Going Online: Decision Processes of Community College Students Enrolling in Online Degree Programs

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Abstract
This paper examines the decision-making process of students who enroll online at two California community colleges to learn how fully-online students gather information about potential institutions and programs, which alternatives were considered, and which sources were most useful to them in choosing programs. We draw on interviews with 25 students intending to attend fully online; interviews were conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings suggest that students are aware of the availability of online classes and make the choice to attend at a given institution based on convenience, finances, and familiarity with the college. The students that we interviewed almost all enrolled in programs that were proximate to their homes, despite their intent to complete their academic programs online. Colleges should think carefully about how information and support are provided to those students wishing to complete classes and find creative ways to engage students and provide campus resources virtually.

Keywords: Online students; college enrollment; postsecondary institutions; fully-online programs

Post-secondary online degree programs and courses have grown substantially over the last two decades (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Deming et al., 2012). Before the pandemic, more than half of all U.S. postsecondary institutions had students enrolled in online classes (Jaggars, 2011; Parsad et al., 2008), and a significant portion of students were completing their degrees fully online. At public two-year institutions, 15% of students enrolled exclusively online as of 2019 (Hill, 2021); this rose to 32% of students by 2022 (Hill, 2024). Fully-online program enrollment has historically been particularly attractive for adult learners (Ortagus, 2017); for instance, while only 15.6% of undergraduates under age 23 were enrolled in fully-online programs as of the 2019–2020 academic year, nearly 44% of undergraduates aged 30 and older were enrolled in such programs (United States Department of Education, n.d.b.).

Despite this growth, little is known about the factors that influence decisions around where to attend college for students who prefer fully online degree programs. In this paper, we examine the decision-making processes of students who intended to enroll fully online, drawing on interviews with 25 students at two California community colleges. Interviews were conducted between March 2019 and January 2020, so all participants actively opted into online enrollment rather than being forced into it due to COVID. We explored student perceptions and experiences related to two questions:

1. What sources of information do students draw on when deciding where to enroll in exclusively-online programs?
2. What factors do students who enroll in fully online degree programs most commonly weigh in deciding which college to attend?

Review of Related Literature

Our study joins literature on two main areas of research: the factors and information sources that students consider when choosing colleges, and unique considerations of students considering online course options.

College Choice

Much of the research on college choice proceeds from Hossler & Gallagher's (1987) framework, which posits three basic stages leading up to a student's college decision. The first stage is *predisposition*, the point at which an individual makes the overall decision to attend college (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). However, our project touches more closely on the final two phases: *search* and *choice.*

In Hossler & Gallagher's (1987) second stage, the *search* stage, students begin to engage with sources of information, communicate with institutions, and seek advice and recommendations from trusted sources like family, friends or high school counselors (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Other possible sources include college websites, search engines, and college rating and review websites (Capranos & Dyers, 2020). The search process may not be exhaustive; instead, a short list of institutions under consideration may come from recommendations from friends and family, student predisposition or familiarity with a particular institution, or perceptions of financial constraints (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000).

In Hossler & Gallagher's (1987) final stage, *choice*, student consider the alternatives and make the decision to attend a specific college for a specific program. An extensive set of literature has centered on the choice stage of the college decision. Prior studies suggest individuals make decisions based on perceived constraints surrounding the decision and subjective assumptions about costs and benefits associated with the result of the decision (Hardin, 1993; Perna, 2006; Tierney & Venegas, 2009). Accordingly, decisions are subjectively rational given the information, assumptions, and constraints that influence an individual rather than objectively rational for all individuals in all similar settings (Perna, 2006). When settling on a college, students consider a variety of college-specific factors including institutional quality, specific major, finances, and campus life (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; United States Department of Education, 2009).

While work around traditional students assumes that this stage occurs prior to choice—e.g., that the search process narrows down a list of options and a set of front-runner colleges are selected from among that list—there is evidence of less sequencing in the search/choice process for nontraditional students (e.g., students who are older rather than searching for colleges right out of high school; Bers & Smith, 1987). These students may have a distinct process because of the differing life circumstances they may face; for instance, students entering college in their mid-twenties or beyond may choose their institutions with an eye to maintaining their regular routines, such as caring for families that they do not want to move or continuing in jobs that they do not want to leave (Hearn & Long, 2023).

