



Challenges to Success in Online Classes

Motivations, Experiences, and
Perceptions of Online Students

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Contents

Introduction	3
Distance Ed at SDCCD.....	3
Theoretical Framework	5
Amount and Type of Interactions	5
Course Design	5
Faculty Training.....	5
Study Design	6
Research Questions	6
Methodology.....	6
Highlights.....	10
Reasons for Choosing Online Classes.....	10
Student Characteristics	10
Course Characteristics	11
Framework of Analysis	12
Findings	13
Reasons for Choosing Online Classes.....	13
Student Characteristics	15
Course Characteristics	18
Conclusion.....	24
Challenges.....	24
Strengths.....	24
Limitations of this Study	25
Recommendations	26
References	27
Appendix.....	29
Focus Group Questions.....	29

Introduction

Between 2005 and 2017, the number of students taking a class online at California Community Colleges more than doubled, growing from 11% of students enrolled to 28% (CCCCO, 2017). Along with the promise of providing more accessible education to more students, the growth of distance education has brought challenges: students in online classes on average demonstrate lower retention and success rates compared to traditional classes (CCCCO, 2017; Xu & Jaggars, 2013), and achievement gaps among economically disadvantaged students and under-represented minorities tend to be exacerbated in online classes (Jaggars & Xu, 2016). While the gap in success rates between online classes and traditional classes has narrowed, statewide online success rates still lagged 4% behind that of traditional classes as of the 2016-17 academic year (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. Statewide success rates, by modality

Modality	2005-06	2011-12	2016-17
Face-to-face	70%	71%	70%
Online	53%	60%	66%

Source: CCCCCO, 2017

Distance Ed at SDCCD

Online classes at SDCCD occur in three modalities: Fully Online, Partially Online¹, and Hybrid². Fully Online classes represent the majority of online enrollments (17% of all enrollments in Fall 2017, compared to 3% for Partially Online and 1% for Hybrid enrollments). There is significant variation in success rates among the online modalities, but they have all improved over the last five years.

Since the 2013-14 academic year, online enrollments at City College/ECC, Mesa College, and Miramar College have doubled, from 35,178 enrollments in 2013-14 to 70,850 in 2017-18³. As at the state level, online enrollments are generally less successful than on-campus enrollments at SDCCD, but online success rates have improved over the last five years. Further, as the number of students taking online classes grew between Fall 2014 and Fall 2017, the number of unsuccessful students grew more slowly (Unsuccessful Online Student Profile, 2018). And while efforts to improve the learning experiences of distance education students have had a significant impact, success rates in Fully Online classes (which make up the largest share of online enrollments) remain 7% below success rates in on-campus classes (Course Success and Retention Rates of Online Students, SDCCD OIRP, 2018). For a comparison of online success rates and on-campus success rates, see Table 2.

¹ At least one class meeting or exam on campus, more than 50% of the instruction delivered online.

² More than 50% of the instruction on campus, less than 50% online.

³ 2018 SDCCD Enrollment Almanac, p. 53

Table 2. Success rates in SDCCD classes, by modality

Modality	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Fully Online	62%	62%	63%	64%	67%
On-Campus	72%	72%	73%	73%	74%
Average	70%	71%	71%	71%	72%
<i>Difference between Online and On-Campus</i>	10%	10%	10%	9%	7%

Source: SDCCD Information System

Unsuccessful Students in Online Classes

In the Fall terms between 2015 and 2017, unsuccessful online students were more likely to be African American or Latinx, and tended to be younger students compared to the online student population (Unsuccessful Online Student Profile, 2018). These findings are consistent with the literature (Jaggars & Xu, 2016), which found similar disparities in distance education in both California and across the United States.

Table 3. Over-representation among unsuccessful online students

Group	% of Unsuccessful Online Students	% of Online Students
African American	11%	8%
Latinx	41%	36%
Students 18-24	57%	54%

Source: SDCCD Information System

Given the growth of distance education, it is crucial that SDCCD continues to develop its efforts to improve online instruction. As part of these ongoing efforts, focus groups were conducted in Spring 2018 to better understand the experiences of students who were unsuccessful in online courses. The results of these focus groups will guide the continued improvement of online instruction by informing faculty training and the improvement of online student services.

Theoretical Framework

The literature review for this study focused on three main themes: a) amount and type of interactions in the course⁴, b) course design⁵, and c) faculty training⁶.

Amount and Type of Interactions

Regular effective communication and contact between faculty and students is required by distance education regulations (CCCCO, 2008) and accreditation standards and definitions (WASC, 2013). The literature has found that generally, the more students interact with others in an online course, the more successful they are⁷.

Student-faculty interactions generally occur via email or a notification through the course's learning management system. The literature makes it clear that students largely build their perceptions of faculty engagement from these communications, which in turn drive their own engagement with course material (Jaggars & Xu, 2016). While the relationship between faculty-student communication and course engagement is perhaps not surprising in the context of learning environments, it nonetheless emphasizes the importance of visible and varied efforts by faculty to get to know their students.

Course Design

The literature regarding online class design has identified several course features that benefit students, including clear expectations (Jaggars & Xu, 2016), instructor-created materials (Hegeman, 2015), and a predictable course structure (Evans, Robertson, and Dyer, 2017). Clear learning objectives are an important part of traditional classes too, but the online format requires a deliberate effort to establish these expectations.

Faculty Training

While many of the principles underlying distance education are similar in theory to those underlying traditional classrooms, the online format requires that those principles be translated, updated, and implemented in different ways. Experienced faculty feel more confident about making this transition than faculty who have never taught an online class (Hunt et al., 2014), and it is important to support faculty as they “adapt to online teaching and their new roles and skills” (Baran & Correia, 2014). As with most shifts in pedagogy, the process of learning to teach online classes requires that faculty new to the format “reflect on their past experiences, assumptions, and beliefs toward learning and teaching” (Baran, Correia, and Thompson, 2013). Such reflection is most effective when supported through actionable toolkits and additional curriculum development resources (Baran & Correia, 2014).

