PALM BEACH STATE
COLLEGE

Class Withdrawal Survey
Spring 2011

August 2011

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 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 Spring, 2011 term.

Methodology

The survey was administered online to students between January 7 and May 2, 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 2,242 valid responses were recorded in credit and college preparatory classes, including 1,805 in classroom and web enhanced classes, 377 in pure online classes and 60 in classroom/online hybrid classes.

Students first were asked to give the primary reason for the 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. Data were analyzed using SPSS.

Discussion

Online classes make it possible to attend without having to commit to a long and regular block of time that could discourage working students and students with families from registering for classes and pursuing their educational goals. However, merely offering classes online does not fully address the time commitment challenges that these students face.

Survey results showed some difference between online and traditional students in their reasons for course withdrawal. Online students were *not* more inclined to say that they weren't doing well in class or that the class was too difficult. However, they were much more likely to cite work and family responsibilities and falling behind in classes than were students taking a traditional class. It is likely that these three reasons are interrelated—work and family responsibilities are the driving forces that cause online students to fall behind.

Results

Reasons for course withdrawal, total sample

As shown in Figure 1, below, four reasons—work responsibilities (33%), family responsibilities (28%), not doing well in class (23%) and falling behind in assignments (23%)—were given most frequently as either primary or secondary reasons by more than one out of every five students responding.
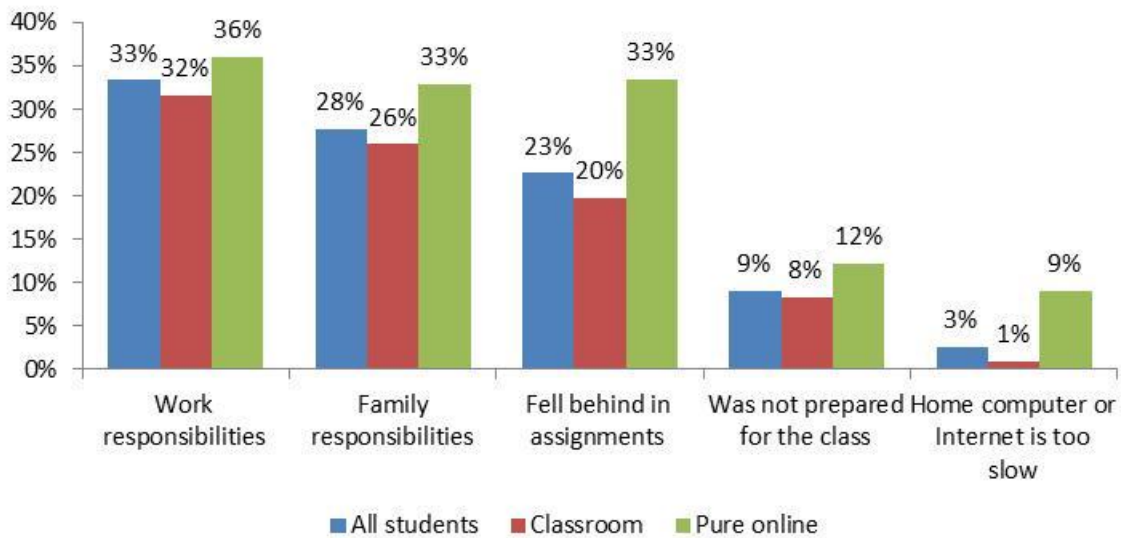
Figure 1
Reasons for course withdrawal
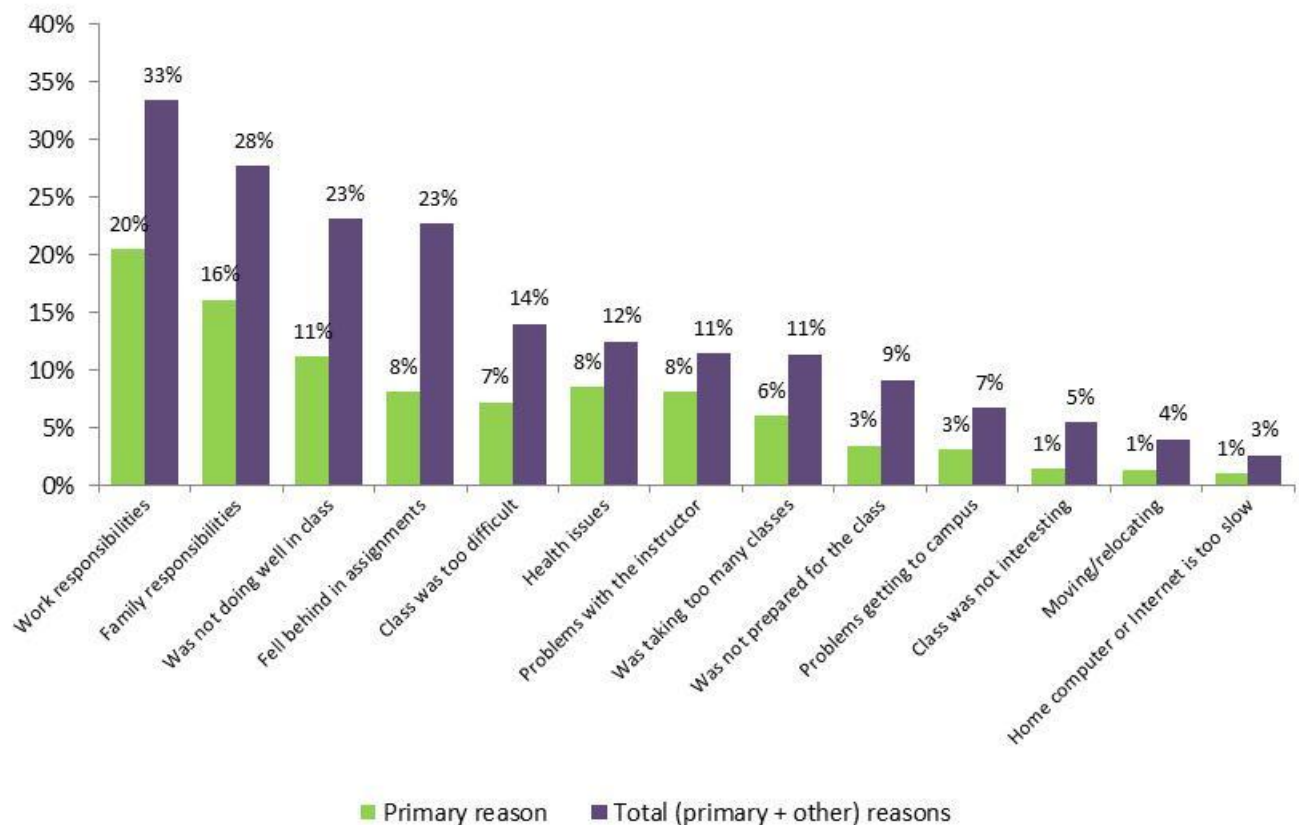
Reasons for course withdrawal, contrasting online and traditional classes

