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ABSTRACT

This document discusses how in 1999, the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges began 2 major projects to develop and improve online learning and courses. The first project (a U.S. Department of Education Demonstration for financial aid rule waivers) examines current rules intended for on-campus programs in the case of online students. The second project is a four-year grant that will serve to strengthen the two-year community college's online courses. The goal of the report is to share findings from on-going evaluations of these two projects using the administrative records analyzed for student characteristics and college status along with survey results given to online students on an annual basis. Some of the findings are as follows: (1) the number of students in online classes has increased 40% from 1999-2000 to 2000-2001; (2) the top two goals for online students are four-year college transfer and work preparation; (3) students enroll in online classes in order to pursue training at home or in the workplace; (4) students that were strictly enrolled in online classes were often older and had family responsibilities; and (5) students report high rates of satisfaction with their online courses and instructors. (MZ)

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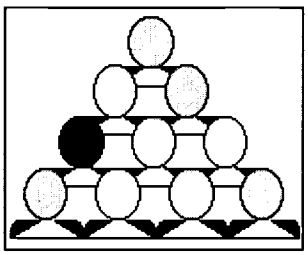

Research Report No. 02-2

Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges

Online Learning Students: Characteristics, Satisfaction, and Implications for Future Planning

A Summary of Findings from Two System Development Projects

January 2002

Background:

In early fall 1999, the community and technical colleges, through the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, began two major projects to develop and strengthen online learning. One project, a U.S. Department of Education Demonstration for financial aid rule waivers, is examining current rules intended for on-campus programs in the context of online students. The second project is a $1.8 million four-year grant to strengthen and expand the two-year college system's online courses and services, including the development of a "one-stop" system so students may view and register for online courses at a single web site. The funds for this project come from the Learning Anytime Anywhere Partnership (LAAP), a program administered by the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE), U.S. Department of Education. Both projects are providing detailed information on online students and courses.

The purpose of this report is to share findings from the on-going evaluations of these projects using administrative records analyzed for student characteristics and college status along with survey results administered each spring to online students. The data analysis is based upon students enrolled in 2000-2001. The survey results combine two years of survey responses for students enrolled in AY 1999-2000 and AY 2000-2001.

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Key Findings

- The most impressive finding regarding online courses and students is the continuing rapid growth rate. The number of students enrolled in online courses increased 40 percent from 15,770 in AY1999-2000 to 22,000 in AY 2000-01.

- 4,700 students enrolled exclusively in online classes (19 percent of all online students). This group of online-only students has also grown 40 percent.

- About 26 percent of the students that enrolled entirely in online classes were new to colleges, compared to 11 percent of all online students that were new, an indicator that online learning is increasing access to a population that may not have attended traditional on-campus classes.

- While online students have multiple goals for attending college, overall, 4-year college transfer and work preparation are the two major educational goals. Students who attended exclusively online had somewhat different educational goals than online students as a whole as they were 2.5 times as likely to attend for personal interests as the other online students who were enrolled on campus as well.

- Students enrolled online for flexibility to pursue training at home or in the workplace as well as to better manage their time. The typical student who attended entirely online was more likely to have work and family responsibilities and was older than other online students as whole, characteristics and demands that increase the importance of having flexible delivery mechanisms.

- Students' satisfaction with their online course and instructors remains consistently high. The satisfaction level with library resources, technical support and advising, while also high, is less so than with instructors and courses. These online services are also less developed than instruction, with the first services due to be piloted in spring 2002 as part of the LAAP grant project.

- Students recognize that online classes have greater demands than on-campus classes, requiring more work outside the class, more reading and greater study skills in critical thinking and applying knowledge.

Implications for The Future

The major implication of the findings is the degree to which online instruction will become integral to colleges' planning. This planning should be part of, and not mutually exclusive from, bricks and mortar planning. Notably we can expect that wherever there are college campuses and classroom buildings being planned, we will also see a high demand for online classes for these on-campus students who mix and match in order to efficiently work towards their educational goals. One will not replace the other for the majority of students who enroll in online classes.

At the same time there is evidence that online instruction is attracting a new student who might not have otherwise attended a college campus because of competing family and work demands. This student appears to be strongly motivated by personal along with work and degree goals. However, patterns of attendance for this new wave of students needs further study. Does she continue to attend exclusively online, or does she become a bricks and mortar student at some time? Does she alternate between on-campus and online?