⁴ Jaggars & Xu, 2016

⁵ Jaggars & Xu, 2016; Hegeman, 2015; Evans, Robertson, and Dyer, 2017

⁶ Hunt et al., 2014; Baran, Correia, and Thompson, 2013; Baran & Correia, 2014

⁷ Evans, Robertson, and Dyer, 2017; Johnson, Mejia, and Cook, 2015; Kebritchi, Lipshuetz, and Santiago, 2017

Study Design

Improving distance education outcomes is a complex and ongoing process. An important component in addressing the needs of and challenges faced by distance education students is understanding their behaviors, motivations, and experiences. To gather this experiential information, focus groups were conducted in Spring 2018 by the SDCCD Instructional Services Division and the Office of Institutional Research and Planning. The experiences of the participants, who all enrolled in but did not successfully complete an online class, will supplement existing data regarding online student characteristics and outcomes. These findings will be used by the Online Learning Pathways program to help increase successful course completion rates. Specifically, the results will be used to a) improve teaching and learning in online courses through faculty training, b) update workshops on online pedagogy, and c) improve online student services (e.g. online tutoring, online counseling, library access, etc.). Analysis identified themes from focus group discussions, and then connected those themes to the research questions (below).

Research Questions

1. Why do students decide to take an online class?
2. What factors contribute to student success in the online environment?
3. What services are accessed by online students?
4. Are there subject areas in which online students tend to be unsuccessful?

Methodology

This was a qualitative study that used focus groups to explore students' perceptions of the online class experience. Focus groups provide participants the opportunity to reflect on their experiences, and they provide richer data than can be gathered through a survey or student outcomes. Focus groups can reveal experiences and possibilities previously unidentified by researchers; for this reason they are an excellent place to establish a line of inquiry or contextualize existing data. Conclusions drawn from focus groups must be qualified, though, by the fact that focus groups are more likely to give voice to polarized viewpoints. This particular qualification must be reinforced for this study because participants were recruited through convenience sampling, wherein students with stronger perspectives are more likely to participate than those with moderate perspectives.

Target Population

In order to better understand the challenges facing online students, Instructional Services and the Office of Institutional Research and Planning determined that it was important to reach out to students who were not successful in online classes. These students' experiences were targeted to provide a deeper dialogue about the reasoning, motivations, and services used by this population.

The target population for the focus groups was students who a) **took at least one online course at the SDCCD credit colleges in Fall 2017**, and b) **did not successfully complete that course**. Eligible students were identified by the following criteria:

1. Valid enrollment in an online course as of end-of-term Fall 2017 at City College/ECC, Mesa College, or Miramar College
2. Received a grade of D, F, or No Pass

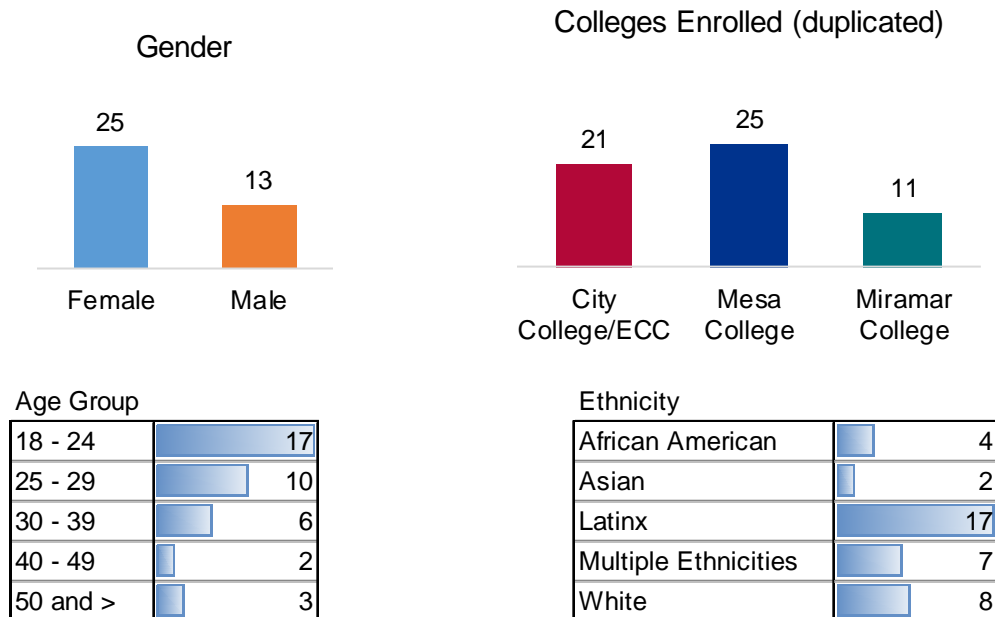
A total of 3,677 students fit these criteria among the three credit colleges. They were invited to participate via email and offered \$50 in compensation for their participation. Of the 110 students (3%) who responded to these invitations, 38 ultimately participated (1%) in nine focus groups. Attrition was largely due to scheduling issues, as respondents were not always able to attend an available time slot.

It is important to note that while the population of students was sampled based on their unsuccessful completion of an online class, they were not made aware of this criteria, either during recruitment or during the focus groups.

Participant Characteristics

The demographics of the 38 participants were similar to those of the SDCCD student population. Participants were largely between the ages of 18 and 24, predominately female, and predominately Latinx.

Focus Group Participant Characteristics, Fall 2017
n=38



After the conclusion of the focus groups, the Office of Institutional Research and Planning compared the online and on-campus GPAs of the 38 focus group students to the online and on-campus GPAs of the student population (all students enrolled in Fall 2017). This comparison shows a significantly lower GPA for focus group students in online-only classes than for the rest of the student population in online-only classes (1.87, compared to 2.74 for the student population). See Table 4 for outcomes of focus group participants compared to the student population.

In **on-campus classes**, participants performed similarly to the student population, with similar GPAs, retention rates, and success rates. However, participants passed **online classes** at half the rate of the population. This indicates that the experiences of these participants are reliable sources for determining challenges unique in online learning for SDCCD students. Further, it should be noted that focus group participants passed classes at a lower rate than the population despite remaining enrolled in those classes until the end of the semester at a higher rate (92% of enrollments retained for participants, compared to 84% for the population). This higher retention rate may be due to:

1. Student characteristics which contribute to not dropping a class may overlap with those of individuals who participate in research.
2. Students who made an effort to pass a class, but were not successful, may have been more motivated participate in research by a desire to voice their concerns about the experience.