Looking at a sample of nontraditional students, Bers & Smith (1987) found that students compressed the search and choice steps into a single process, searching until they determined they had a choice that was adequate for their needs rather than conducting an exhaustive search. Because online classes may be especially attractive for older, nontraditional students with competing obligations (Author, 2019; Ortagus, 2017), similar models may hold for online students.

Most prior research related to college choice has focused on students attending face-to-face. To settle on an enrollment decision in this context, students first consider the constraints faced given their particular life situation and the assumed benefits of each of the considered options (Iloh & Tierney, 2014; Somers et al., 2006). Constraints can include preferences and predispositions to a particular subject area, schedules, finances, family and work responsibilities, distance to campus, geographical considerations, and opportunity costs (Barnes-Teamer, 2003; Iloh & Tierney, 2014). If a college meets prior established criteria related to convenience and cost, students may continue to weigh other options or may decide that college is acceptable and forego considering other options (Bers & Smith, 1987; Perna, 2006).

Choices of Online Students

Though established models (e.g., Chapman, 1981; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987) have been developed to understand student choices around college attendance, there has been little attention paid to students who choose to enroll in programs that are fully online. Instead, literature focused on choice-making around modalities tends to focus on students who are evaluating whether to take individual classes online versus face-to-face. When students opt to take a class online over face-to-face alternatives, convenience and schedule flexibility are often key factors in the

decision (Benbunan-Fich & Hiltz, 2003; Bright & Vogler, 2024; California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2017; Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2017; Farris et al., 2003; Flowers & Cotton, 2003; Jaggars, 2014; Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2016; Author, 2019). These factors may be especially prominent in the considerations of older students (Bers & Smith, 1987), who are over-represented in fully-online programs (United States Department of Education, n.d.b.; Ortagus, 2017). However, few believe that online courses fundamentally provide more effective instruction or superior learning (Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2017; Farris et al., 2003; Jaggars, 2014; Public Agenda, 2013; Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2016). This suggests that online learners' choices may be influenced by constraints that lead them to take online classes even though that might not be preferred in the absence of those constraints.

While this work begins to establish reasons for taking *individual courses* online, very few studies address the process of decision-making used by students who chose to forego face-to-face classes totally and enroll *fully online*. Three exceptions are recent survey-based studies (Lansing, 2017; Clinefelter et al., 2019; Capranos & Dyers, 2020), which found that similar to students interested in attending programs at in-person institutions, cost, reputation, and curriculum were priorities for online-intending students. We extend this literature by using qualitative methods to gain additional nuance around the sources of information and college selection process of students seeking to specifically enroll in broad-access institutions and attend fully online.

Methods

To better understand the decision-making process of fully-online students, we conducted a series of interviews focusing on student experiences and thought processes leading up to the point of enrollment. The views represented in this paper are drawn from online students at two California community colleges, which we call "Poppy College" and "Sage College" or, collectively, the "home colleges."

Poppy College is part of a multi-college district serving a large metropolitan area that encourages cooperation and collaboration between colleges through a set of agreements guaranteeing transferability of courses within the district. Students at any one college may take online or face-to-face classes at other colleges in the district in pursuit of their academic goals. Poppy College's enrollment is among the top third of community colleges in the state, with more than 30,000 students enrolled per semester (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office DataMart, n.d.). As of fall 2019, roughly one-third of Poppy students took at least some online courses, with about 15% enrolling exclusively online (authors' calculations from the Integrated Postsecondary Data System [IPEDS], United States Department of Education, n.d). The student body was around 40% White and 30% Latino/Hispanic, with smaller shares identifying as Black and Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (Appendix Table A1).