This latter stop-in and stop-out pattern may have particular importance for professional/technical education. As colleges move towards modularization and more just-in-time delivery of these courses and programs in order to focus on job ladders, they will need to take into account course delivery. Increased availability of online professional and technical courses also may have an impact on study skills and how we prepare students for coming modularization. At the very least, the increased demands of online learning suggest the need for some exposure to all students. In particular, low income, less skilled students may have less opportunity for further training without these new study skills.

Part I: Analysis of Administrative Records

Student and course records were used to compare online students to a group of on-campus students enrolled in similar programs and courses. The entire set of online students, referred to as "all-online students" in this report, includes some 22,000 students who enrolled in 1 or more online classes in 2000-01. The majority of these students were simultaneously enrolled in at least one on-campus course. However, within the group called all-online students is a subset (19 percent of all-online) of 4,700 "online-only students" who enrolled exclusively in online courses during this period. For the purposes of this analysis the group of all-online students is compared to the subset that was online-only. In addition, another set of 290,000 on-campus students was analyzed and compared to the online students. This on-campus set was enrolled for similar purposes in similar classes, but received their instruction entirely on-campus.

While the analysis is based upon 2000-01 students, the results are consistent with findings in 1999-2000. The most impressive aspect of online instruction is the overall growth in online students. The total number of online students increased 47 percent, from 15,000 in 1999-2000 to 22,000 in 2000-01.

Findings From Data Analysis:

Demographic comparisons between all-online students, the subset that was on-line only and the on-campus students were made. Overall, online students, the majority of whom take a mix of online and on-campus classes, are similar to on-campus students who didn't enroll online. They may be somewhat more likely to be female and white. The subset that enrolled entirely online was most different, being older working women with family responsibilities. This group was also more likely to be white.

Table I: Student Demographics and Characteristics

	All-Online (N=22,000)	On-Line Only (N=4,700)	On-Campus (N=291,000)
Female	62%	66%	52%
White	82%	84%	75%
Median Age	26	31	28
Parent	33%	40%	32%
Employed Full-time	30%	49%	32%
Has Disability	4.7%	2.6%	3.9%

The subset of online-only students was compared to all online students as a whole for school status. The subset was about 2.5 times as likely to be new to college. They were also 13 percent less likely to enroll in their home district as all-online students, who typically were already registering for and attending classes there. Online-only students were more than two times as likely to take online classes for personal interest. They were less likely to be transfer students, but about the same percent attended for work reasons as the all-online student group as a whole. Based upon their purposes for attending, online-only students were probably less likely to be eligible for financial aid.

Table II: College Enrollment Status
All-Online Students Compared to Online Only

	All-Online (N=22,000)	Online Only (N=4,700)
Attending Full-Time	64%	16%
Purposes Enrolled	Work- 42% Transfer- 51% Personal Interest- 7%	Work- 44% Transfer- 37% Personal Interest- 18%
Received Aid	33%	20%
New to College	11%	26%
Enrolled in Home District for On-line Classes	67%	52%

Part II: Survey Results

Each spring for the past two years, the SBCTC has administered a major survey of online students enrolled during spring quarter, contacting them via their online instructors. Items for this survey are prescribed by the Department of Education as a condition of participation in the online demonstration program. The goal is to have a survey filled out by every online student in a Washington community or technical college.