Table 4. Student outcomes, Fall 2017

		GPA	Retention	Success
Participants <i>n</i> =38	Fully Online	1.34	92%	33%
	On Campus	2.75	87%	74%
	Overall	1.87	90%	49%
All other students enrolled <i>n</i> =45,906	Fully Online	2.72	84%	66%
	On Campus	2.76	89%	74%
	Overall	2.74	88%	72%

Source: SDCCD Information System

Focus Group Logistics

Focus groups were conducted using an online videoconferencing platform. Participants were emailed a link to an online videoconference, and participated via webcam on their computer or their phone. There were between two and seven participants in each focus group. The nine focus groups were conducted between March 12th and 22nd, 2018, and lasted between 30 and 70 minutes.

Discussions were guided by one facilitator, and in most cases observed by one additional researcher. Participants were asked questions regarding four input components of online learning: student or learner characteristics, instructor

characteristics, course characteristics, and program and institutional characteristics (DETA Framework of Inquiry, 2015). Participants responded directly to the facilitator's questions, and were encouraged to respond to or elaborate on each other's responses.

While participants were encouraged to discuss their online educational experiences in general at the beginning of the groups, discussion during the second half of each focus group was directed towards participants' experiences in the prior semester. This effort was made in order to collect information regarding students' experiences when they were unsuccessful in online classes. Each focus group videoconference was recorded and transcribed.

Recordings and transcriptions of the focus groups were reviewed and coded for common themes. Themes were selected for analysis by frequency of repetition across the nine focus groups and strength of agreement within each focus group.

Highlights

Focus group participants were generally candid about their experiences in online classes. Some expressed frustration at various components of online classes, while others were largely satisfied with their experiences.

Many participants characterized both student and faculty behaviors that contributed to success in online classes as more intentional than those in traditional classrooms.

Reasons for Choosing Online Classes

Research Question:

Why do students take online classes?

The main reason participants chose online classes was the increased flexibility offered by the format. Participants required more scheduling flexibility than would be allowed by on-campus classes because they balanced work, childcare or elder-care responsibilities, health issues, and other classes.

These other obligations made it harder for participants to physically get to campus. Parking was often the first reason that participants identified for avoiding on-campus classes.

Participants' motivation to avoid physically going to a campus drove a number of other responses regarding course characteristics, such as a preference for weekly deadlines (as opposed to two or three deadlines per week) and access to a clear, comprehensive course outline at the beginning of the course.

Student Characteristics

Research Question:

What contributes to student success online?

Stay organized. Participants rated organization and motivation as key student-level factors for success in online classes. Many participants experienced falling behind in class, and said it was difficult to get back on track once this had happened.

Participants contrasted online classes with their experiences on-campus: in on-campus classes, participants said it's easier to understand assignment expectations and stay on top of deadlines, while online classes require more intentional efforts to manage deadlines and not fall behind on assignments. Some participants identified the use of planners, agendas, and physically printed copies of the syllabus as effective workload organization aids.

Stay motivated. Participants were candid about instances when they had lost motivation, and were fairly open about connecting that loss of motivation to unsuccessful course outcomes. However, a number of respondents indicated their lack of motivation arose from a sense that faculty did not care about students in online classes.

Research Question:

What services are accessed by online students?

Get help early. Most participants did not indicate that they accessed support services such as tutoring. Those that did had varied experiences, but the participants who reported that tutoring had been beneficial said that they sought out help early in the semester rather than later.

Course Characteristics

Regular, effective communication. A dominant theme among participants was that the quality of faculty responses and interactions drove their engagement in a course. Participants generally associated exemplary professors with strong course organization and consistent, detailed communications. For example, many participants preferred online classes in which they were provided a comprehensive syllabus and course assignment schedule, and where they could access all or most course materials from the beginning of the class.

On the other hand, many participants shared negative experiences that arose from what they perceived to be poor communication from faculty. Many participants felt ignored, or felt that faculty didn't care, when faculty responded to questions with brief emails that only referred to the course syllabus. In some cases, participants referred to textbooks as more helpful than the materials provided by instructors.

Research Question:

Are there subject areas in which online students tend to be unsuccessful?

Participants' responses reveal that delayed or brief responses posed particularly difficult challenges in technical subjects such as math, accounting, or computer-skills courses in programs like Excel. Participants were hesitant to enroll in online math courses, or in other subjects they perceived to be difficult, because they felt that they wouldn't have the opportunity to ask questions, which they felt would

lead to lower or unsuccessful grades in the course.

Fewer, consistent deadlines. Participants expressed a strong preference for classes which had one deadline per week rather than two or three. More frequent deadlines were perceived to be burdensome rather than supportive of learning.

