

"W" Telephone Survey of FCC Online Students 2007

Executive Summary

The survey was conducted during the winter of 2006 and the spring of 2007. From a sample of 356 students who had withdrawn from an online course 100 telephone interviews were completed successfully. The purpose of the survey was to find out why students withdraw from online courses. Specifically, the survey was designed to test the hypothesis that there is a statistically significant overlap between the reasons why the course is taken online and the reasons why the course is dropped. Here is a selection of 10 highlights.

1. The total of 100 respondents included 67 females and 33 males. The 67/33 ratio is consistent with the 70/30 female to male ratio in the overall online student population at FCC. The ratio for the F2F population of the College is 60 to 40. Taking the age of 22 as a dividing line, 48 of the respondents were 22 and under, 52 were older than 22.

2. The overlap between the reasons why the course was taken online and the reasons why the course was dropped is significant. A group of 69 respondents identified either "Convenience relative to a heavy work schedule"(41) or "Personal, Family, Health" (28) as the single one significant reason for *choosing* the course online (page 10). Asked about the reasons why they *withdrew* from the course, the 69 respondents marked 3 reasons as "Very Important" for their decision to withdraw. The reasons are (A) "Could not handle both work and study", (B) "Health, Personal Problems, Family", (C) "I signed up for too many classes". Given 69 respondents and a combined total of 117 check marks for the 3 reasons, 48 out the 69 respondents identified more than one of the three reasons for withdrawing from the course (page 31).

3. "W" students who have taken an online course previously are significantly more likely to take another course online (81%) than their first time counterparts (36%). Ranging from "Not Likely" to "Not a Chance" 45% of the first time online "W" students are not very eager to repeat the experience (page 4).

4. Did the "W" students participate in any of the class activities at all? 20% of the respondents said "No". This figure is significantly higher than the No-Show rate identified in 2005 for "W"s at 10.3% for the end of the second week of classes (page 8).

5. The survey results are revealing not only in what they affirm, but in what they rule out. 69% of the respondents identify two work and family related factors as the single one significant reason for choosing the course online. The next highest ranking reasons come in at 6% for "Travel sometimes" and 5% for "F2F class was full". Only 2 of 100 respondents say they took the course online because they thought online was easier (page 10).

6. Including two reasons that were added by respondents, the survey listed 21 possible reasons

for the decision to withdraw from the course. They can be grouped into three categories: (A) “Personal/Circumstantial”, (B) “Course or College Related”, and (C) “Other”. At a ratio of 2:1, 57% of the respondents identified their reasons for withdrawing in category (A), whereas only 28% listed course or college related reasons (page 13).

7. It is important, of course, to inquire about the reasons that in retrospect explain the decision to withdraw. It is equally important to ask the 80% of students who did participate in the course (page 8) what their experience was before they made the decision to withdraw. The answer is: We fell behind. Actually, 10% of the respondents mention “Getting Behind” as the one most significant reason for withdrawing, but more importantly, 33% of 90 respondents (who articulated one piece of advice to other online students in Q12) formed a chorus saying “Keep up with the pace; don’t fall behind!” (page 14). There seems to be room for intervention because even the most “Personal and Circumstantial” reasons are likely to announce themselves in “Falling Behind”. What do instructors do when students fall behind?

8. Using PeopleSoft data for comparison, the Grade Point Averages for the 100 survey respondents is shown to distribute over the range from 0 to 4 in much the same percentage segments as the GPA for a general population of 730 students who take only online classes. It is not the case that the GPA for online “W” students is lower than the general population of online students (page 33).

9. Previous FCC retention data indicated a correlation between date of registration and success rate (defined as receiving an A, B, or C grade). In the 2005 figures, the success rate declined roughly from around 90% for early registration to about 70% for late registration. Tracking the registration dates for the 336 online “W” students in our original sample only 23% registered “late”, i.e. during the period of 1 week before and 1 week after the beginning of the semester. Online “W” students are not disproportionately associated with late registration (page 32).

10. Did students choose the online course themselves or were they guided by an advisor? A majority of 77% said they chose it themselves, 19% reported guidance by an advisor (page 5). There seems to be room for intervention when 33% indicate that being enrolled in too many courses was either ‘Very Important’ or ‘Somewhat Important’ for their decision to withdraw (page 11)..

(The full report is available as booklet and online at <http://courses.frederick.edu/faculty>)