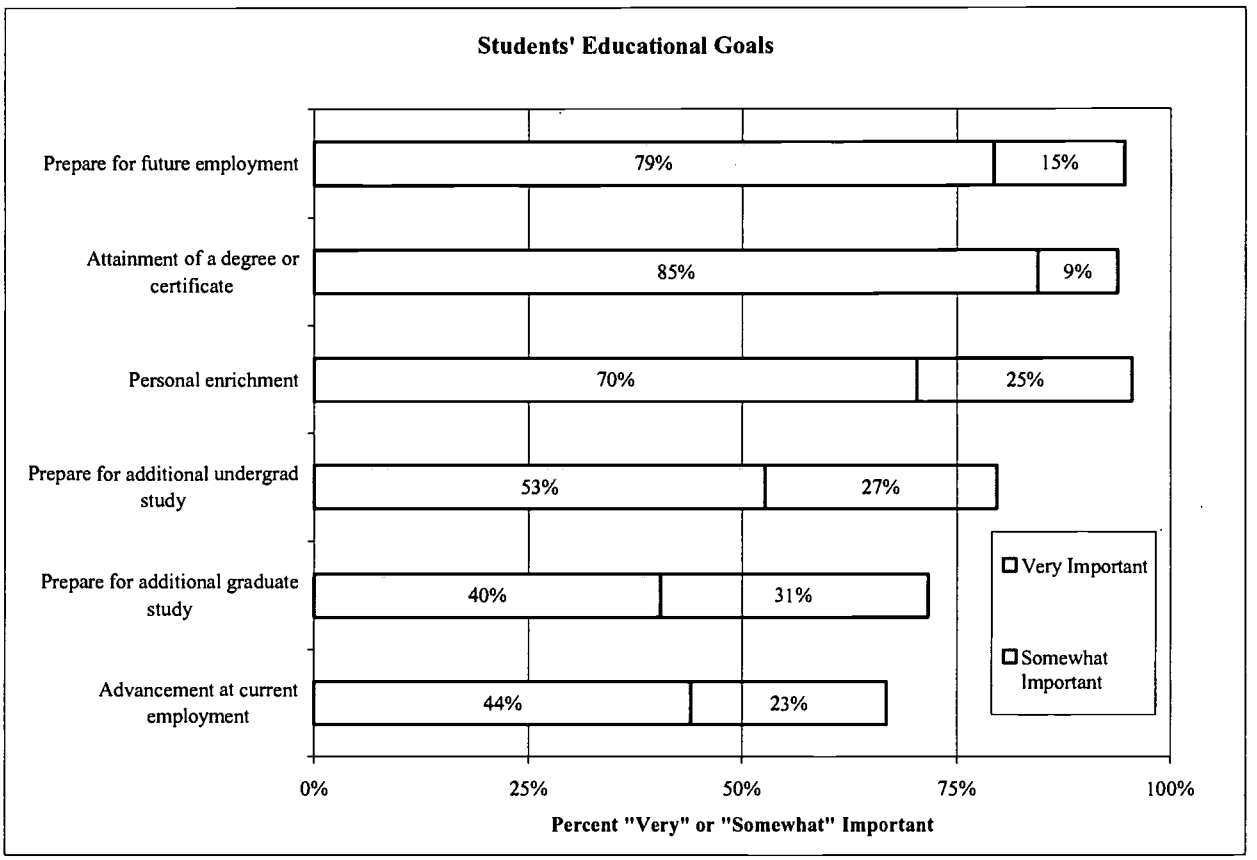
The reality is that about one in six online students have completed the survey each year. In 2000, of the 5,607 students taking an online course in the spring quarter, surveys were received from 970. In 2001, the rate climbed slightly, with 1,385 of the 8,003 students completing the survey. Female students and students over the age of 40 were slightly more likely to respond to the survey than males and younger students.

Although the overall response rate is low, because of the volume of responses and the overall year-to-year consistency, the results from the survey should be representative of the overall population of online students. The survey error is 1.8 percent, meaning that 19 times out of 20, the results of a yes or no question should be within 1.8 percentage points of the percent for all students in this population. Generally speaking the survey findings have been consistent with analyses of administrative records.

SYSTEM RESPONSES

In both years, the survey included questions about students' educational goals, their reasons for choosing to enroll in a course online rather than on-campus, satisfaction with their online experience, and questions comparing the online and on-campus experiences of those students who have taken courses in both environments.

What are the educational goals of online students? Students' top three personal educational goals have consistently been personal enrichment, preparation for future employment, and/or attainment of a degree or certificate. Approximately 95 percent of students named these as a somewhat or very important goal. A smaller proportion (60 to 80%) named preparation for transfer, graduate study, and promotion at their current job.



