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Preparing Students for Online Courses: Why We Need Better Student Readiness Activities

Rachel Hare Bork

Community College Research Center

Teachers College, Columbia University

hare@tc.edu

Meg Buchanan Foster

Division of Student Affairs

J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College

mbfoster@reynolds.edu

Ghazala Hashmi

Quality Enhancement Plan

J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College

ghashmi@reynolds.edu

Innovations 2012 Conference
Philadelphia, PA
March 5, 2012

Presentation Overview

1. CCRC Study of Stakeholder Expectations of Online Courses
2. J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College's approach to an orientation to learning online – Center for Distance Learning (CDL) 001
3. Assessing CDL 001
4. Questions

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Context

- Distance learning enrollment is growing in community colleges, yet many courses have high withdrawal rates
- Existing empirical research suggests that instructors and students' expectations of college courses may be misaligned in both face-to-face and online courses
- There is limited research on online learning in community colleges, as well as on the importance of course expectations

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Why Expectations Matter

- Misalignment of student and instructor expectations results in a poor experience for all parties
  - Instructors may blame students for not being prepared and/or understanding the demands of college-level courses
  - Students may feel defeated by the demands of college and convince themselves that they do not belong in college
- Distance learning courses amplify the importance of aligned expectations because of asynchronous interaction and pedagogy

What Can Be Gained from Studying Expectations

- Given the growth of distance learning, examining stakeholder expectations can improve:
  - Student readiness for online learning
  - Instructor pedagogy & preparedness
  - Institutional structures and policies governing distance learning

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Data & Methods

- Part of a larger qualitative study on teaching and learning in the online environment
- Fieldwork at 2 community colleges in Virginia
- Data sources:
  - 46 student interviews
  - 38 faculty and administrator interviews
  - 26 virtual classroom observations of high-enrollment courses
- All transcripts audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded based on stakeholder expectations and opinions of online courses, students, instructors, and the institution in general

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Overview of Findings I

- Stakeholders generally agreed on broad expectations of online courses, but they disagreed on the **details** of the expectation
- Instructors and students both expected that online courses would be easier than face-to-face courses prior to involvement in an online course, but after their initial experience felt that online courses are in fact more difficult and more time-consuming than traditional courses

Overview of Findings II

- Greatest overlap among stakeholders is the notion that successful online students need excellent time-management
- Expectations differed broadly and in the details:
  - Pedagogy and assignments
  - Course organization
  - Communication and feedback
  - Student technological competency
  - Student readiness

Time Management Expectations of Students

Students' expectations of themselves	Instructors' expectations of students	Expectations Alignment
Students expect themselves to be responsible for their own learning **as guided by the instructor**	Instructors expect students to take **complete responsibility for their own learning**	Different
Students expect themselves to balance work, home, and school demands to stay on top of school deadlines	Instructors expect students to meet course deadlines	Same
Students expect themselves to be self-driven to stay on task and complete assignments	Instructors expect students to be independently motivated to apply themselves to course assignments. **Instructors do not expect that they can contribute to student motivation by developing engaging activities and pedagogical approaches**	Different

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Expectations of Students

Category	Students' expectations of themselves	Instructors' expectations of students
Technological competency	Students expect themselves to already possess the requisite technological skills for online courses	Instructors expect students to have adequate technological skills and appropriate computer access
Communication & Feedback	Students expect themselves to communicate about logistical issues more than academic issues because of the lack of immediate response	Instructors expect students to be proactive in communication and ask for help when needed
Student Readiness	Students expect that talking to friends and family prior to online course enrollment is adequate preparation to determine online courses enrollment	Instructors expect students to attend an institutional student readiness activity prior to online course enrollment

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Student Readiness

- Students did not consider whether online learning matched their skills and learning preferences prior to enrollment
- Instructors expect that students receive information about expectations in the online environment *before* enrolling in online courses
- Fundamental misalignment between what instructors and students expect students need to do to prepare for online courses

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J. SARGEANT REYNOLDS CC'S ORIENTATION TO LEARNING ONLINE

CDL 001: Creating an Orientation to Learning Online

- Component of QEP is to create a robust orientation to online learning.
- Created a team to develop orientation program. Team was group of volunteers that connected three vital areas: Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, and Information Technology.
- Critical to success was including faculty and staff who brought their expertise/perspective as online teachers and students.

