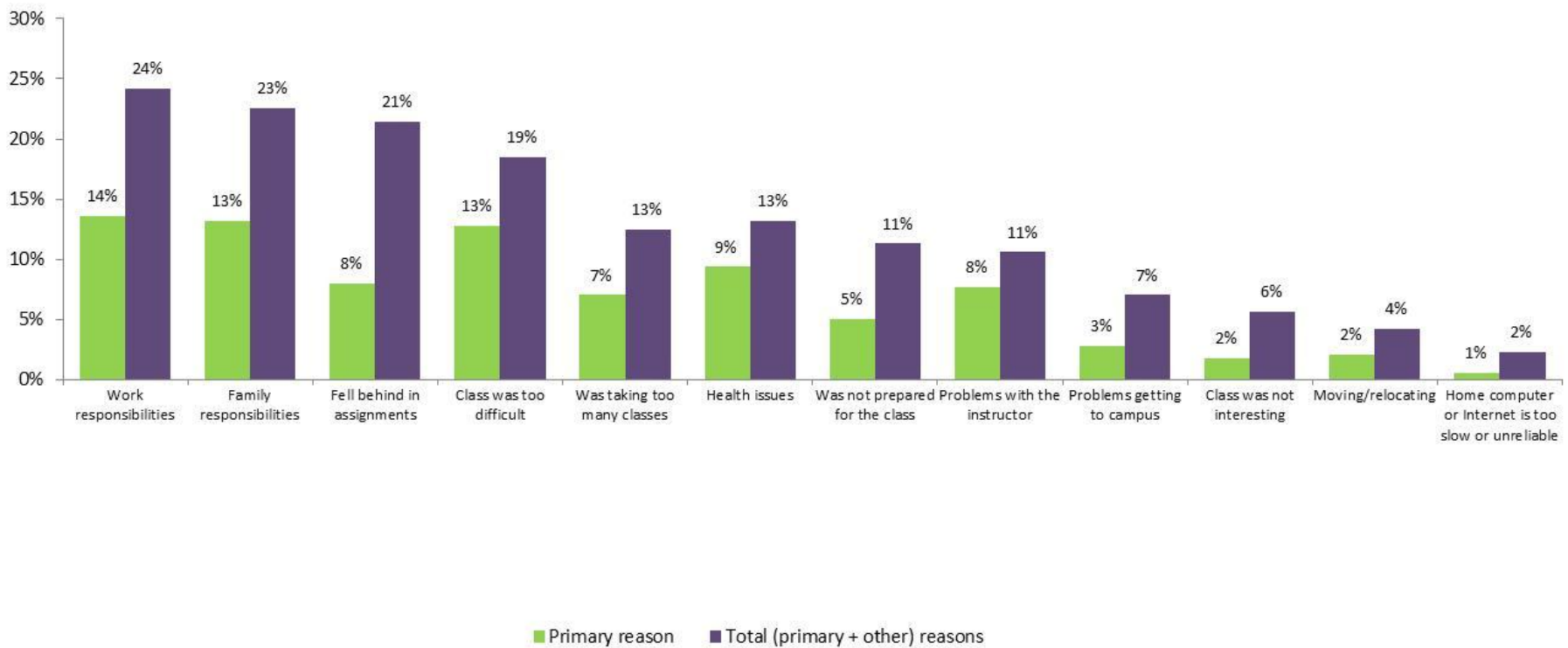
Reasons for course withdrawal, contrasting online and traditional classes

Figure 2 shows four reasons—work responsibilities, falling behind in assignments, computer or Internet speed and other home computer/internet problems—that were cited more often by students taking pure online classes than those in traditional classes.