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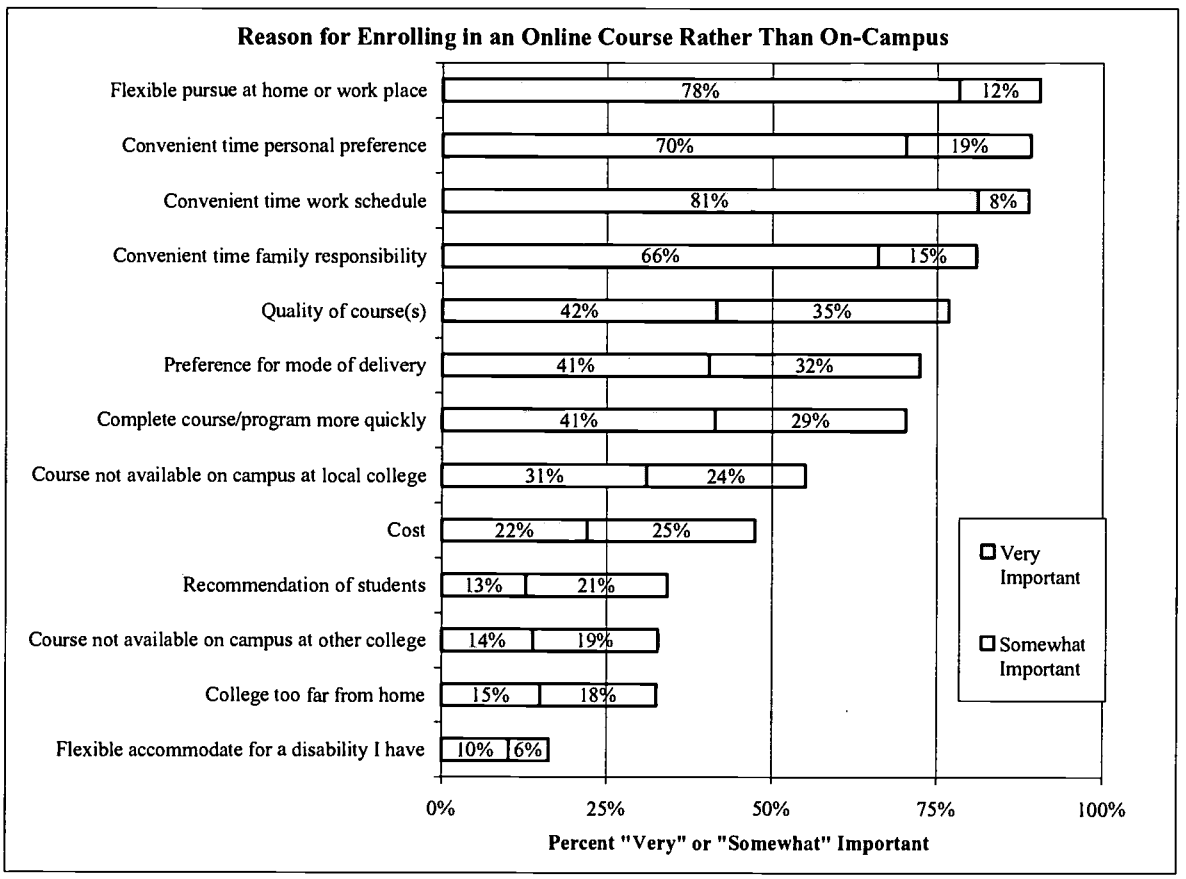
What are the reasons students have for enrolling in online classes? The reasons students gave for enrolling in online rather than on-campus courses have also been consistent from year to year. Approximately 90 percent of students said that the flexibility to pursue coursework at a time that was convenient to them was somewhat or very important. Approximately 81 percent indicated that being able to work around family responsibilities was important. Some three-quarters said that the quality of online courses was a reason for choosing them and slightly fewer cited a preference for online delivery and the ability to complete the course or program of study more quickly. Slightly more than half noted that they were taking an online course because it was not available at their local college. Approximately one in six students said that accommodation of a disability was an important or somewhat important reason for choosing an online course. Although this is the lowest among all items on the list, it is a significant proportion since less than 5 percent of students enrolled since 1999 identify themselves as having a disability. Washington community and technical colleges report a lower rate of service to disabled students than colleges nationwide. Increasing the number and variety of online courses may provide more opportunities to serve residents with disabilities.