Sage College is also near a large urban area, with an enrollment roughly half the size of Poppy's. Online course-taking is very common at Sage, with about half of students taking at least some coursework online and nearly one-quarter enrolling exclusively online as of fall 2019 (authors' calculations, IPEDS data). The student population was split evenly between White and Latino students (roughly 40% each), with small shares identifying as Black or Asian/Pacific Islander (Appendix A, Table 1).

Participants

Distance education staff at each institution distributed an eligibility screener to online students. Delivery differed at each institution, consistent with the requirements of the local research offices. At Poppy, the screener was emailed to all students who had been enrolled exclusively online, in any number of classes, during both the Fall 2018 and Spring 2019 semesters. The eligibility screener identified prospective participants who were 18 years old or older, were either currently pursuing a degree or credential or had earned a degree or credential in the last year, and who reported having taken all courses fully online in pursuit of those credentials. Students who indicated they were only taking some of their classes online were ineligible to participate.

Sage College required that we recruit participants through class announcements rather than email, so the distance education office requested all online instructors to post an announcement with a link to the screener in their classes. The screener was modified to select a sample comparable to Poppy's by asking students how many semesters they had taken online courses and asking them what share of courses taken for their degree or credential programs were taken fully-online. To be eligible to participate, students were required to have taken online courses in at least two different academic terms, and to have indicated that all courses taken for their degree or credential programs were taken fully online. Notwithstanding these, a handful of students disclosed taking occasional face-to-face classes during our interviews. For instance, one student wanted to be 100% online but was required to take at least one face-to-face course to receive military tuition benefits, while others took occasional face-to-face courses when online sections were unavailable. Because these students indicated that their intention was to be fully online, and the face-to-face classes were taken out of necessity, we included them in our sample.

We received responses and contact information from 80 eligible students from Poppy College and 21 from Sage College. Initially students were contacted based on screener response order, but as the sample grew, priority was placed on male students in an attempt to balance and provide a purposeful sample (Seidman, 2013). Despite this effort, few men responded to the invitation to be interviewed and, as a result, males are underrepresented in our sample (see Table 1). To anonymize data, we use participant numbers rather than names.

Ultimately, we interviewed 15 students from Poppy College and 10 from Sage College. We scheduled and completed the interviews at Poppy during the spring 2019 semester, and interviews from Sage between fall 2019 and winter 2020. The last interview was in January 2020, so all interviews occurred prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S.

Demographic information was collected from each participant in surveys either during the consent process or, for some early participants, after the interview was completed. In some cases, missing demographic data was extrapolated from information provided in interview transcripts. Appendix A, Table 1 provides demographic characteristics of interview participants. Participants were disproportionately female (over 75% in both sites) and spanned a wide range of ages from under 22 to over 40. Most participants were White or Latino. Compared to the student populations at their respective colleges, students in our sample tended to be older, nontraditional students.

Table 1
Participant Table

Participant	College	Gender	Age Range
Student 1	Poppy	Female*	Not provided
Student 2	Poppy	Male	25-29
Student 3	Poppy	Female	40+
Student 4	Poppy	Male	40+
Student 5	Poppy	Female*	30–39*
Student 6	Poppy	Female	18–20
Student 7	Poppy	Female*	Not provided
Student 8	Poppy	Female	25–29
Student 9	Poppy	Female	25–29
Student 10	Poppy	Female	18–20
Student 11	Poppy	Female	25–29
Student 12	Poppy	Female	25–29
Student 13	Poppy	Female	21–24
Student 14	Poppy	Female	30–39
Student 15	Poppy	Male	40+
Student 16	Sage	Female	40+
Student 17	Sage	Female	25–29
Student 18	Sage	Female	25–29
Student 19	Sage	Female	25–29
Student 20	Sage	Female	30–39
Student 21	Sage	Female	18–20
Student 22	Sage	Male	30–39
Student 23	Sage	Female	25–29
Student 24	Sage	Female	30–39
Student 25	Sage	Female	40+

Note. Source: participant survey.
*Survey not returned; data imputed based on observation during the interview (sex) or specifically mentioned during the interview (age).