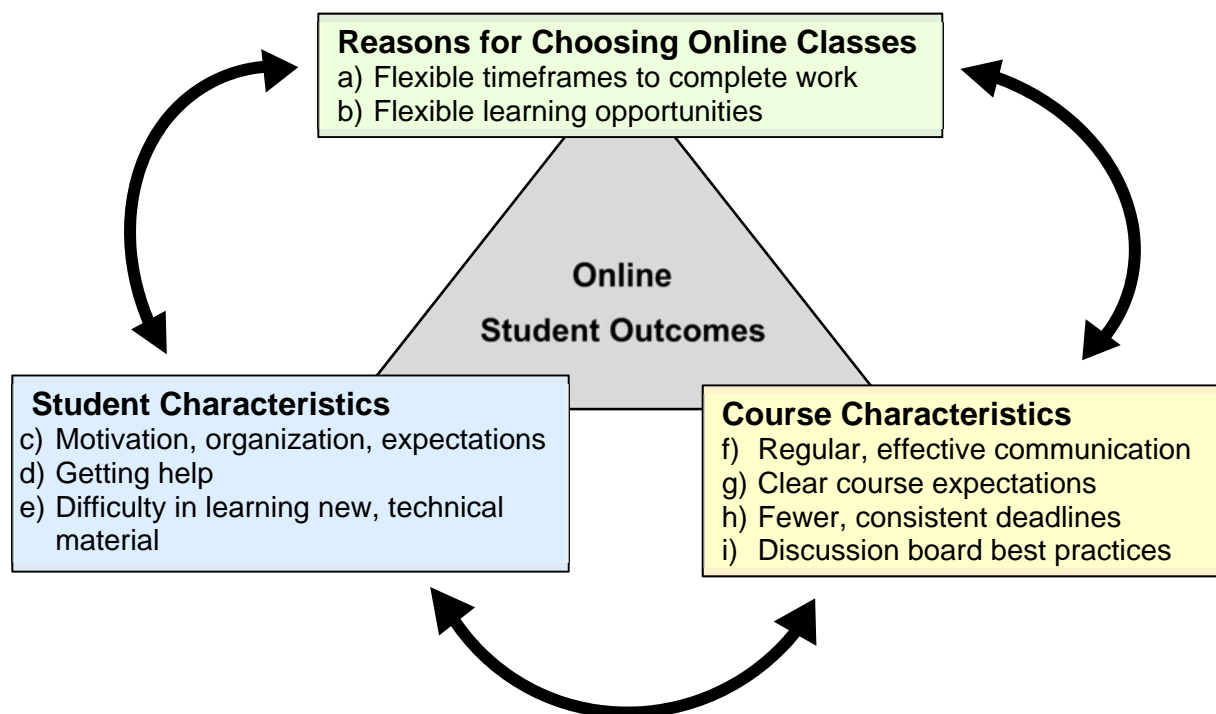
Framework of Analysis

To gather information about student experiences in online classes that will inform efforts to increase successful course completion rates, participants were asked about why they chose online classes, what factors were helpful, what challenges they encountered, and what their communications to and from other students and professors were like (for the full list of questions, see Appendix). Themes that arose from participants' responses fell into three categories: **Reasons for Choosing Online Classes**, **Student Characteristics**, and **Course Characteristics**. These themes framed the analysis.

Reasons for Choosing Online Classes generally pertained to the increased flexibility of the format. Participants required this flexibility because they balance work, childcare, and other classes. The requirements of increased course flexibility drove several *student characteristics* (such as difficulty getting help), and influenced the *course characteristics* to which participants responded well (such as fewer deadlines).

Themes included in **Student Characteristics** were informed by participants' descriptions of themselves and their academic motivations. These characteristics were often connected to participants' reasons for choosing online classes. They also affected participants' experiences in the classes: students who expected online classes to be easier than on-campus ones described falling behind early in their first online class.

Participants responded well to **Course Characteristics** which aligned with the Reasons for Choosing Online Classes and their own Characteristics. For example, participants indicated that a clear and comprehensive course outline provided at the beginning of the course supported their existing time management practices and helped them balance other responsibilities (such as work) with assignment deadlines.



Findings

Reasons for Choosing Online Classes

Most participants indicated they chose online classes because of the flexibility offered by the format. This flexibility was most apparent in two themes: (a) **flexible timeframes to complete work** and (b) **flexible learning opportunities**.

a) Flexible timeframes to complete work

Some participants indicated they would prefer to take classes on-campus, but they chose online classes because getting to campus is too time-consuming for their schedule. A variety of factors contributed to this perception. Perhaps the simplest, which was cited by participants in every focus group, was parking.

“The parking I find to be horrendous at Mesa College so there’s not a chance you’re getting me there in person.”

Another factor was that some participants work multiple jobs, and they simply don’t have enough time around or between work hours to physically attend a class. In online classes, however, they can view part of a lecture or complete part of an assignment before work, on a lunchbreak, or in between jobs. Many participants referred to this style of completing coursework (in increments throughout a week leading up to a deadline) as “working at my own pace.”⁸ Other participants said they do not have full control over their schedules, or have obligations other than school. The ability to access classwork at different times during the day throughout the week was important to these participants.

“[At] my job they plan the schedule monthly so doing online classes just helps me work around their schedule.”

Several participants who were parents indicated that online classes fit their childcare responsibilities. These parents appreciated that online classes allowed the flexibility to either fit classwork into their family’s childcare availability, or to complete classwork at the same time as looking after their children.

“I have an autistic son and once he’s done for the day, I can put my pajamas on and I can concentrate on schoolwork, or I can get up at 3:00AM, or I can do it in the middle of the day. [...] Sometimes we go to the pool and I’ll sit there and do homework and my son will get to swim.”

Some participants enrolled in online classes as part of a full-time course load. These participants chose online classes largely for two reasons:

⁸ This idea was intended to express working on multiple class assignments leading up to a deadline (usually at the end of the week), which participants typically contrasted to multiple deadlines within the same week.

- On-campus sections were full, not offered, or offered at a different campus.
- On-campus sections were only available at times that participants were already taking other classes. Participants often saw the online format as an opportunity to complete a class that they would otherwise have to postpone due to being unable to physically attend that class.

b) Flexible learning opportunities

Some respondents said they actually prefer online classes because the format allows different and varied opportunities to learn course material than traditional classrooms do. Multiple exposures to material is a tenant of classroom pedagogy, and some students require more exposures to master material than others do. In online classes with recorded lectures, these students can pause or rewind the lesson without worrying about slowing down the pace of the class for other students.

“In the online environment, I have the time to go back, read what was presented to me a couple of times [...], as opposed to being in a classroom and saying, well, we’re running out of time.”

Some participants indicated that classrooms are sources of anxiety for them, and that completing work in a more comfortable space was preferable. This perspective was not shared by a majority of participants, but those who did feel this way described factors such as public speaking and the stress of commuting as contributing to classroom-related anxiety.

“I just have some anxiety when I'm physically in the classroom sometimes. [...] I just find that it's more comfortable for me if I just work on my own and I do it on my own time.”

Participants chose online classes for a variety of reasons, but most were related to the increased flexibility of the online format. While this flexibility benefits students for the reasons discussed above, it also poses unique challenges to students, faculty, and SDCCD distance education.

