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# Examining Christian College Students' Summer School Choices

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## **Abstract**

Faculty and administrators use anecdotal evidence to assume the reasons full-time traditional students at private Christian colleges choose to take online summer courses at community colleges instead of their own online offerings. The purpose of this research was to provide empirical evidence necessary to make informed decisions regarding strategic planning for enrollment efforts at private Christian colleges. Students in the research sample placed the highest priority on summer courses they perceived to be cheaper and easier. Implications for distance learning administrators are presented.

## **Introduction**

Full-time students at Christian colleges often elect to take online courses from community colleges during nontraditional terms. While opportunities for online learning may be limited at many Christian colleges, some students choose to take coursework at a community college even when similar courses are offered by the college they attend full-time. The purpose of this research was to uncover the factors contributing to the summer school choices of students who elected to take a course from a community college instead of a course offered by the Christian college where they were enrolled as full-time students. Considerations for administrators of online programs at Christian colleges are explored.

## **Review of the Literature**

Using anecdotal evidence, some college faculty and administrators believe students take courses from community colleges during nontraditional terms because students perceive them to be cheaper and easier than the courses offered at their traditional college. The literature suggests access, cost and the perception of rigor may contribute to Christian college students' summer school choices. Private four-year colleges have been slow to offer online opportunities to traditional and nontraditional students. The number of private nonprofit colleges with online

courses and full programs grew to 48.4% in 2012, but 70.6% of public colleges offered full online programs and almost every public college has offered online courses since 2002 (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Online access to a Christian college education is improving, but still-limited offerings may influence students' summer school choices.

The cost of education plays a significant role in students'; college choices. In years following a national decline in disposable income and gross domestic product, enrollment at community colleges has increased—presumably due to students who chose to attend a community college instead of a four-year institution (Wetstein, Hays & Nguyen, 2011). The two highest factors affecting attrition at private four-year colleges are adequacy of personal financial resources and the amount of financial aid available to students (ACT, 2010). Students who do choose to attend more expensive private colleges often employ strategies to lower their overall cost of education by taking general education courses during the summer term at a community college to transfer back to their private school (Chen, Dundar, Hossler, Shapiro, Torres, Zerquera & Ziskin, 2012; De Vise, 2010).

Little has been published to compare the actual rigor of community college coursework with that of four-year nonprofit private institutions, but the perception remains that courses taken from a community college will be easier. Given the mission of community colleges to provide access to students who are less academically prepared, their curriculum may indeed be different (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). As well, fewer faculty at community colleges hold terminal degrees (NCES 2004b) and more are serving in a part-time or adjunct capacity as compared to faculty at nonprofit private colleges (NCES 2004a), which may lead some to assume the quality of their courses are inferior (Tensions, 2010).

### **Statement of Purpose**

Anecdotal evidence and faculty perceptions abound as to why students choose to take summer courses online at another institution when their primary institution offers similar online offerings, but the literature is lacking empirical evidence. Anecdotal evidence is not sufficient to guide strategic planning for enrollment at Christian colleges. The purpose of this research was to uncover the actual factors that guide students' choices for summer school education.

### **Methodology**

Of interest in this research were full-time traditional students enrolled at a private Christian college who chose to take summer coursework online at a different institution when similar coursework was available online from their primary college. The convenience sample of 111 students was drawn from a small Christian college in the Midwest. The 111 students were enrolled full-time at their primary college in the spring of 2012, took a course during the summer at a different institution, and returned as full-time students to their primary college in the fall of 2012.

An electronic survey (Appendix A) was developed to collect and store student' responses to questions regarding their summer school choices. The survey adapted based on students' responses to the question that asked whether they were aware their college offered online

summer courses for the summer of 2012. Each student was contacted through their college email with a request to complete the online survey, and the link to the survey was provided. The survey was available for a period of ten days, with reminders automatically sent every two days within the time it was open. Survey results were stored within the survey software, then analyzed using SPSS 20.

## Results

Examination of transcripts revealed that 197 courses were transferred by 111 students after the summer 2012 academic term. Most of those courses, 84.8%, were taken from a community college within the same state as the Christian college and 55.3% were taken from the community college nearest geographically.

All 111 students who transferred in a course from the summer term were requested to take the survey, and 88 students completed the survey for a response rate of 79.3%. Each returned survey was fully completed, and examination of the data showed no outliers. All surveys were included and used in this research, resulting in an actual sample size of .