Data Collection and Analysis

Participants were interviewed individually over Zoom, with most interviews lasting around 30 to 45 minutes (see Appendix B for the semi-structured interview protocol). Each student who completed an interview received a $50 Amazon gift card. Interviewers disclosed relevant background characteristics to participants: In terms of positionality, the first author was a former community college student and taught both face-to-face and online in community colleges prior to and throughout graduate school, while the second author's sole experience with online learning was as a researcher. We attempted to keep our own positionalities in mind while conducting and analyzing the interviews (Seidman, 2013).

Each interview was recorded and transcribed for analysis. Notes taken during the interview process were used to build analytical memos (Saldaña, 2013) summarizing interviewers' post-interview reactions and reflections.

Transcripts were coded in Dedoose using a two-cycle process (Saldaña, 2013). First cycle coding followed a structural approach (Saldaña, 2013) to identify responses that connect to broader themes related to the interview questions. Through the identification of these responses and relationships between themes, structural coding provides a foundation for second cycle coding and is considered to be well suited for interview transcripts (Saldaña, 2013). First cycle codes were broadly grouped as relating to the two research questions around sources of information and factors influencing students' choice of college. Upon completion of the first cycle coding process, codes were reviewed, consolidated and revised to reflect themes in the data. During this process, observations and reflections related to the interviews, codes, and embedded themes that we observed as we coded the transcripts were recorded as analytic memos (Saldaña, 2013). These analytic memos were used to further focus on specific themes in the second cycle of coding.

Second cycle coding further organized themes identified during the initial cycle, honing and refining the ideas reflected in the data using an elaborative coding approach (Saldaña, 2013). Elaborative coding uses codes and themes in the data to support, strengthen, or modify frameworks and findings from prior work (Saldaña, 2013). Second cycle codes were developed based on Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) framework for college choice and refined through an iterative process of coding and consultation between the research team. Appendix A, Table 2 provides a list of the codes used in this paper.

Trustworthiness

We established trustworthiness of analyses (Miles et al., 2020) through several steps. To pursue confirmability, we maintained records of our processes, such as maintaining codebooks, to ensure clarity of interpretation in coding and consistency over time. Our use of two sites served the purpose of establishing transferability by identifying patterns common to both sites; we also discuss our findings in light of prior studies in the discussion. At the same time, we identified some unique patterns in each college that were echoed across multiple participants in one site but not the other, allowing us to assess when the cases deviated from each other; identifying these deviations improves our confidence in the credibility that analyses also capture factors unique to each college. We further established credibility by triangulating some of the accounts of participants, for instance by visiting websites mentioned as sources of information in students' college search processes. To ensure dependability, we collaborated in establishing codes and refining codes, and we wrote contemporaneous memos on the interviews capturing initial impressions which were used in establishing and reviewing themes.

Findings

Sources of Information and Information-Gathering Processes

Students reported gathering information from multiple sources as they weighed which college to attend. Many Poppy and Sage students narrowed in on their eventual colleges, as well as a few other potential options, based on external sources—sources other than information provided by the colleges themselves. After narrowing their college options, students seeking additional information about specific institutions began to rely more on internal sources, consulting college websites or college staff members.

"I Had Some Friends…Who Had Gone There": External Sources of Information

Many students, particularly those who grew up in the local regions, were familiar with Poppy and Sage based on the experiences of friends, family, or acquaintances who had attended the college. Student 20 reported being exposed to Sage during high-school college trips: "…in high school we also did a field trip senior year to [Sage] to do the assessments and everything to see where we would place into college." This familiarity made applying to Sage a natural fit for her.