Figure 2 shows five reasons—work and family responsibilities, falling behind in assignments, not prepared for the class, and computer or Internet speed—that were cited significantly more often by students taking pure online classes versus those in traditional classes.

**Figure 2
Reasons for course withdrawal noted more often by online students**

Students taking traditional classes were more likely to cite class performance and problems with the instructor as reasons than those taking classes online, as noted in Figure 3, below. Little difference was observed between online and classroom students among the other possible reasons for withdrawal.

**Figure 3
Other reasons for course withdrawal**
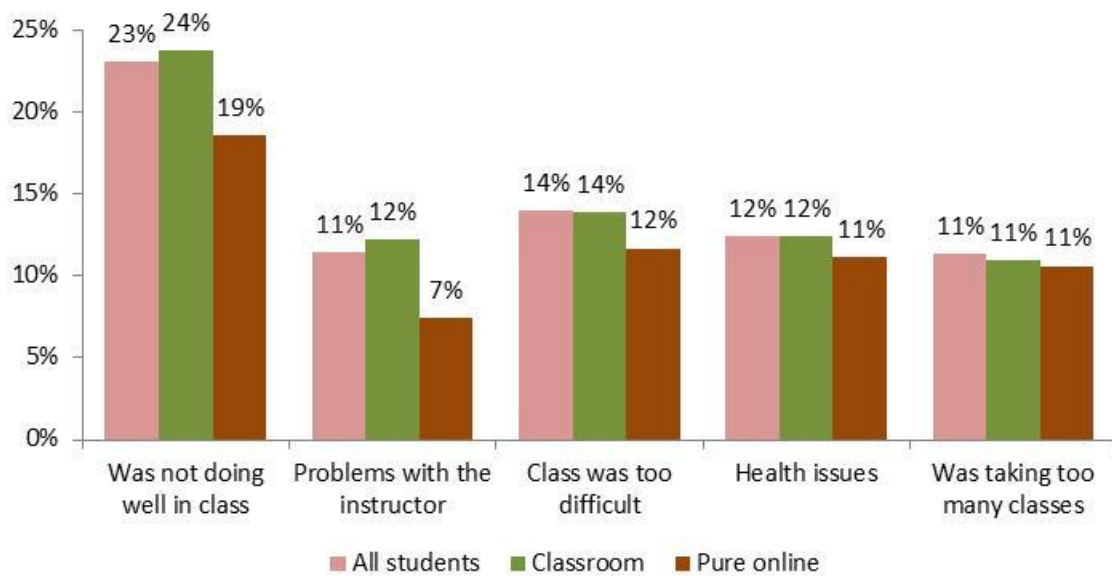
Number of reasons cited for course withdrawal

