Study: Community college students do poorly in online classes

By Danya Perez-Hernandez, Chronicle of Higher Education

While the use of online courses is increasingly widespread in California's community colleges, the success rate of students in the courses lags behind that of their peers taking in-person courses, according to a report released last week by the Public Policy Institute of California, a nonprofit and nonpartisan think tank that focuses on the state's public programs.

The report, "Online Learning and Student Outcomes in California's Community Colleges," says online-course enrollment reached close to one million in the 2010-11 academic year, up from 114,000 in 2002-3. Almost 530,000 California community-college students enrolled in online courses during 2011-12, nearly 20 percent of all students taking credit courses, the report says.

The institute's researchers found that students were less likely to complete online courses than traditional courses, and were less likely to complete online courses with passing grades. But when it comes to long-term impact, measured by the likelihood of students' earning degrees or transferring to four-year-colleges, those who combined traditional and online courses were more successful than those who took face-to-face courses alone.

According to the report, in 2011-12, 79.4 percent of students completed online courses they started, compared with 85.9 percent of students completing traditional courses. The findings are based on student and course data collected from the 112 community colleges in California.

Read the whole story