Using descriptive statistics it was determined that 86.4% of the survey respondents took a course online, 9.1% took a course on a campus, and 4.5% took a combination of both online and onsite courses. With 94.3% of responders indicating they were aware their primary college offered online courses in the summer of 2012, it is clear students' decision to take a course from another institution was an intentional one and not due to lack of awareness.

Students were asked to select the top three reasons they chose to take a course from another academic institution. Table 1 reveals the percentage of students who placed each reason within their top three. Overwhelmingly at 84.3%, the top reason given was that tuition was less expensive at the other college, followed by students' perception that the courses at another institution would be easier. Twenty-eight percent of students indicated the specific course they wished to take was not offered by their traditional college.

Table 1

Reason	Percentage of Students Indicating the Reason in Their Top 3 Choices
Tuition was less expensive at the other college	84.1%
I thought it would be easier at a different college	39.8%
The course I needed wasn't offered at (name of college)	28.4%
The start or end date of the course worked	18.2%

better in my schedule	
I wanted to transfer the course in because I was concerned it would bring my GPA down	16.9%
Financial aid would not cover the course at (name of college)	13.3%
I thought the course would be better at a different college	4.8%
I preferred to take the course with a different instructor	3.6%
I wanted to take the course in an onsite classroom, not online	2.4%

Crosstabulation in SPSS was used to determine whether a combination of choices was prevalent among respondents. No combination of three choices was selected by respondents with any significance, and in fact only 2% of respondents selected all three of the most commonly selected choices. Though no set of three was selected with any significance, the following two choices were selected with a frequency above 5% of respondents (Table 2).

Table 2

	Perception of Ease	Course Not Offered	Timing of Course	Concern for GPA	Financial Aid
Tuition	34%	19%	14%	14%	12.5%
Perception of Ease		10%	8%	8%	

At 34% of respondents, the most likely combination of factors in students' summer school choice was "Tuition was less expensive at the other college" and "I thought it would be easier at the other college."

Only 5 respondents indicated they were not aware their primary college offered online courses in the summer of 2012. Of the 5, only 1 reported talking with their advisor about registering for a summer course at their primary college, and 2 talked with their advisor about registering for a summer course at another institution. None of the five attempted to find information about summer courses at their primary college on either the internal portal or external website.

The comments shared by the students who responded to the survey reflected their strong dissatisfaction with the cost per credit for summer courses at their Christian college, particularly given that the summer courses were to fulfill their general education requirements.

*"The online prices...are absolutely ridiculous."*

*"[C]lasses are WAY more expensive to take over the summer."*

*"I took three 4 credit classes at [a community college] for the price of one 4 credit class here."*

*"[Name of college] was way too expensive for taking gen eds compared to the other colleges nearby."*

Though comments were almost entirely related to the cost per credit hour, a few students hinted at the rigor of the Christian college compared to the rigor they perceived from community college courses.

*"I would be okay taking a course at [name of college] but it may be to (sic) tough and too expensive."*

*"Online classes at [name of college] are too expensive and too time consuming."*

Thirty-four percent of students indicated an intention to take a course again in the summer of 2013, but only 11.1% of those students would take the course at their primary college if it was offered. Given respondents strong feelings about the cost of tuition, it is the most logical factor in their future summer course decisions.

## **Discussion**

Almost every student in this sample who chose to take an online course at another institution during the summer of 2012 did so with the full awareness that their own institution offered similar coursework. The cost per credit hour and perception of rigor were the primary factors that influenced their decisions, with availability of specific courses as the next closest factor. The research provides empirical evidence that supports faculty perception that students transfer in courses from community colleges after the summer term because students believe those courses to be cheaper and easier.

Examination of the cost of tuition reveals an interesting dichotomy. The cost per credit hour for online tuition at the students'; full-time college was \$385, compared to \$150 at nearby community colleges—a significant difference. Interestingly, the tuition per academic year at the private college was \$25,590 for two semesters totaling 24-36 credits, compared to \$3312 to \$4968 for 24-36 credits at the community colleges. Despite that, the students in this study chose to attend the private college as full-time students during the traditional academic year even though tuition was as much as 7.7 times more expensive than the tuition at the community college.

At this research site the tuition rate of online courses was less than half the tuition rate for courses taken at the same college during the traditional academic year. The online tuition rate was \$385 per credit hour, but the per credit hour rate during the traditional academic year ranged from \$710 for 36 credits per year, up to \$1066.25 per credit hour for 24 credits per year. Despite the discounted rate of tuition for online courses, students perceived them to be overly expensive.