Student Characteristics

Participants' responses about their own learning experiences in distance education were grouped into three themes: (c) **motivation, organization, and expectations**, (d) **getting help**, and (e) **difficulty in learning new, technical material**. Responses often revealed tension between student-level challenges and strengths; this section presents those challenges and strengths, and explores practices and perceptions that were beneficial and detrimental to students.

Challenges	Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Expectations that faculty will initiate communication regarding missing assignments.• Access to supplementary resources, such as other classmates, tutoring, and even instructors is decreased by the online format.• Access issues are amplified in subjects like math, in which students often have many procedural questions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The increased flexibility of online classes is a unique opportunity for students who may otherwise be unable to complete a course.• Detailed responses from professors encourage student engagement and motivation in courses.• Instructor-created materials were more highly valued by participants than references to outside resources.

c) Motivation, organization, and expectations

Participants were generally candid about instances when they weren't motivated, and some participants directly linked that lack of motivation to not being successful in an online class. Other participants indicated that their first online class was particularly challenging because they were still unfamiliar with the requirements of the online format.

“The online experience has helped me get my act together in terms of management, and making sure I’m responsible and accountable for making sure that my instructors give me the information I need [...] Most of the time I feel behind because of my own disorganization.”

Participants did not generally provide specific methods that were effective at helping them stay organized, but did agree that it is important to get familiar with a course's format early, either through physically printing out the syllabus or checking the course's platform more often than may be required.

“I don’t think you have to log in every day, but the first couple weeks try to, that way you can kind of get a feel for the pattern of like when things are due.”

These efforts may be initially viewed as excessive by students who are used to on-campus classes. But participants generally understood that the online format requires more intentional efforts to get accustomed to a class's requirements, deadlines, and pace.

Some participants reported a sense of disconnect from the class. This sense was strongest among participants who expected faculty to establish communication first. These participants did not feel able to initiate communication with their instructor, which often led to unsuccessful course grades.

“I did my work but missed two papers, and instead of reaching out and talking to me about it, or at least reminding me or checking in, she went on her merry way and didn’t. [...] It wasn’t fully her fault, I am taking responsibility for my miscommunication or lack of communication, but it was devastating when I can’t receive my financial aid for the following semester.”

Some participants developed stronger time management proficiencies over the course of their online enrollments, learning how to stay organized and understanding the consequences of falling behind. And while some participants understood the need to be proactive about communicating with instructors, others encountered difficulties in doing so (see **Regular, effective communication**), and still others never took the first step. These difficulties may be related to other new-to-college characteristics, such as being a younger, first-time, first-generation college student (Jaggars & Xu, 2016). These students' unfamiliarity with college-level expectations may be exacerbated by the increased flexibility of the online format.

d) Getting help

Even when participants were proactive about reaching out to their online instructor, many experienced difficulties in getting substantial answers. While this experience was not shared by all participants (some described their instructors' email responses as extremely helpful), there were still many who reported that their emailed questions to faculty were met with brief, unsupportive responses.

“I kind of reached out like, for help from the professor [...]. He just said, read this page of the textbook or look at the syllabus. [...] I got to a point where I could do the assignments to the best of my ability, get like a 30%, and then I could not continue from there because there were no resources. [...] I ended up having to take a no pass in the class.”

This experience was common enough among participants that it contributed to other themes, such as difficulty in learning new material (see next section) and a decreased sense of connection to the learning environment (see **Regular, effective communication**).

Some participants used either online or on-campus tutoring resources to resolve questions from their online classes. These experiences were varied. Participants who

reported that tutoring was helpful emphasized that they saw a tutor as soon as possible, and didn't wait until the end of the term. This suggests that effective use of tutoring resources happens when students are proactive and organized.

While some participants found tutoring to be helpful, others either found tutors' explanations difficult to apply, or were unable to access tutoring at all. Access issues were likely driven by the very factors which led students to choose online classes in the first place: work schedules, childcare responsibilities, or other demands on their time.

“A challenge for me is if I don't understand something, I don't have time to go see a tutor.”

Several focus group participants indicated that the online format makes it more difficult to get help from peers. While some said that discussion boards were helpful for solving logistical issues, only one participant said they found substantive content-related help from peers there. Several participants did contrast their online experiences with on-campus ones, saying they missed the opportunity to interact with others.

“I do miss being able to talk out challenges in the curriculum that I may be having. I personally learn better if I am teaching or sharing information with other people.”

e) Difficulty in learning new, technical material

One compound effect of the above challenges was that participants were reluctant take online classes in a subject they found difficult, such as math, or Microsoft programs like Excel. Participants said they tend to have more questions in difficult, technical subjects, and that they prefer on-campus classes because there are more opportunities to get those questions answered.

“I ask my professors questions all the time, so does every else in the classroom. So I just feel like doing [a math class] online, that would've been really hard.”

This sentiment was shared by participants who both were not confident in math and who had been successful in online math classes before. There was a general sense among participants that learning difficult material, particularly math, was made more challenging by a lack of resources that directly support the instructor's presentation of the lesson.

“I've taken a lot of advanced mathematics for engineering and I still couldn't pass trigonometry online because it was just impossible to understand what the professor was trying to convey purely through his own lectures and no textbook.”

Course Characteristics

Participants' responses about institution-centered issues in distance education were grouped into four themes: (f) **regular, effective communication**, (g) **clear course expectations**, (h) **fewer, consistent deadlines**, and (i) **discussion board best practices**. As among Student Characteristics, themes regarding online Course Characteristics often revealed parts of the online experience that are both challenges for students and strengths to their success.

Challenges	Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Incremental course design makes it harder for students with impacted schedules.• Short communications from instructors contributed to a lack of motivation.• Word-count requirements for discussion board postings made these assignments seem like busywork.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Comprehensive course outlines and early access to material supported students' time management efforts.• Detailed, prompt responses contributed greatly to students' sense of engagement with a course.

f) Regular, effective communication

Distance education regulations (CCCCO, 2008), accreditation standards (WASC, 2013), and the literature (Jaggars & Xu, 2016; Johnson, Mejia, and Cook, 2015) all state that regular, effective communication from faculty to students is a cornerstone of distance education. One study found that when online instructors “tended to post frequently, invited student questions through a variety of modalities, respond to student queries quickly, and solicit and incorporate student feedback,” students were more likely to perceive that the instructor “cared about the course and students' performance” (Jaggars & Xu, 2016, p. 19).