Figure 2

Total reasons for course withdrawal noted more often by online students
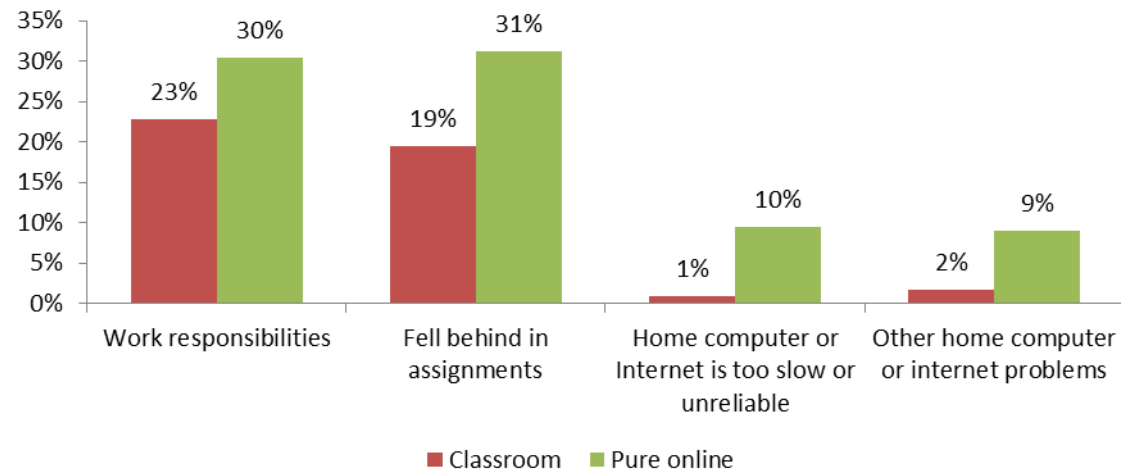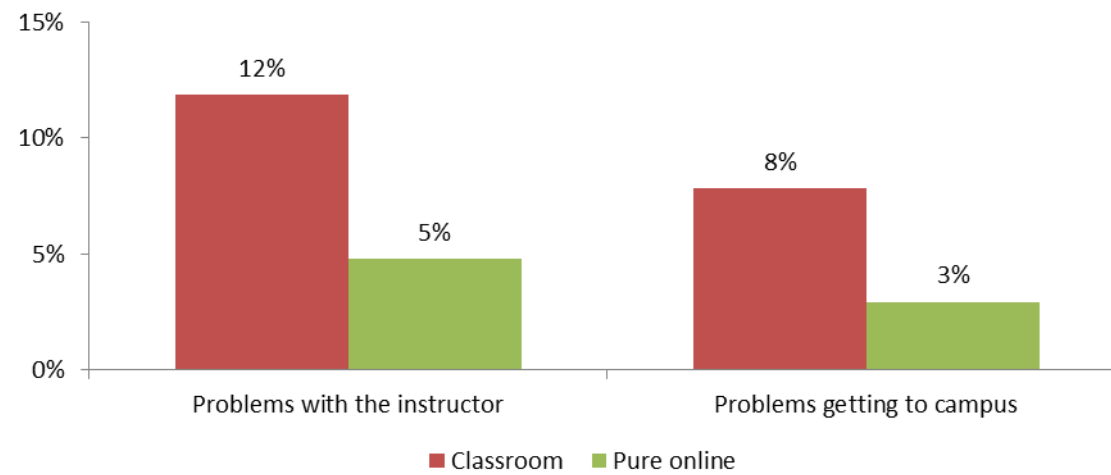
Figure 3 show two reasons—problems with instructor and problems getting to campus—that were cited more often by students taking traditional classes than those in online classes.

Figure 3

Total reasons for course withdrawal noted more often by traditional students

Average number of reasons cited for course withdrawal

As shown in Figure 4, online students also were somewhat more likely to list multiple reasons for withdrawing. On average, online students listed 2.0 reasons for withdrawal, as compared to 1.7 reasons for students in a classroom setting. Note that the base for this question is 1.0—all respondents had to give at least one reason for withdrawing.