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CDL 001: Creating an Orientation to Learning Online

- Assessment of both online instructors and online students (expectations, experiences).
- Assessment of college's use of SmarterMeasure (tool which measures a learner's readiness for succeeding in an online environment; has 7 components). In particular:
  - Life Factors section which looks at whether students have the time, place, reason, resources, and skills.
  - Individual Attributes which measures time management, procrastination, persistence, academic attributes, locus of control, and willingness to ask for help.

CDL 001: Overview

Team asked critical questions which shaped program:

- Would the program be facilitated? Would those facilitators be paid?
- Would the orientation program be housed in Blackboard or just freely available on the web?
- How much time could we require of students?
- How much work could we require of students?
- Had to develop marketing strategy to market CDL 001 to students, faculty and advising staff.
- Had to develop training program for staff/faculty to facilitate section.

CDL 001: Overview

Program Components:

- Orientation session takes 4-6 hours to complete.
- Simulates experience of being in a distance learning class and is housed in Blackboard.
- Session is facilitated by trained faculty/staff member.
- 2 Learning Units are divided over two weeks.
- Assignments include: 3 discussion board posts, quiz, library research assignment, and final reflection which uses SafeAssign.

At the present time CDL 001 is not a requirement.

Students are strongly encouraged to take CDL 001.

CDL 001: Review Modules

View: Library Resources module

https://jsr.my.vccs.edu/jsp/home.jsp

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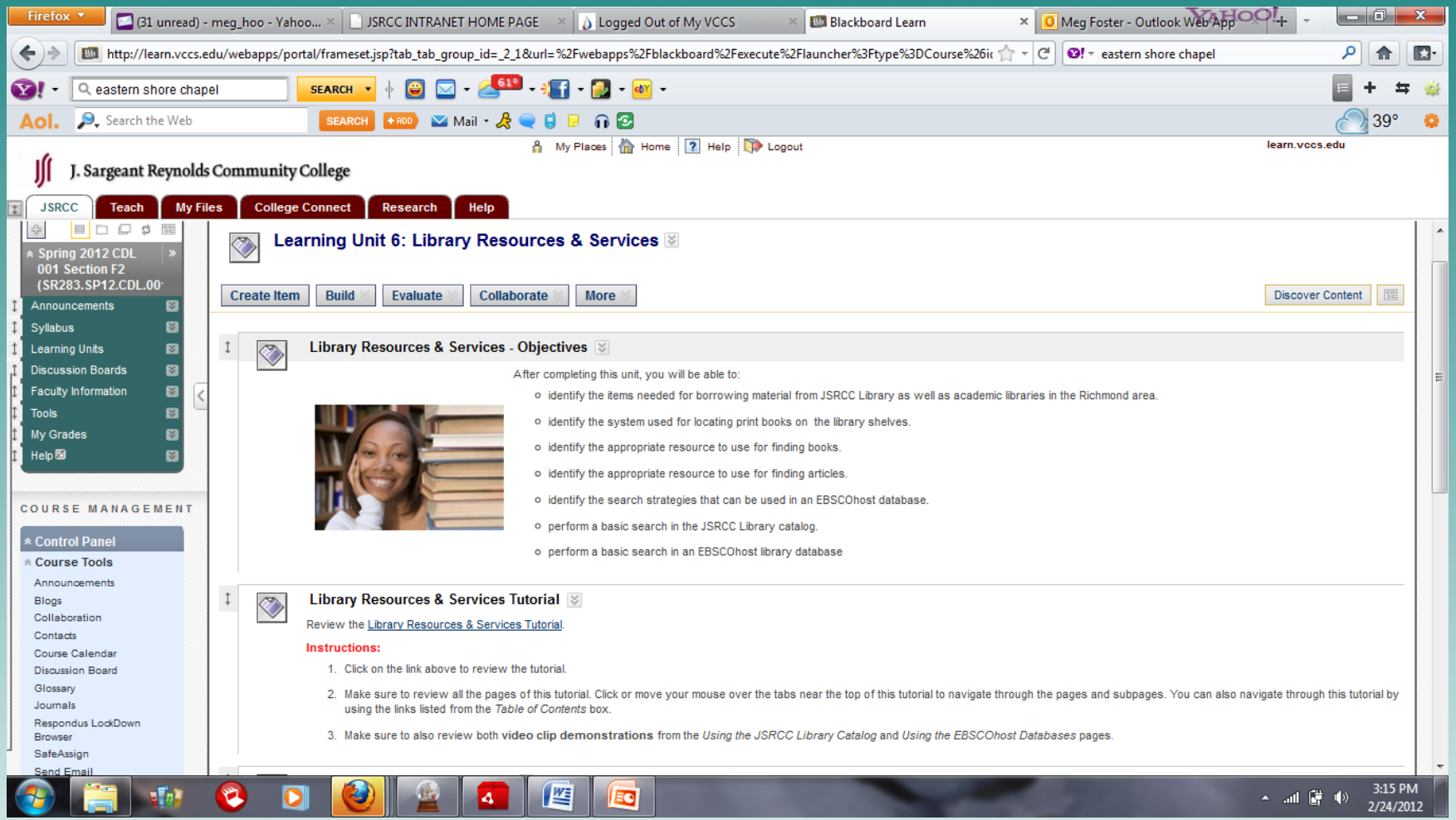
CDL 001: Library Resource Module