In the experiences of focus group participants, communications from professors generally took four forms:

1. Emails to the entire class
2. Emails to an individual student
3. Video introductions and lectures recorded by the instructor
4. Posted notices to the online learning platform (Blackboard⁹)

⁹ Focus groups were conducted following the Fall 2017 semester, at which time SDCCD online classes used Blackboard, an online learning management system. As of Summer 2019, all SDCCD colleges will transition to use Canvas.

The least valued of these by participants was notifications posted to Blackboard. Participants enrolled in multiple online courses either were overwhelmed by notifications or did not receive them in time, and did not perceive them to be connected to an existing syllabus or course schedule.

“It was just sort of, make sure you check Blackboard every day just in case something pops up. Oh, surprise, something was due yesterday.”

On the other hand, participants did value emails and recorded videos highly. These forms of communications were perceived to be more relevant, timely, and accessible than Blackboard notifications.

“At the beginning of each week, the professor sends out a little like, “We’re going to start the next module, this is what you are expected to do this week, just a reminder things are due this date,” or whatever.[...] So he’s just very attentive.”

The experiences of the focus group participants suggest that effective communications from instructors influenced their engagement with the course. The literature identifies this connection between instructor communications and student engagement as key to the development of critical thinking skills in online classes (Hosler & Arend, 2012). Further, instructor-created materials like recorded lectures have been found to improve performance in online math classes, compared to publisher-generated materials (Hegeman, 2015).

While effective communications were linked to course engagement among participants, their experiences were evidence for the converse as well. Participants who reported unhelpful email responses from their instructors connected that lack of communication to further issues in the class, up to and including an unsuccessful final grade. For many participants, this was an issue that built over time and contributed to a general sense of separation from their instructor. However, one participant explicitly linked an unhelpful response about a low grade on an assignment to a lack of motivation in the class.

“I emailed her and asked her to clarify what the issue was, [but] she just said redo it and never explained why. [...] To be perfectly honest, it just kind of killed my motivation to do the class.”

Other participants described feeling disconnected from classes in which the instructor relied on Blackboard-based communications, or responded to questions by referring to the syllabus.

“[An instructor] will put all the assignments up, post their PowerPoints that they’ve had for how many years and just keep it there, and then just leave the class. They’re like, OK, good luck, if you have any questions it’s in the syllabus.”

Additionally, some participants described being uncertain about their performance in a class until grades were available; when grades were not updated until the end of the semester, participants said they felt as if they had never had a chance to resolve issues.

The increased distance between faculty and students makes it harder for online instructors to perceive learners' needs and respond to them effectively (Kibaru, 2018; Hunt et al., 2014). Nonetheless, the implications of non-regular, ineffective communication resulting from that increased distance extend beyond lower student satisfaction. Brief or delayed responses by faculty established a perception among participants that those faculty didn't care about the students in those classes. Along with disengaging a student from a course, that perception made it less likely a student would seek out additional help, or communicate with a professor regarding hardships or difficulties. This in turn meant that students who had such perceptions about faculty were more likely to miss deadlines and receive low or failing grades in courses.

g) Clear course expectations

Participants expressed a strong preference for faculty who provided a comprehensive overview of assignments and assessments at the beginning of the course and consistent course structure. These experiences corroborate the literature, which suggests that students in online classes prefer learning objectives that are clearly stated and well-aligned to assessments, largely because there are fewer opportunities to clarify expectations (Jaggars & Xu, 2016). A detailed overview of assignments appears to have supported participants who were already organized, and helped other participants establish good organization practices.

“I have been blessed with a couple of instructors that really have their act together. [A professor] who was in the Information Technologies department basically has a tendency to map out the entire semester with information and videos and assignments.”

The literature regarding online course organization provides a possible explanation for students' preference for courses with a clear, comprehensive course outline. Predictable structure in content delivery can “reduce cognitive overload” which can otherwise overwhelm students and hinder progress through a course (Hegeman, 2015, p. 73). As students grow more familiar with the format of content delivery, they can devote more attention to processing complex content.

Several participants reported that their online instructors provided video introductions for themselves at the beginning of the course. These introductions, combined with a clear map of the syllabus, helped participants feel that they could manage the course's expectations.

“The professor has everything already uploaded on the site. [...] He even has YouTube videos of himself talking and everything is just so much easier when things are set up already and it's not just, you know, like a ghost teacher.”

h) Fewer, consistent deadlines

Many participants expressed that they choose online classes because the format accommodates a variety of schedule types: students balance multiple jobs, work schedules that change month-to-month, have childcare responsibilities, and navigate combinations of these and other factors. Participants who balance such obligations preferred classes that had one deadline per week rather than two or three.

“I can't always open Blackboard at work or if I'm on duty, I just don't have time to where they're like, hey you have 24 hours [to complete] a quiz... [If there isn't notification on Blackboard], you have to go into seven different folders to figure out, content by week, quiz this week, discussion this week, and a discussion that has to be done three different days...”

Multiple deadlines per week may be used by faculty for a variety of reasons, such as breaking up large assignments or encouraging repeated engagement with course material. Even when participants acknowledged these motivations, they reported that multiple deadlines per week interfered with their time management. Because the rhythm of a student's personal life may fluctuate week to week, a class with multiple deadlines per week can make it more difficult to turn in each assignment on time.

The literature identifies a regular course structure with consistently formatted modules as helpful for students in online classes, as such structure allows students to focus on the material being presented rather than learning new conventions (Hegeman, 2015). While one instructor may view their class, with two deadlines every week, as consistently structured, students may have a different perspective. The experiences of focus group participants suggest that they assess consistency of structure across all their online classes.