While it is unclear as to why students were willing to pay significantly more for education during the traditional academic year, there are several possible explanations. Financial aid packages at Christian colleges are often substantial, drastically reducing the cost of a full year of attendance. At the college in this study, the average financial aid package reduced the cost of attendance by two-thirds. When students' tuition is discounted in this manner, the difference in tuition with a

community college may seem more reasonable. Scholarship money was not available for summer school at the Christian college in this study. Because students may have paid for summer coursework out-of-pocket, or borrowed funds specifically for summer coursework, they may have been more aware of the cost difference.

Another possible explanation is that students might be willing to pay a higher rate of tuition for the Christian college experience, but perceive that experience to be exclusive to traditional academic terms. Many students choose a Christian college because of the integration of faith and learning, the opportunity for Christian student life programs, and to form relationships with Christian faculty (Burks & Barrett, 2009; Noel-Levitz, 2010). Opportunities for direct interaction with professors, social activities, and active religious participation may be less prevalent during a nontraditional term.

The students who elected to take a course somewhere other than their traditional full-time college did not believe the quality of the course or the quality of the instructor would be better at another institution. Students may not place a high value on general education coursework (Harmes & Miller, 2007) and therefore prefer the perceived value and ease of a community college over any perceived quality of the general education course from the private Christian college.

## **Implications**

Where does this leave administrators of distance learning programs at Christian colleges? Difficult decisions must be made on how resources are allocated to support the mission and strategic plan of the institution.

The common strengths of Christian colleges-- quality coursework from experienced professors skilled at integrating faith and learning—do not appear to influence traditional students' summer school decisions. In order to retain their students for the often under-utilized third term, Christian colleges must either reduce the perception of rigor of their coursework or determine whether they can reduce the cost of tuition to compete with community colleges. The first is nonsensical, but the second may not be feasible.

New initiatives and programs that meet the needs of adult learners—an emerging market for many Christian colleges—may take precedence for time and effort. Programs for adult learners are often aligned with the mission of Christian colleges and provide an additional source of enrollment for the institution. Instead of competing with community colleges, distance learning administrators at Christian colleges might better serve their institutions by shifting the focus to partnerships with community colleges that facilitate the transition of adult students from associates degree programs to online or hybrid adult degree completion programs, leveraging the value of an affordable education from community colleges with the value of faith-based learning in programs that lead to bachelors and graduate degrees from private four-year Christian colleges. The low enrollment of traditional students in the summer term may be negated by the increased enrollment of adults in certificate and degree programs.

## Conclusion

Even small changes in enrollment can critically impact the fiscal stability of a private Christian college. Understanding students' enrollment decisions during the summer term will inform strategic decisions about tuition, marketing, staffing, budget and institutional priorities. Many traditional students want their summer courses to be cheap and easy. Private Christian colleges must determine whether it is in the institution's best interest to provide that, or to expend resources to seek out new enrollment opportunities.

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## Appendix A

1. How did you take your summer transfer course(s)?  
Onsite  
Online  
Combination of both
  2. Did you know that (name of college) offered online courses in the summer of 2012?  
Yes  
No  
For students who responded with yes, the following questions were asked:
  3. Please identify the top three reasons you chose to take your course from another college:  
The course I needed wasn't offered at (name of college)  
I thought it would be easier at a different college  
The start or end date of the course worked better in my schedule  
Financial aid would not cover the course at (name of college)  
I wanted to transfer the course in because I was concerned it would bring my GPA down  
Tuition was less expensive at the other college  
I thought the course would be better at a different college  
I preferred to take the course with a different instructor  
I wanted to take the course in an onsite classroom, not online
  4. Do you intend to take a course again this summer?
  5. If you decide to take a course this summer, do you plan on taking it from (name of college)?
  6. Please share any comments that might assist us in offering online courses that would meet your needs.  
For students who responded that they were not aware the college offered online courses in the summer of 2012, the following questions were asked:
  7. Did your advisor talk with you about registering for a summer course at (name of college)?
  8. Did your advisor talk with you about registering for a summer course at another college?
  9. Did you attempt to find information about summer courses on (name of college's internal information system for students)?
  10. Did you attempt to find information about summer courses on the website (name of college's external website)?
  11. Do you plan on taking a course this summer?
  12. If you decide to take a course this summer, do you plan on taking it from (name of college)?
  13. Please share any other information to help us ensure you have access to the courses you need this summer.
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*Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, Volume XVI, Number II, Summer 2013*  
*University of West Georgia, Distance Education Center*  
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