

# Study: Students prefer 'real' classrooms, not online

By Carla Rivera, Los Angeles Times

As colleges are rushing – or being pushed – to embrace online education, they might want to take pause: Most students prefer connecting with teachers and fellow students and don't want to take all of their classes online, a study suggests.

Students preferred direct instruction if they expected a course to be difficult, singling out math and science, according to the study released Thursday by the Community College Research Center at Columbia University's Teachers College.

They also preferred a face-to-face setting when studying subjects they considered interesting or important, especially if the class was in their major. Many of the students said they learned more when the instructor is present.

The overall findings suggest that demand for online courses may be less than advertised. That consideration may become more important as many states move toward greater online offerings as a way to increase access and lower costs.

The drive in California is being led by Gov. Jerry Brown, who proposed new funding for online efforts in his 2013-14 budget plan, including nearly \$17 million for the state's 112 community colleges to create a "virtual campus."

"In our students, about 10 percent said yes if I could take all of my courses online that would be helpful, but 90 percent said they'd like to take some online mixed with face-to-face," said study author Shanna Smith Jaggars, who is the assistant director of the research center. "If students are not able to get into courses because there are not enough course sections,

it doesn't seem to suggest that adding more online courses is the answer."

The findings, drawn from a larger study, are based on interviews with 46 students at two community colleges in Virginia who were taking at least one online class in spring 2011. They were a mix of ages and most were working.

Most students said they took online courses because of the flexible schedule, and some older students said they preferred a virtual classroom because they didn't have to interact with their younger classmates.

But most said they missed the personal back-and-forth of the classroom.

"It just seems more, when you do it online, if you need help, your teacher is basically not there," said one student. "Like face-to-face, she can help you a little bit more. But then when it comes to online, you have to teach yourself, I guess you could say."

Nearly 27 percent of California's 2.4 million community college students take at least one online class, up from 12.5 percent in 2005-06, according to officials. Students ages 18 to 24 account for 61 percent of those enrolled in online courses, and those younger students seem to be driving demand.

But the Columbia study echoes concerns that online learning doesn't serve the needs of all students.

"It's consistent with what the chancellor [Brice Harris] has been saying, that we don't want students taking 100 percent of their classes online, it needs to be the proper mix," said spokesman Paul Feist. "We need to restore course offerings at community colleges and restore access, but that will not be exclusively online."