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 1.8 reasons for students in a classroom setting, as seen in Figure 4. 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
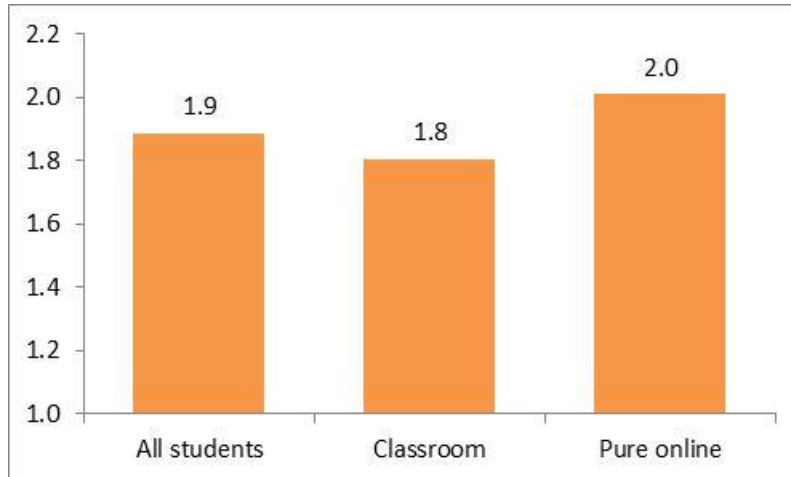
Tabled responses

	All students				Classroom				Pure online			
	Primary		Total		Primary		Total		Primary		Total	
Work responsibilities	459	20.5%	748	33.4%	371	20.6%	570	31.6%	75	19.9%	136	36.1%
Was not doing well in class	250	11.2%	518	23.1%	221	12.2%	429	23.8%	27	7.2%	70	18.6%
Family responsibilities	360	16.1%	621	27.7%	288	16.0%	469	26.0%	63	16.7%	124	32.9%
Fell behind in assignments	182	8.1%	508	22.7%	127	7.0%	356	19.7%	50	13.3%	126	33.4%
Class was too difficult	161	7.2%	313	14.0%	132	7.3%	251	13.9%	23	6.1%	44	11.7%
Health issues	190	8.5%	279	12.4%	150	8.3%	224	12.4%	32	8.5%	42	11.1%
Problems with the instructor	181	8.1%	256	11.4%	155	8.6%	221	12.2%	25	6.6%	28	7.4%
Was taking too many classes	134	6.0%	254	11.3%	111	6.1%	197	10.9%	18	4.8%	40	10.6%
Was not prepared for the class	77	3.4%	204	9.1%	64	3.5%	151	8.4%	11	2.9%	46	12.2%
Class was not interesting	32	1.4%	121	5.4%	27	1.5%	101	5.6%	4	1.1%	14	3.7%
Problems getting to campus	69	3.1%	150	6.7%	66	3.7%	134	7.4%	1	0.3%	6	1.6%
Moving/relocating	30	1.3%	89	4.0%	22	1.2%	59	3.3%	8	2.1%	23	6.1%
Home computer or Internet is too slow	23	1.0%	58	2.6%	5	0.3%	18	1.0%	16	4.2%	34	9.0%
Other responses												
Need to take in classroom/online too hard	11	0.5%	11	0.5%	1	0.1%	1	0.1%	9	2.4%	9	2.4%
Financial aid/financial problems	12	0.5%	14	0.6%	6	0.3%	7	0.4%	6	1.6%	6	1.6%
Did not need class/already took class	14	0.6%	14	0.6%	13	0.7%	13	0.7%		0.0%	0	0.0%
Death in the family	9	0.4%	11	0.5%	7	0.4%	8	0.4%	2	0.5%	2	0.5%
Changed Plans	2	0.1%	4	0.2%	2	0.1%	3	0.2%		0.0%	0	0.0%
Changed major	6	0.3%	6	0.3%	5	0.3%	5	0.3%		0.0%	0	0.0%
Dropped corresponding lab or lecture	3	0.1%	5	0.2%	3	0.2%	4	0.2%		0.0%	0	0.0%
Problems with Blackboard	3	0.1%	5	0.2%	1	0.1%	2	0.1%	1	0.3%	1	0.3%
Transferring to another school	3	0.1%	3	0.1%	2	0.1%	2	0.1%	1	0.3%	1	0.3%
Military Service	1	0.0%	1	0.0%	1	0.1%	1	0.1%		0.0%	0	0.0%
Difficulty getting textbook	3	0.1%	3	0.1%	2	0.1%	2	0.1%	1	0.3%	1	0.3%
Test Anxiety	3	0.1%	3	0.1%	3	0.2%	3	0.2%		0.0%	0	0.0%
Other computer problems	3	0.1%	3	0.1%	1	0.1%	1	0.1%	2	0.5%	2	0.5%
Wasn't learning anything	0	0.0%	4	0.2%	0	0.0%	2	0.1%		0.0%	0	0.0%
Other personal problems	15	0.7%	15	0.7%	13	0.7%	13	0.7%	2	0.5%	2	0.5%
Time/scheduling problems	1	0.0%	3	0.1%	1	0.1%	2	0.1%		0.0%	0	0.0%
All other	5	0.2%	5	0.2%	5	0.3%	5	0.3%		0.0%	0	0.0%
Average number of reasons for withdrawal	1.9				1.8				2.0			
n=	*2,242*				*1,805*				*377*			