Other respondents were advised to consider Poppy and Sage based on positive experiences of friends or family. Student 21 had a family legacy at Sage, including an aunt who worked at a prestigious four-year institution and who strongly advised her to complete her general education requirements at Sage: "She recommended, pretty much everyone in my family has started at Sage in one way or another. In one generation or another, we've all gone to Sage at least for our general eds. So that's where I got my advice to go there first." Similarly, Student 13 was steered towards Poppy partly by a colleague: "When I was researching my options, she told me about [Poppy], the program that she went through," and Student 13 ultimately enrolled in the same program. Student 10 also tapped into broader networks including "church members and even counselors and doctors" to gain information about experiences attending Poppy College: Hearing from these community members made her "confident and comfortable in wanting to apply and not feel like I was making a bad decision in the school that I was choosing." For these students, having first-hand recommendations from trusted sources made them more confident that Sage and Poppy were strong options.

Multiple students who had strong recommendations for Poppy or Sage from friends or family reported that they did not seriously consider other options given their confidence that those colleges would provide good experiences. As one student put it, "I just knew that this [attending Poppy] is the direction I wanted to go. It was the only option that I really ever considered" (Student 2). For these students, as for nontraditional face-to-face students in Bers & Smith's (1987) work, the search and choice phases were compressed into a single stage.

For others who searched more broadly, many used the Internet to seek schools that fit the criteria that they had in mind. Like many students, Student 8 reported using "a lot of Google, for sure" to find the "best online programs". Some students used Google to find more specialized web sources. For instance, Student 14 described an especially helpful website, likely the California Virtual Campus Course Exchange based on the description, she found through Google. The site "connects online students with certain courses they need.…[If] you're like, 'okay I need argumentation and debate'…[the website] will list every school in the state that offers it online." Student 14 was then able to use the site to locate online classes across the state to meet her needs, including outside of her home institution. Indeed, Student 14 was among a handful of students who used external sites—such as the website described or another called assist.org—to shop across the entire California Community Colleges system for classes needed for an academic program or for transfer, regardless of the student's distance to the campus.

Student 3 described a similar methodical approach using external information to collect information on multiple colleges before deciding on a college. She reviewed published course pathways for accounting certificates to get a sense of degree requirements at each institution.

Additionally, she looked at course descriptions at multiple colleges to determine whether certain institutions offered higher-quality or more rigorous programs than others. She went to websites for specific courses to check textbooks lists to ensure that if she attended a community college, she would still be using texts comparable to those used at more prestigious institutions. While these two students were particularly methodical in using external information to gather information about their program options, they were outliers among the sample.

More commonly, students relied on sites where former students familiar with institutions reported on their experiences. Several participants, for instance, reported scouting out RateMyProfessor.com to gain information on prior students' experiences with online classes in programs they were considering. Other sites also provided respondents with valuable advice on the college-going process; Student 23 received help from a website for military spouses connected with the base where her husband was stationed: "I posted in the wife page, I was like, 'What colleges do you recommend?' And everyone was pretty equal between Sage and [another nearby college]." Given that military families are likely to lack access to the local networks that provided many students with information on the programs available at local colleges, these types of pages may provide important sources of social capital in navigating the process of local college choice.

"If Your Website's Not Amazing, How Good is Your Online Program?": Online Information from the Home Colleges

Students leaned heavily on each college's website to learn about their programs and online offerings. The quality of these websites was important to whether students felt it was easy to find the information they needed. For instance, while Poppy provided information about online courses through their dense course catalog, they also featured a website through the distance education department that listed all fully-online degrees and programs available at the school. Student 8 described finding this "much more intuitive" information source: "You can actually put in, okay, what are 100% online degrees, so when I found that I was like, 'Oh, this is perfect!'" This page helped boost her confidence that Poppy would meet her needs.

By contrast, some students described that a lack of clarity in other colleges' websites dissuaded them from attending those institutions. Student 3 related, "there are places where I would click onto [a college's] website. I would start looking at it and that information wasn't freely available or it wasn't easily understood. For me, if it's not easily understood from the beginning, it's not a program that I necessarily want to invest my time in." Student 5 ruled out one particularly convenient college because of the website: "I had originally looked at [neighboring college] because my mother-in-law and father-in-law live close so I could drop [my children] off if I needed to go in or whatnot. But... it just seemed like [the website] wasn't as user-friendly and I just wasn't impressed." Student 5 went on to muse: "If your website's not amazing, how good is your online program?"