“The online classes that I felt I learned the most and did the best in, was a simple structure by the professor. They had maybe like three areas that they had assignments and it was very routine as to when they were due and how they were supposed to be done. But the professors that didn't have any type of that structure, where assignments are always changing and stuff like that, it just did not work at all.”

i) Discussion board best practices

Online instructors often attempt to foster interpersonal interactions among students through discussion board assignments. These assignments generally require that students create a post in response to a reading or video. These assignments work well when faculty provide clear expectations through rubrics for not only an original post, but also for peer responses; otherwise, the quality of these posts can be “perfunctory” (Jaggars, 2016, p. 23). While the literature suggests that discussion boards can serve as forums for students to resolve logistical or technical issues in the course (Johnson,

Mejia, and Cook, 2015), the experiences of focus group participants did not contain much evidence of such interaction.

Instead, participants interacted with other online students through discussion board assignments. Participants shared that their online instructors assigned both original posts, often in response to a reading or video, and responses to other students' posts. Some students appreciated these assignments, while others largely viewed them as "busywork."

Those who appreciated discussion boards understood that interaction is an important component of learning. These participants indicated that while the discussion board format may not be ideal, it does provide an opportunity to read others' perspectives.

"I was in a film course where we just like watched a lot of movies over time and hearing other people's interpretations of [...] a character's choice or the director's choice to use a particular shot [...] was really nice."

On the other hand, many participants indicated that they viewed discussion board assignments as requirements rather than as learning opportunities. These participants expected they would be required to demonstrate participation in the class through some amount of "busywork," and they often categorized discussion board assignments as such. This view was even acknowledged by those who appreciated discussion boards. Two factors contributed heavily to this perception: (1) quantity-related requirements instead of content-related ones and (2) a repetitive schedule of required posts and replies.

"Some teachers use [online discussions] really well. My current professor [...] does have a discussion but it's once a module, or once a bigger category, not once a week. [...] And then other [professors], it does feel like [discussion boards] are just kind of there every week [...] and it feels like you're making things up to say because you have to say something."

Many other participants had more strongly negative views of discussion boards. Again, many of these students understood that discussion board assignments are provided as opportunities for participation, but nonetheless felt the assignments were more tedious than instructional.

"I felt a lot of times online professors were assigning a lot of, you know, responding to discussion posts and all this kind of stuff that didn't actually feel very helpful in learning the material, but just to ensure we were partaking in the class."

These participants perceived discussion boards as a necessary tedium of online classes, and largely did not see them as valuable to the learning process.

Given the importance of interactions in learning, discussion board assignments are a potentially valuable tool for online instructors. However, participants' experiences make

it clear that all discussion board assignments do not meet that potential. Generally, participants reported that fewer, more substantive discussion board assignments were more constructive to the learning process than weekly posts with repetitive or similar prompts. Requirements about the length of a post or number of responses generally shifted participants' perception of these assignments away from opportunities for expression and discussion, and contributed to a sense that they were "busywork." The literature suggests that faculty provide content-related rubrics for discussion posts (Jaggars, 2016) as a way to address this perception.

Conclusion

While the experiences of focus group participants were varied, they revealed a number of challenges that made success in online classes difficult. Participants' responses also suggested a number of principles that respond to the needs of the online student population.

Challenges

In online classes, the increased distance between students and instructors can make learning more difficult. For some students, particularly those who have trouble making use of outside resources, this increased distance is exacerbated by brief emails from instructors which only refer to the syllabus. These students end up feeling disconnected and unmotivated to engage with course material. Discussion boards, which can foster interactions between students, were often not perceived as beneficial to learning. Participants instead described discussion board assignments as "busywork," especially when instructors imposed word-count requirements rather than content-based requirements.

For focus group participants, the increased distance from instructors was especially problematic in math classes. Participants were generally reluctant to take math classes online due to a perception that they would not be able to get questions answered. While tutoring did help some participants, others reported access issues that were largely related to the reasons they chose an online class.

Finally, participants expressed a strong preference for classes which had single weekly deadlines, instead of multiple deadlines per week. Similarly, participants expressed that an incremental course design, in which they could only access one week's material at a time, did not support their time management practices.

Strengths

Participants characterized good online courses as ones with clear structures, regular assignment deadlines and formats, and instructor-created content such as recorded lectures. Participants perceived that instructors who organized their courses this way were experienced and effective.

Participants also highly valued instructors who responded quickly and thoughtfully to emailed questions. Participants generally associated such communications with closer engagement with course material. Comprehensive course outlines and early access to material supported students' time management efforts.

Limitations of this Study

Several qualifications should be considered alongside the findings of these focus groups. First, due to their small size (n=38 for this study), focus groups do not necessarily reveal experiences representative of the student population. While they can identify a range of experiences, further inquiry (such as surveys) should be conducted to determine the prevalence of the experiences of focus group participants. This is especially important because focus group participants are more likely to represent extreme viewpoints.

Second, these focus groups were directed at understanding input components of online learning in order to better inform faculty training and student services. While the literature regarding assessment validity identifies a range of factors that influence assessment outcomes and the implications of test scores, those concerns are beyond the scope of this study. Nonetheless, as focus group participants interacted with both placement tests and learning outcomes tests, questions regarding assessment validity are relevant to their experiences.

Recommendations

1. **Foster student communications with professors.** Some participants expected online instructors to follow up regarding missed assignments – these students may benefit from additional information regarding online class expectations.
2. **Support faculty communications with students.** Participants often perceived online instructors as distant; this perception grew when their questions were met with brief responses that only referred to the syllabus. On the other hand, faculty who responded to questions thoroughly and provided comprehensive course guides were perceived as more engaged, a factor that participants connected to their own motivation in the course.
3. **Encourage course structures with weekly deadlines instead of two or three deadlines per week.** Participants often saw online classes as a way to earn credits while balancing work, childcare responsibilities, and other classes. Multiple weekly deadlines made it harder for students to stay current with assignments while meeting other obligations.
4. **Provide as much access to course material as possible.** Participants said they choose online classes because the format allows them to navigate competing demands on their time. This balancing act often meant reading ahead to take advantage of a free morning, or completing assignments early in anticipation of a busy work week. When course material is provided incrementally, students are less able to proactively manage their time.
5. **Support faculty to make use of content-based rubrics for discussion boards.** Participants perceived discussion board assignments as having little educational value when they were held to quantity- or length-related standards. Clear expectations regarding content of original responses to reading, and responses to those replies, may better direct students' efforts to engage with material.
6. **Embed course-aligned support resources in online learning platforms.** Participants often described math classes as difficult to take online due to not being able to get questions answered. Increased faculty communication with students and instructor-created content may partially mitigate these concerns, but some students may still benefit from further support. Paired with reminders to schedule appointments early and directions to tutoring centers, online tutoring may provide this support.
7. **Further research** regarding the success of students online should explore different groups' experiences. Students may have varying experiences, challenges, and assets based on age, educational goal, ethnicity, and employment status.