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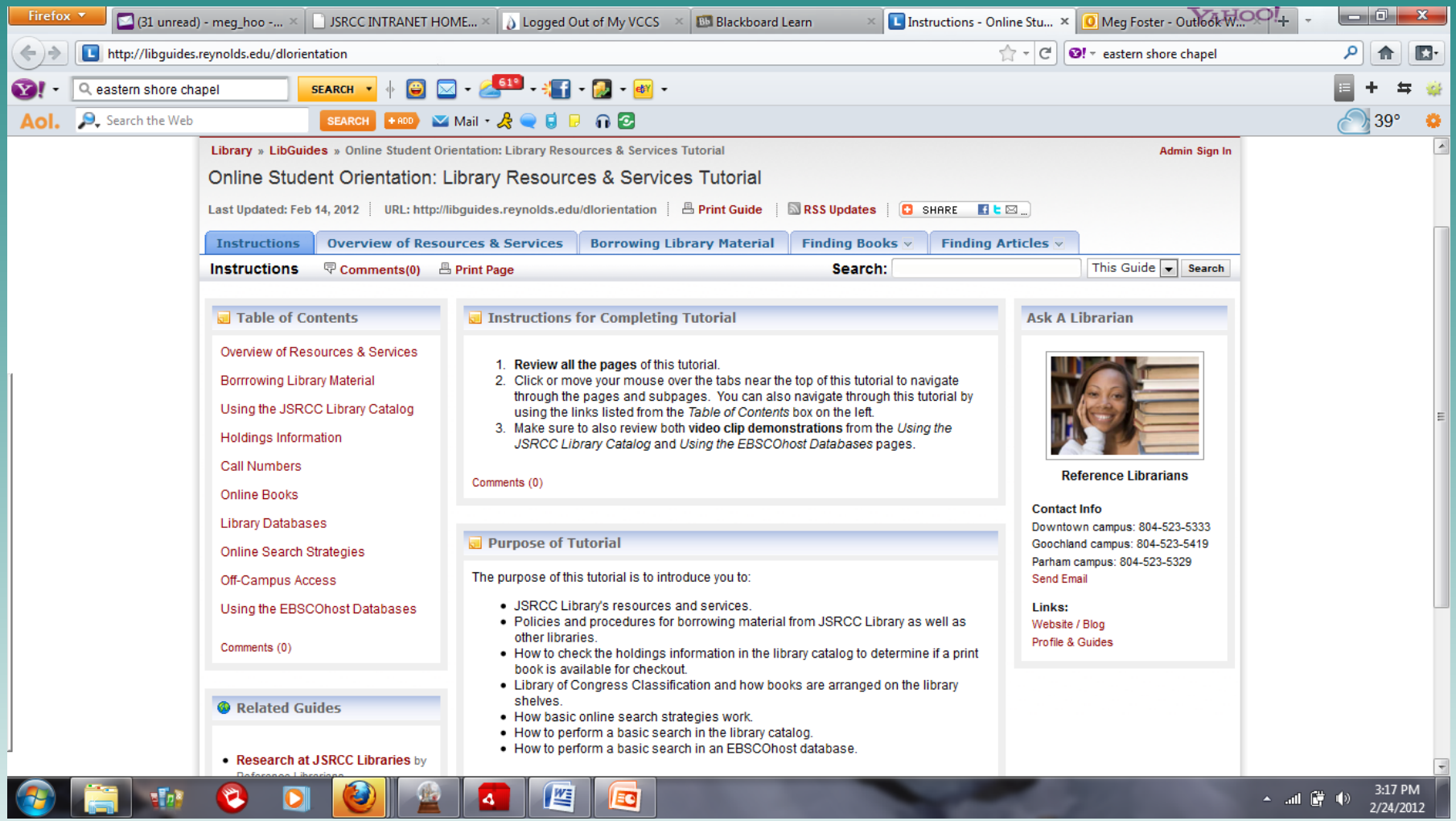
CDL 001: Library Resource Module