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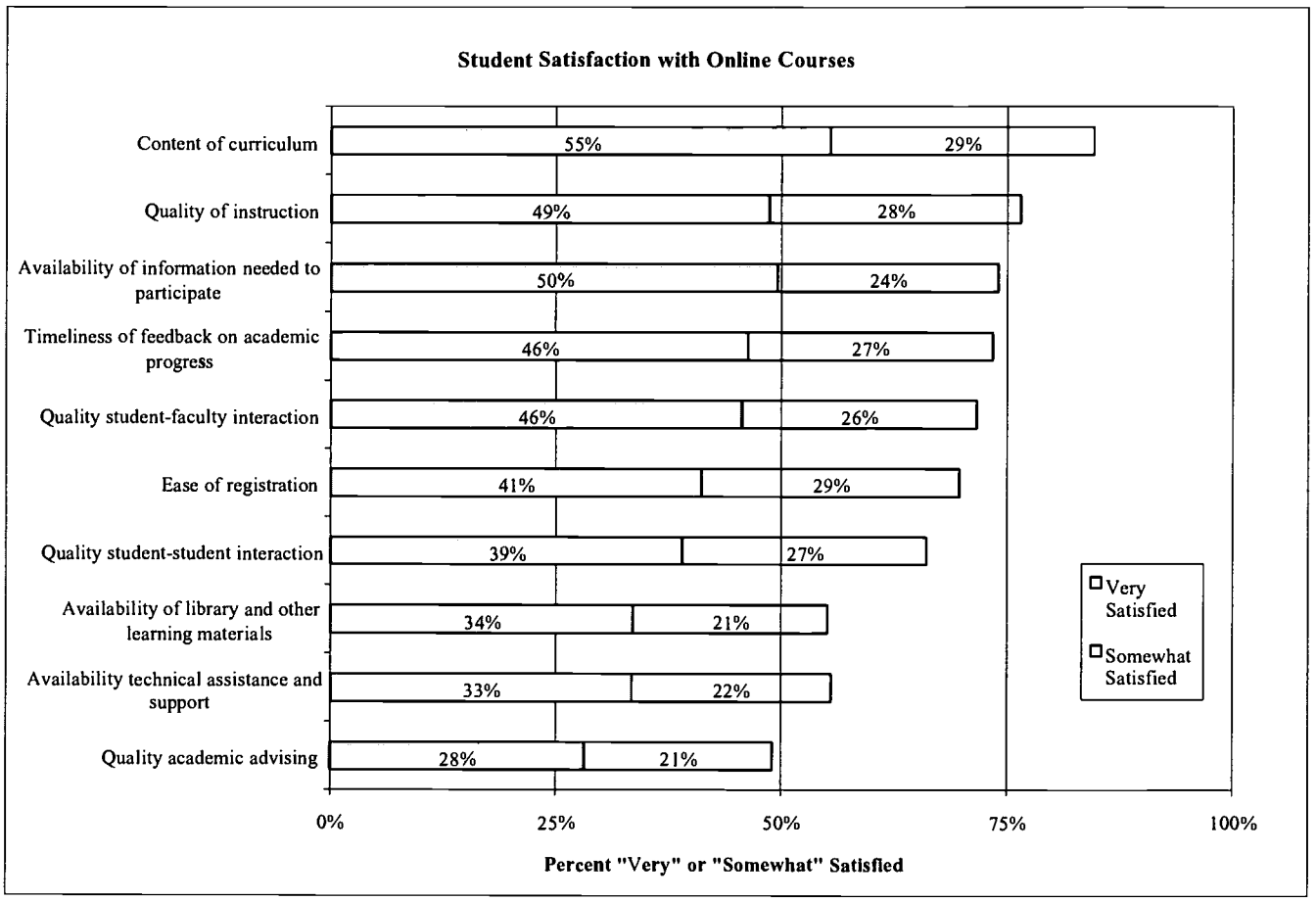
Are students satisfied with online courses? Overall, students are satisfied with their online experience. Approximately 85 percent were somewhat or very satisfied with the course content, three-quarters were satisfied with the quality of instruction, the timeliness of feedback, and student-faculty interaction. Two-thirds of students were satisfied with the level of interaction with other students. Although satisfaction with student services such as advising, technical assistance, and registration remains low, the levels of dissatisfaction are no higher than for other items. Rather, a greater proportion of students is neutral or has no opinion. In addition, the percent of students who are somewhat or very satisfied with student services has increased slightly from 2000 to 2001.



