

Research in Brief: Distance Education

A Paradigm Shift. The past 25 years witnessed a paradigm shift in the world of higher education. While the education system has its roots in the Industrial Age of the brick and mortar, it has gradually changed its methods of delivery in response to societal needs. Offering courses in flexible formats, where learning takes place anytime and anywhere, is one of the hallmarks of the present Information Age.

Diablo Valley College has been in the forefront of this development and has invested wisely in distance education. The phenomenal expansion in enrollment in this area far exceeded the overall enrollment growth at the college. This expansion carried with it many opportunities, yet there are some challenges ahead.

What is Distance Education? Distance education is a formal education process in which the student and instructor are not in the same location. Institutions may require various proportions of online instruction for a course to be included as online course or a hybrid/blended online course. Distance education at DVC includes courses with more than 50% of the instruction taught online.

Why Distance Education? Institutions offer online courses for a variety of reasons:

- Meeting student demand for flexible schedules
- Providing access to college for students who would otherwise have no access
- Making more courses available
- Seeking to increase student enrollment

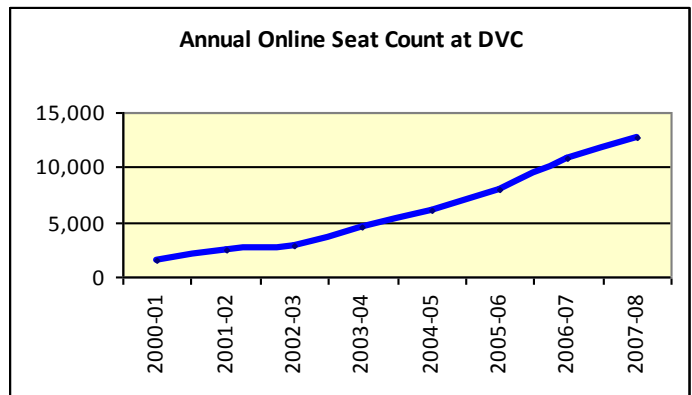
Enrollment Growth. Enrollment in online courses have continued to grow at rates far in excess of the rate of growth in total student population, with the most recent data demonstrating no signs of slowing. The following information was provided by a recent national study¹

- Almost 3.9 million students were taking at least one online course during fall 2007, a 12% increase over the numbers reported the previous year.

- The 12.9% growth rate for online enrollments far exceeds the 1.2% growth of the overall higher education student population.
- Over 20% of all U.S. higher education students were taking at least one online course in fall 2007.

DVC Experience. DVC's enrollment in distance education courses increased significantly over the past eight years, with every term setting a record that surpassed that of the previous one.

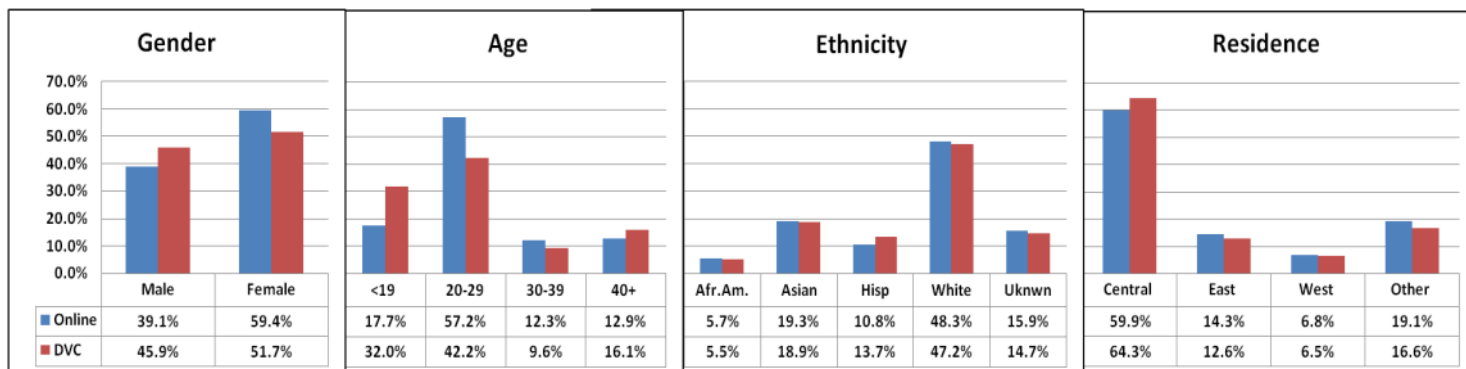
During this 8-year period, the proportionate share of total seat count at the college increased from 1.1% in 2000-01 to 9.4% in 2007-08. Furthermore, online courses generated 1,575 FTES in 2007-08, compared to 185, eight years earlier². Undoubtedly, online instruction is becoming an important source of revenue generated by the college.