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ASSESSING CDL001

Past & Current Assessments of CDL001

- CDL001 Exit Survey
  (August 2011 – February 2012)
- Phone Survey of Non-Completers
  (Fall 2011)
- Faculty and Staff Feedback in Reflection Paper
  (Fall 2011)
- Success and Persistence Rates of CDL001 Completers (Fall 2011)

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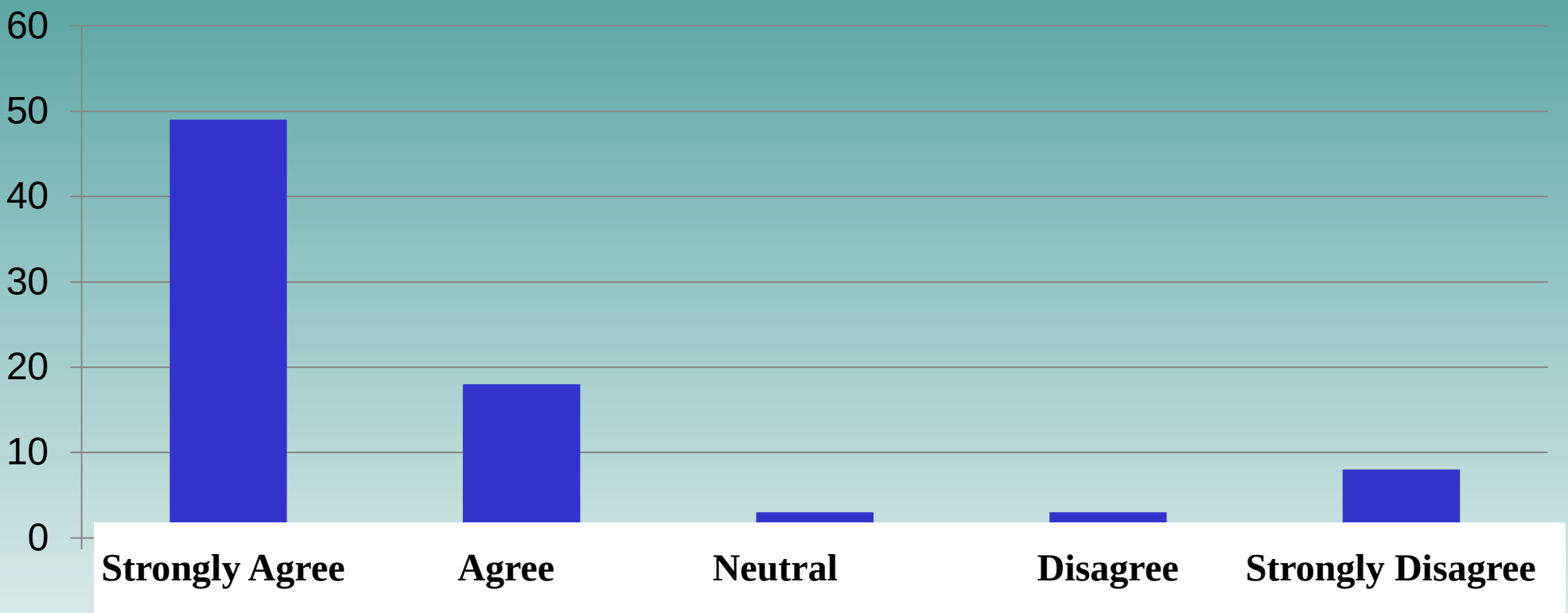
Results of the CDL001 Exit Survey

