DISTANCE LEARNING COURSEWORK:
A CSM Student Profile

INTRODUCTION

This report presents a profile of CSM students enrolling in distance learning coursework (telecourse and on-line), Fall 1999 – Spring 2002. The data reported below represents 5,271 unduplicated students enrolling in 6,792 distance learning courses during the past 6 semesters (Fall 1999, Spring 2000, Fall 2000, Spring 2001, Fall 2001, and Spring 2002.) During this period of time, these 5,271 students enrolled in and received a grade in 4,233 telecourses and 2,559 on-line courses. Throughout this analysis, comparisons are made with “traditional format” courses—i.e., all other credit courses offered during the same period of time.

Figure 1 displays the total number of distance learning enrollments in relation to total CSM enrollments. Although the number of distance learning sections offered have been steadily increasing, traditional format courses still account for 96.1% of total course enrollments.

Figure 2 examines how many students enroll in distance learning courses only as compared to a combination of distance learning and traditional format courses. These data show the following enrollment preferences in terms of the following:

A) Students enrolling in on-line coursework only — 15.7%
B) Students enrolling in telecourses only — 37.5%
C) Students enrolling in distance learning [on-line and/or telecourse] — 49.6%
D) Students concurrently enrolling in distance learning and traditional format courses — 50.4%

Figure 3 displays the total number of distance learning courses enrolled in per term. These data indicate the following: more than three-quarters (77.6%) of students enroll in only 1 distance learning course per term; 17.8% enroll in two courses; 3.4% enroll in three courses; 1.2 enroll in four – six courses.

Figures 4 – 6 presents a demographic profile of distance learning students in terms of gender, age, and ethnicity. This profile is disaggregated in terms of student preferences for: telecourses; on-line courses; and distance learning coursework combined. For purposes of comparison, the demographic profile of the entire CSM student population is also presented.
Gender. As Figure 4 indicates, female students show a strong preference for distance learning coursework as compared to male students: 69.4% vs. 30.6%. In comparison, females comprise 51.3% of the total CSM population.

Age. Distance learning courses attract older students (40 years or greater) at a significantly greater rate than students 20 years old or younger: 30.5% vs. 7.3%. This difference is even greater in terms of enrollment in on-line courses: 30.2% vs. 4.4%. (See Figure 5) In comparison, students 40 years or older comprise only 15.9% of the total CSM population. Conversely, students 20 years old or younger are vastly underrepresented in distance learning courses as compared to their proportional share of the total CSM student population: 7.3% vs. 27.3%

Ethnicity. As Figure 5 indicates, the proportion of White students enrolling in distance learning courses is greater than their share of CSM total enrollment: 53.8% vs. 41.6%. However, there are significant ethnic variations in terms of preference for telecourses vs. on-line courses:

- Whereas African Americans represent 3.3% of the total CSM student population, they comprise 6.3% of telecourse enrollments and 2.7% of on-line enrollments.
- Asian/Pacific Islander students show a strong preference for on-line courses as compared to telecourses: 24.1% vs. 10.5%.
- Hispanic students demonstrate a preference for the traditional in-class format as opposed to distance learning format. Whereas Hispanics represent 17.4% of the total CSM student population, they comprise 14.2% and 10.9% of enrollments in telecourses and on-line courses, respectively.
CONCLUSION

The expansion of distance learning and on-line learning programs is being experienced in all segments of higher education. This expansion, in what has been called “off-campus” education, will continue to increase as the California Community Colleges respond to the needs and expectations of students who are best served by venues other than “traditional” on-campus sites and classrooms. Accordingly, College of San Mateo has kept pace with these changing demands by offering expanded distance learning opportunities in the form of both telecourses and on-line courses.

Through California Assembly Bill AB 1123 [2000], the State Legislature declared that access to higher education is the primary goal for the use of educational technology, and that all adults in the State shall have access to educational opportunities, regardless of income level, geographic location, physical limitation, or the size of the school they attend. The State Legislature also found that a distance learning venue can provide promising educational opportunities for individuals without access to traditional, campus-based instruction, those with different learning styles and training needs, as well as for those limited by family, time, and place constraints.

Most observers agree that the use of educational technology in the form of distance learning is not a goal unto itself. Rather, it is appropriately viewed as a means of achieving the Statewide goal of ensuring that California’s citizenry has access to higher education. Although educational technology in the form of distance learning provides a new way of addressing traditional educational needs, technology is clearly not the answer to all educational problems. The following issues have been hotly debated in national forums regarding the role of technology in higher education: accreditation; intellectual property rights; changing faculty roles; pedagogical techniques; assessing student learning; staff development; student support services; courseware development; and training and support.

Mindful of the above issues, College of San Mateo will continue to explore ways to use technology and distance learning as a means of providing postsecondary access. Furthermore, the College is guided by the principle that time and place issues associated with work, family, or other obligations should not impede those seeking access to a Community College education.