"She Really Explained to Me the Process": Campus Counselors Providing Information

While many students relied primarily on websites to do initial scouting for information, students who spoke with counselors often reported that they were an excellent resource. For instance, Student 18 related that a Sage counselor provided a tremendous amount of support at

the enrollment phase. The counselor at Sage "created an educational plan for me, so I know exactly what classes I need to take for the next year and how she really explained to me the process of what it would be to transfer over as well." Student 18 went on to name several other colleges she had talked to during the enrollment phase, which did not offer the same comprehensive support. As we discuss below, supportive admissions processes were named as a specific factor that promoted attendance for some students.

Overall, students found college sources valuable in helping them to finalize their enrollment decisions, particularly in Sage where the counseling and application services received especially high marks from students.

Motivations for Institution Choice

While some of the students in our sample only ever seriously considered the institution they ultimately ended up attending, many considered other institutions. Of those students who did consider other colleges, a wide variety of options were considered, including other community colleges locally; other regional community colleges; or online options offered by four-year institutions like University of Phoenix, Western Grand Canyon University, extension schools at University of California campuses, and Arizona State University. Respondents named several considerations that pushed them to attend Poppy and Sage specifically. Cost, class choice and convenience, reputation, and student supports during admissions were key factors students considered when deciding between institutions.

"The Most Cost-Effective Thing": Financial Considerations

While many students had considered four-year universities or other private two-year colleges, including non-profits, the relative affordability of the community college system made it an attractive option for many students. For Student 8, who considered an extension program at a University of California institution, the decision "came down to price...I just didn't want to have that kind of debt." Similarly, Student 19 considered attending a private non-profit college that explicitly offered fully-online degrees, drawn by the convenience of the online program that culminated in a four-year degree. However, although the program "seemed very accommodating to your schedule," she ultimately decided against that route due to price: "They're just extremely expensive." Many more students ruled for-profit colleges out out-of-hand due to their expense. Student 12's thought process was typical of these students: "I also looked at the 'commercial colleges', I guess you could say, that you see on TV that are fully online, like University of Phoenix and the price point was just absolutely ridiculous. So I didn't even consider those."

In addition to having a lower list-price than many other four-year and private options, students noted that the financial aid offered by the community colleges made them an attractive option. While Student 23 considered a for-profit college, she was swayed by the offer of a tuition waiver "that was only accepted at community colleges. So a university was not in the option at the moment." For many students, cost was the primary consideration in college choice.

"I Needed Convenience": Class Choice, Campus Proximity and Access to Multiple Colleges

While many students opted for a community college due to the favorable price point, they also valued the convenience of course offerings given other constraints in their lives. In

particular, the breadth of availability of online courses was a major point pushing students towards Sage and Poppy specifically. Student 19 articulated this point: "for me, online works better, [since I'm] working full time. Then I noticed that there's a lot of colleges that don't offer online programs. Like the majority of the classes are Tuesday, Thursday from 8:00 to 10:00, and most people work during that time... [Sage] offers a lot of online classes, which is great." Student 16 weighed this point heavily as well. Her primary motivation in attending Sage was "the amount of online [options] they offer per class. There's more than just one, they have a lot of room and availability."

Knowing that entire degree or credential programs could be completed solely online was important for many students. Student 15 ruled out institutions that did not offer complete credential programs online: "Often times what I saw was that there was a particular class that was really interesting…but the entirety of the program was not offered online, which is a common situation." Student 12 similarly wanted to avoid a situation where a required course "could be available online every single semester, and then randomly it will change it on-campus only. So I didn't really feel comfortable pursuing a degree from where that was a possibility." This made her prize schools that explicitly advertised fully-online degrees.

Interestingly, even among students who preferred online classes, the proximity of the campus was an important consideration for many students. They reasoned that even if most of their classes were online, they may need to talk to professors or visit student services, and they wanted to make sure they were able to do those things on campus if necessary. Student 19 related that for her,

> ...proximity was a consideration in case I had to go to the college and maybe get an education plan, or if I had to make an appointment with a counselor or just something that came up, maybe there was an event I wanted to go to…I've had friends that would register online to colleges far away, like up north. It just seems if something came up, what if I needed to go on campus?