Demographics. The profile of students enrolled in online courses at DVC is similar in many respects to that of the general student body at the college, with the exception of two areas related to gender and age:

- Women enrolled in larger numbers in online courses (59%), compared to their proportionate representation at the college (52%).
- Similarly, students 20 to 39 years of age accounted for nearly 70% of the enrollment in online courses, compared to 52% for DVC as a whole.

Demographics and Residence of Online vs. DVC Students, Fall 2007



These two differences suggest that online courses meet the needs of working adults attempting to juggle their career and family responsibilities.

With respect to students' residence, the current geographical reach of DVC is predominantly local, with the majority of the students residing within a 50-mile radius of the DVC campuses.

Course Success and Retention. In the past eight years, course success rates (grades of A, B, C, CR, P) for online students at DVC fell consistently below those of the college as a whole. The gap in success rates was as high as 19% in fall 2001; however, it has narrowed to only 9.6% in spring 2008. Course retention rates were also lower for online courses.³

Disciplines. The gap in success rates varies among disciplines, with some disciplines showing a 44% difference in success rates between online and face-to-face courses.⁴

Opportunities and Challenges. The greatest benefit of online instruction is the expansion of student access, particularly for those who may not otherwise have been able to attend college. In addition, the college has an opportunity to broaden its geographical reach beyond its service area. With an educational cost that is very affordable, DVC should be able to compete favorably with both public and for-profit institutions (e.g., University of Phoenix).

To succeed in the current competitive educational environment, the college may wish to redesign its curricula and academic programs in a way that enables it to offer college-level degrees or certificate programs that can be completed totally online. Almost one-third of all 2-year and 4-year institutions reported offering college-level degree programs designed to be completed totally through distance education in 2006-

2007.⁵ The college's success will depend on meeting some important challenges, including:

- Providing academic services (counseling, tutoring, etc.) to online students of comparable quality to those offered for face-to-face students.
- Closing the achievement gap between online and face-to-face students.
- Providing staff development opportunities for the online faculty on an ongoing basis. Teaching online courses may require more planning and more time than face-to-face courses.⁶
- Negotiating testing sites throughout the country and therefore eliminating the need for campus visits.

In summary, distance education and the Internet are here to stay. Perhaps they may become the great educational equalizers that will move us toward personal fulfillment and higher educational attainment.

RESOURCES

- ¹ Allen, Elaine and Seaman, Jeff. *Staying the Course: Online Education in the United States, 2008*, Babson Survey Research Group. The Sloan Consortium, November 2008. ([Document](#))
- ² Office of Planning, Research and Student Outcomes. *DRAFT Predictors of Success in Distance Education Courses: A Case Study, 2000–01 to 2007–08*, Diablo Valley College, March 2009 ([Report](#))
- ³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴ Office of Planning, Research and Student Outcomes. *Discipline Online Success Rates Summary, Fall 2002 to Spring 2008*, March 2009. ([Chart](#))
- ⁵ Parsad, Basmat and Lewis, Laurie. *Distance Education at Degree Granting Postsecondary Institutions, 2006–07 (NCES 2009-044)*, National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Science, U.S. Dept. of Education, Washington, D.C. ([Document](#))
- ⁶ Jaschik, Scott. "The Distance Education Tipping Point," *Inside Higher Education*, May 26, 2009. ([Article](#))