Figure 4
Average number of reasons for withdrawal
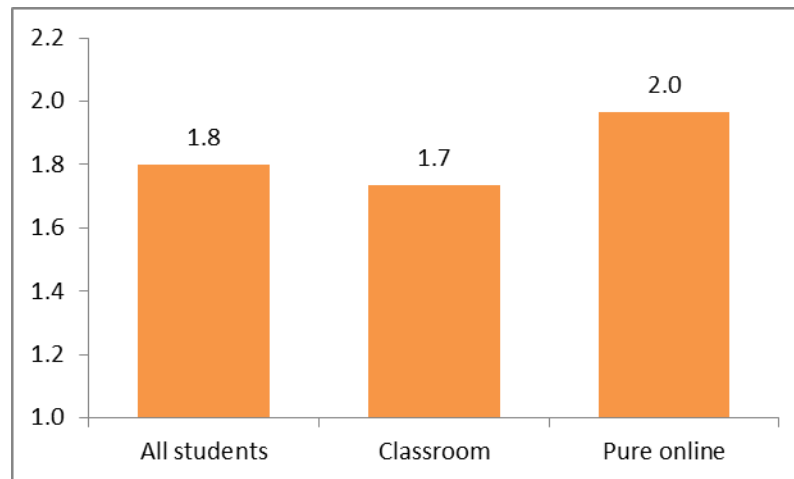
Tabled responses – Table 1

	All students				Classroom				Pure online			
	Total		Primary		Total		Primary		Total		Primary	
Work responsibilities	548	24.2%	308	13.6%	420	22.7%	252	13.6%	115	30.4%	52	13.8%
Family responsibilities	510	22.5%	299	13.2%	388	21.0%	229	12.4%	65	17.2%	65	17.2%
Fell behind in assignments	486	21.5%	181	8.0%	360	19.5%	135	7.3%	118	31.2%	44	11.6%
Class was too difficult	419	18.5%	290	12.8%	363	19.7%	249	13.5%	51	13.5%	37	9.8%
Was taking too many classes	283	12.5%	159	7.0%	227	12.3%	131	7.1%	53	14.0%	25	6.6%
Health issues	298	13.2%	212	9.4%	230	12.5%	172	9.3%	63	16.7%	35	9.3%
Was not prepared for the class	256	11.3%	115	5.1%	213	11.5%	92	5.0%	42	11.1%	23	6.1%
Problems with the instructor	240	10.6%	174	7.7%	219	11.9%	162	8.8%	18	4.8%	11	2.9%
Problems getting to campus	159	7.0%	63	2.8%	144	7.8%	60	3.2%	11	2.9%	2	0.5%
Class was not interesting	128	5.7%	41	1.8%	111	6.0%	39	2.1%	15	4.0%	1	0.3%
Moving/relocating	95	4.2%	47	2.1%	69	3.7%	39	2.1%	22	5.8%	7	1.9%
Home computer or Internet is too slow or unreliable	52	2.3%	12	0.5%	16	0.9%	6	0.3%	36	9.5%	6	1.6%
Other home computer or internet problems	66	2.9%	31	1.4%	32	1.7%	11	0.6%	34	9.0%	20	5.3%
Other	308	13.6%	308	13.6%	249	13.5%	249	13.5%	48	12.7%	48	12.7%
Other responses												
Need to take in classroom/online too hard	9	0.4%			1	0.1%			8	2.1%		
Financial aid/financial problems	4	0.2%			2	0.1%			2	0.5%		
Did not need class/already took class	21	0.9%			16	0.9%			5	1.3%		
Death in the family	9	0.4%			8	0.4%			1	0.3%		
Changed major	12	0.5%			10	0.5%			2	0.5%		
Dropped corresponding lab or lecture	5	0.2%			5	0.3%			0	0.0%		
Problems with Blackboard	1	0.0%			0	0.0%			1	0.3%		
Military Service	2	0.1%			2	0.1%			0	0.0%		
Difficulty getting textbook	6	0.3%			2	0.1%			3	0.8%		
Test Anxiety	4	0.2%			3	0.2%			1	0.3%		
Other computer problems	4	0.2%			0	0.0%			4	1.1%		
Wasn't learning anything	8	0.4%			8	0.4%			0	0.0%		
Other personal problems	58	2.6%			52	2.8%			5	1.3%		
Time/scheduling problems	20	0.9%			17	0.9%			2	0.5%		
All other	63	2.8%			37	2.0%			18	4.8%		
Average number of reasons for withdrawal			1.8				1.7				2.0	
n=			2,263				1,847				378	