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Appendix

Focus Group Questions

Facilitator Introductions, Overview and Housekeeping (10 minutes)

1. Moderator introduction
 - a. *Hello everybody, my name is [...] and I will be leading our discussion today.*
2. Introduce observer and technical assistant

[...] is joining our group as an observer. They will be observing and taking general notes of the group.
3. Acknowledge agreement to be recorded
 - a. *Our conversation today will be recorded. The recording is only for research purposes. Only the researcher will be listening to the recording.*
4. Confidentiality statement and payment
 - a. *You all received and signed the confidentiality statement. As stated, names and personal information will not be used in any reports. All information that you provide today will remain completely anonymous.*
 - b. *You will receive \$50 for your participation in today's focus group. You should have received by email the forms required for payment. If you have not already done so, please complete and sign the forms, take a picture of the completed forms, and email the pictures to me at [...]*
5. Overview of focus group: purpose, who will use the information and how, time, structure and format
 - a. *We invited you to participate in this group to discuss your experiences with online learning at the San Diego Community College District. I will ask you several open-ended questions. Your personal opinions and experiences are very important to us. There are no right or wrong answers, so please feel welcome to express your open and honest opinions.*
 - b. *Today's discussion will last **90 minutes**. Following the discussion, you will receive a short 5-question follow-up survey. Please complete the survey as soon as possible so that we may process your compensation.*
 - c. *We ask that you turn off any background noise such as music or tv. For example: If a phone rings or there is noise, you will want to click **MUTE**.*
6. Mute and raise hand
 - a. *If you need to mute yourself, you can find the mute button under the "**Participants**" button. Please remember to unmute yourself when you'd like to speak to the group.*
 - b. *In order to allow everyone to speak I am going to ask you to use the "Raise hand" button. You can find that button also under "**Participants**".*
 - c. *Finally, please **check your name** as it appears on your screen. If only your first name appears you **do not** have to do anything. If your first and last name appears, click the blue icon at the top right of your screen. Click "Rename" and type in your first name only.*
 - d. *Are there any questions before we get started?*

Setting the Tone (10 minutes)

Participant Introductions

1. Please tell us your first name, which college(s) you are attending and for how long you have been attending, your major, and your education goal (degree, certificate, transfer, personal enrichment, employment, etc.).
 - a. How many online courses have you completed, how many are you currently taking, and were/are the classes fully or partially online or both?

Guided Questions (approximately 10 minutes/section)

2. Let's first talk about **why you decided to take an online class**. Please describe your decision to take an online class. [Question addresses student motivations](#).
 - a. Was it a parent or family member, friend or colleague who encouraged you to try an online class? What did they tell you about online learning?
 - b. What was it about the class(es) that made you decide to enroll (e.g., degree or transfer credit, within my major, general education requirement, for work or employment)?
3. Now let's talk about some of the **key differences between learning online and learning in a face-to-face classroom**. What do you do differently or the same when learning online compared to learning face-to-face in a physical classroom?
[Question addresses student perceptions](#).
 - a. What did you expect when you first enrolled in an online class? Was the class what you expected, or different from what you expected? If so, how so/in what way?
 - b. Are there **specific subjects** that you think are easier or more difficult to take online versus in a traditional face-to-face class? If so, which subjects and why/how so?
4. From this point on, let's focus on your experiences in your online classes last semester (Fall 2017). First, let's talk about the online class format and the instructor, and how they may or may not have influenced your online class experience last semester. Describe some aspects of the class, and tell us which ones you believe were **helpful or not helpful** for learning and eventually completing your online class. [Question addresses student perceptions](#).
 - a. Think about your **instructor** and how s/he interacted or **communicated** with you and other students. Was the communication helpful or did this present any challenges? If so, why/how so?
 - b. What about the class **activities and assignments** or communications via discussion board and chats? Were these helpful or were there any challenges with these? If so, why/how so?

5. Now let's think about other **things that may make online learning challenging**. Please reflect on your online learning experience **last semester** and think about what made online learning challenging for you.

Question addresses student behaviors.

- a. When and how often did you study (at the same day/time each week)?
 - b. Where did you usually study/Did you have a specific place where you studied?
 - c. How often did you log in to your online course?
 - d. Which resources did you use to help you study?
 - e. Is there anyone who helped you study? How often?
 - f. What about personal commitments and obligations (e.g., work and family)? Did any of these prevent you from successfully completing the class? If so why/how so?
6. Let's continue to talk a little more about the challenges you experienced in your online classes **last semester**. If you **fell behind in your online classes last semester**, what did you do to try to catch up? [Question addresses student behaviors](#).
- a. What was the situation that caused you to fall behind?
 - b. At what point in the semester did you realize that you were behind in your online class?
 - c. Do you feel that you were prepared for an online class? Why or why not?
 - d. Describe what you would do differently now (if anything) in your online class?
 - e. What would motivate you take another online class in the future (or are you currently taking an online class)?
7. What do you believe were **things that helped you** in your online classes **last semester**? [Question addresses student perceptions](#).
- a. Was there anything about your instructor and how he/she taught or responded that helped you?
 - b. Was there something about the lessons, assignments, or activities that helped you?
 - c. What about support services from the college (e.g., counseling, library, tutoring centers, college clubs)? Were there any particular supports that helped you with your online class?
 - d. What other supports can the colleges provide to you or other students who might face the challenges we've discussed today?
 - e. Is there anything that you would recommend to other online students to help them to be successful in an online class?
 - f. Any final thoughts?

Closing

Thank you very much for participating.