August 2011 – February 2012

81 Respondents

Now that I have completed CDL001, I feel confident about taking a distance learning class at JSRCC.

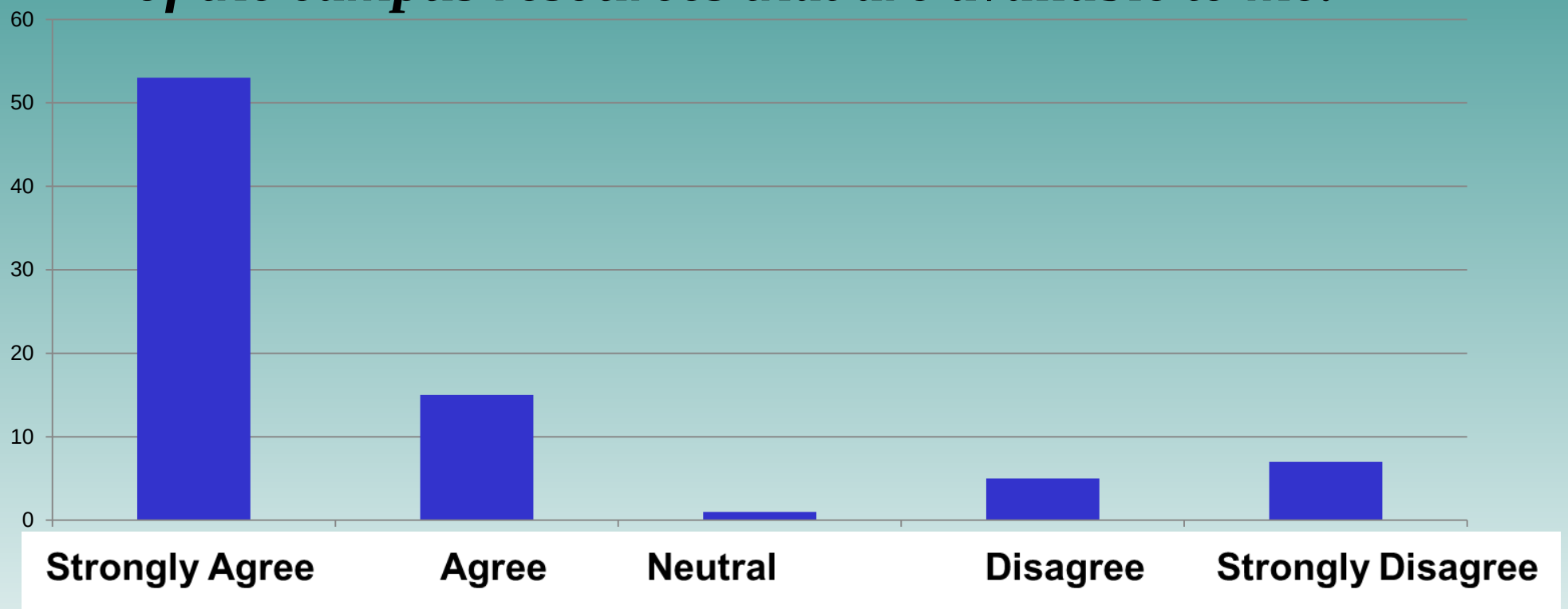


Results of the CDL001 Exit Survey

August 2011 – February 2012

81 Respondents

After completing CDL 001, I now have an understanding of the campus resources that are available to me:



Students participating in CDL001 find value in the Orientation

When asked whether they would encourage other students to take CDL001,

95% of the 81 participants indicated "Yes"

on the Exit Survey

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Fall 2011 Phone Survey of Students Who Did Not Complete CDL001

61 calls placed; 21 participants, 38% Response Rate

Q: WHY DID YOU CHOOSE NOT TO COMPLETE THE PROGRAM?