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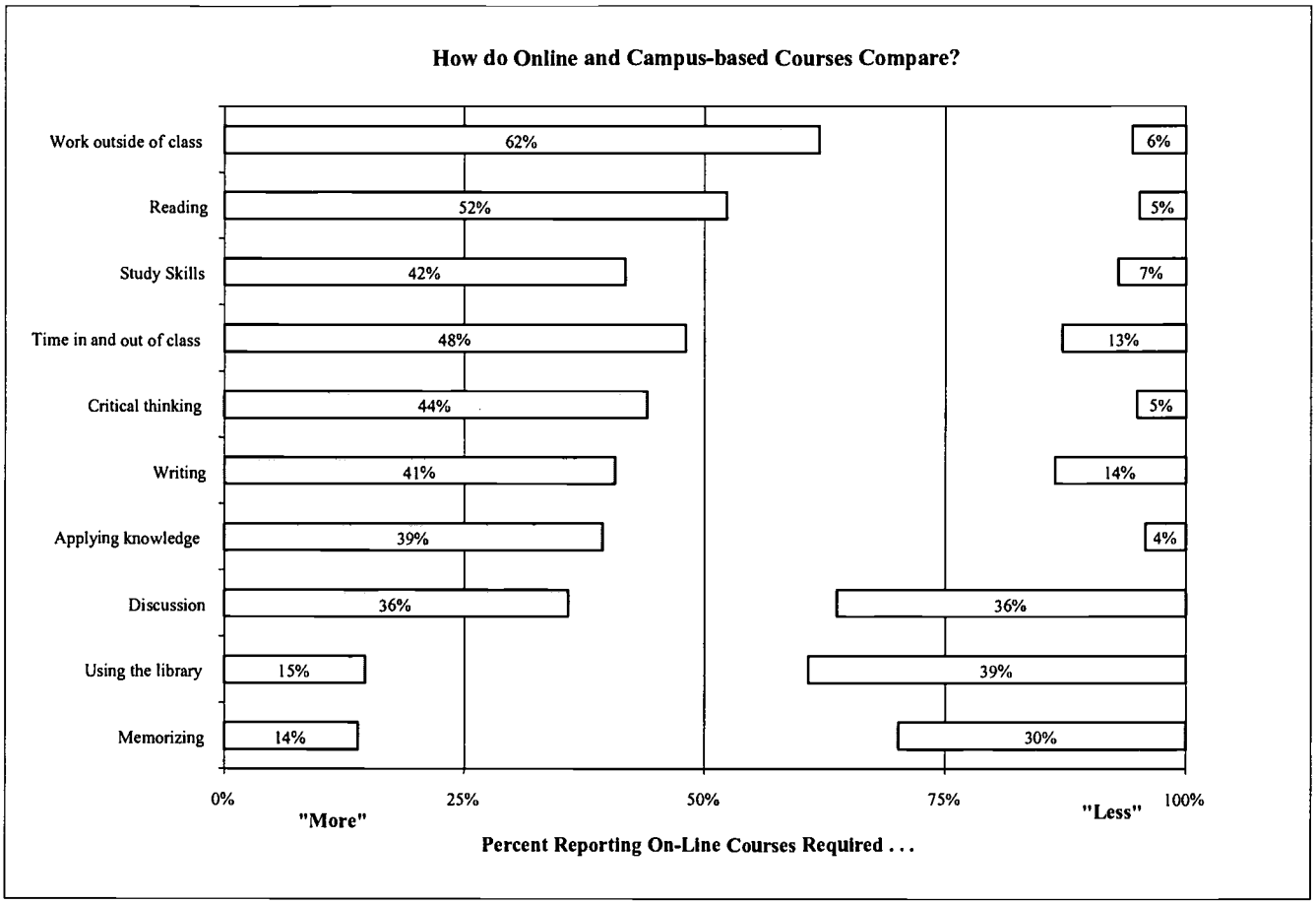
How do online and on-campus courses compare? Online courses are different in some regards from classroom-based courses. Almost two-thirds of students said online courses require more work outside of class whereas 6 percent said they require less work. Similarly 52 percent reported increased demand for reading and only 5 percent report reading less. The demand for study skills, time spent on coursework, critical thinking, writing, and applying knowledge was viewed as "greater" by 40 to 50 percent of students and "about the same" by a similar proportion. Areas that are less demanding include library use and memorizing facts.



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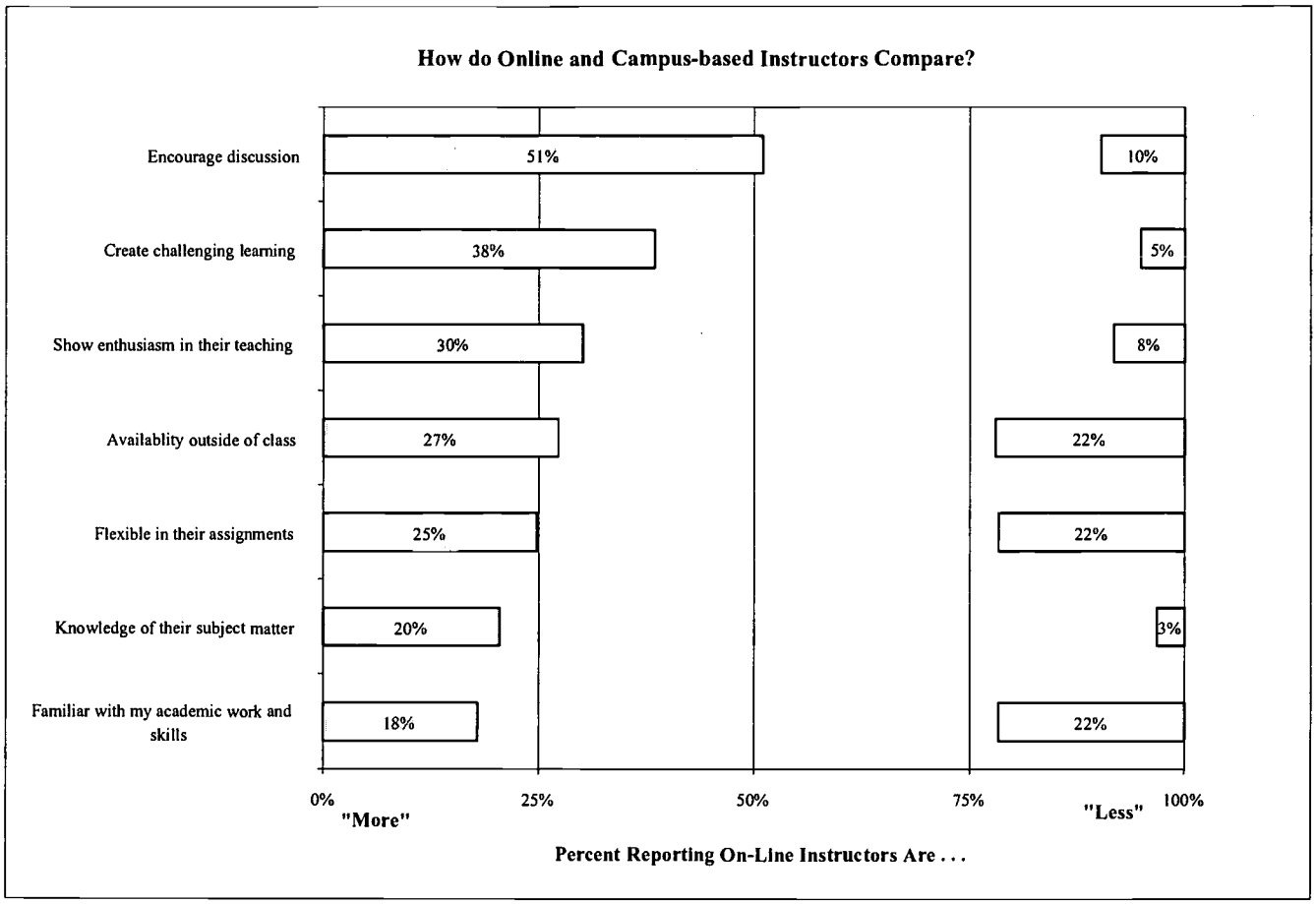
How do online and on-campus instructors compare? Overall, there is little appreciable difference between on-campus and online instructors, with online instructors getting slightly better reviews. Students report that instructors are similar in terms of their knowledge of students' work, flexibility in assignments, and availability outside of class. In terms of knowledge of the subject matter, three-quarters report they are the same, but 20 percent report online instructors are more knowledgeable. Online instructors are also viewed as more enthusiastic about their teaching and more skilled at creating challenging learning environments and encouraging discussion.



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