No response	5
Power outage from Hurricane Irene	3
Forgot that I was enrolled	2
Time constraints/class load	6
Other issues	5

Q: WOULD YOU RECOMMEND CDL 001 TO OTHER STUDENTS? WHY OR WHY NOT?

Yes, highly	1
Yes	15
No	1
N/A	3
No Comment	1

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Fall 2011 Phone Survey of Students Who Did Not Complete CDL001

I would recommend CDL001 to other students because . . .

Top 4 Responses:

Information in CDL001 is extremely helpful	6 comments
To gain greater knowledge of how online classes work	4 comments
Increase online learning skills	3 comments
To learn how to navigate Blackboard	2 comments

Other Responses:

- All students should take a course like this
- Helps students identify whether or not they are independent learners
- Teaches necessary Bb skills for all students, not just online students
- To learn time management skills

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How can CDL001 be improved?

(content summary of responses from Fall 2011 Phone Survey of Non-Completers)

- The CDL001 instructor responded quickly, and such responsiveness is not indicative of all online courses. The College should emphasize to its instructors the importance of quick responses in online courses. (3 comments)
- Provide better information on registration and access to CDL001. (3 comments)
- Make the orientation mandatory.(2 comments)
- The amount of information was overwhelming.
- There was too much emphasis on how to conduct research online.

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Special Sessions for Faculty & Staff

Two Special Sessions of CDL001 for Faculty and Staff have been provided:

- Fall 2011 – 10 participants
- Spring 2012 – 25 participants

The Special Sessions' Target Audience:

- Faculty and staff who teach online and who want to contribute to the further development of a strong orientation
- Advisers who want to better understand the demands of online learning
- Individuals who may be interested in facilitating future sessions of the orientation

These Special Sessions have proven to be an effective way:

- To introduce faculty and staff to better advising conversations with potential distance learners
- To share JSRCC's efforts of improving online learning
- To build the enthusiasm for readiness and orientation efforts at the institution

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Faculty & Staff Reflections:

Student Services Specialist (content summary)

My reasons for taking CDL001:

- to see and experience what we ask our students to do
- to test myself since I have never used Blackboard

What I learned:

I have a better idea of what we ask our students to accomplish.

How I will apply my learning:

I am better able to advise students who expressed interest in online classes. I am able to share my own experiences and point students towards appropriate resources such as SmarterMeasure and CDL001.

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Faculty & Staff Reflections:

Academic Dean (content summary)

My reasons for taking CDL001:

- to understand what students experience when they take CDL001
- to understand our work from immersion, rather than from conjecture
- to guide faculty more effectively in their efforts to teach, especially to teach online

What I learned:

The experience was valuable. A better understanding of our learners helps to become better educators. I respect the importance of student orientation and student readiness.

How I will apply my learning:

I will advocate CDL001 to all faculty under my supervision. The orientation, along with SmarterMeasure, is a very good foundation for student success.

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Success and Persistence Rates of CDL001 Completers

Summer and early Fall completers were tracked through their Fall 2011 enrollments.

- 47 students successfully completed CDL001
- 41 students proceeded to enroll in 74 distance courses in Fall 2011
- Persistence rate: 99%
- Successful completion (A, B, or C) rate: 92%

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Questions for Discussion

- Do the research findings align with your experiences?
- How do we encourage participation in student readiness activities when they are not mandatory?
- How can institutions integrate student readiness activities into the life of the college?
- How do other institutions prepare students for online learning?

For more information

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Community College Research Center
Institute on Education and the Economy
Teachers College, Columbia University
525 West 120th Street, Box 174, New York, NY 10027
E-mail: ccrc@columbia.edu
Telephone: 212.678.3091

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