Student 2 reported similar motivations in limiting his search to Poppy's district: "If I did have to ever go back to campus [for coursework], I didn't want to have to drive to [an area 1.5 hours away] to finish my classes. If I needed to go to campus [it was important] that I would be able to do that." For these respondents, it made sense to look for colleges with physical campuses that they could easily access if need be for face-to-face coursework or appointments.

Similarly, some students anticipated having to take a handful of courses face-to-face—despite intending to attend almost-fully online—and so they prized proximity to campus. Student 24, who juggled her coursework with her children's demanding schedules, articulated that because she anticipated possibly needing to do some face-to-face components of classes—such as hybrid options—being close to campus was important to her to make sure she could continue to balance her schedule: "I needed flexibility, I needed convenience, and I needed something that, [geographically] was located around my children and their schedule." Sage's blend of offering online courses but also proximity made her feel confident in managing her schedule.

In addition to considering the convenience of options at their home college, Poppy students in particular pointed to the benefits of attending a school nested in a district that

provided access to online courses at sister institutions. As Student 9 said, "If [a Poppy] online class is full, at least you can try and see if they have it at another [college in the district]." For Student 5—who was recruited into the sample because she attended classes at Poppy but counted another college in Poppy's district as her "home" campus—the expanded availability of online classes through the district model was a major factor driving her to choose her college: "I'm able to utilize all these campuses that have different online courses and areas and I can take them at each college [in the district]… That really sold me because the availability of classes."

"I was…Leery of Other Online Programs:" Familiarity, Reputation, and Trust

Particularly for those who grew up in the vicinity of Sage and Poppy, many students cited familiarity with the colleges based on either friends' experiences or from knowing the colleges in the region. For instance, Student 10's friends who had attended Poppy spoke positively about the experience: "They all told me that they liked Poppy and that the teachers are really there for you." As we note above, for some students, the recommendations of friends and family were so persuasive that they really did not consider other options.

Some students considered other options but explicitly viewed community colleges as more reputable compared to schools that they viewed as predatory. Several respondents reported being turned off by aggressive marketing from for-profit institutions. One student went so far as to block the calls of a for-profit college that she had investigated because of the "predatory" recruitment tactics: "… [I recall] the predatory phone calls I got after. Like, day after day after day. I was like, 'Mmm-hmm, you're for-profit.'…It was bad enough I had to block it." (Student 14). Other respondents who considered for-profit options similarly were put off by the promised ease of degree receipt at those institutions. Speaking of for-profits, Student 25 worried that "if it's that easy to get a degree from some place, it may not be accredited. So I was a little too leery on other online programs to be quite honest with you." By contrast, she had heard of Sage's programs and understood from others who had attended that Sage had a strong reputation and maintained academic rigor, both in its online programs and more generally.

While some respondents were leery of for-profit colleges, others viewed them more positively. Student 17 recalls that "...people did recommend me Phoenix…I wanted to do the Phoenix because you finish faster, but it was too expensive." In these cases, often financial motivations pushed students to enroll at community colleges instead.

"They Obviously Want Me There": Application Process and Student Supports

At Sage in particular, several students specifically mentioned the college's outreach and welcoming approach to online students as a factor in their enrollment. Student 20 applied to three community and technical colleges, but ultimately enrolled at Sage because they offered immediate and enthusiastic outreach to hear as a new student:

> Sage and [another nearby community college] were definitely [on my list] and I'm not sure it happened with [the other] one, but Sage was like, "Oh, welcome. Congratulations on enrolling." So I definitely felt more drawn to that because it's like, okay, they obviously want me there enough that they're responding to me sooner.

This, combined with greater clarity over the availability of online offerings at Sage, swayed Student 20's matriculation decision.

Other students echoed that the ease of matriculation factored into their choice to attend Poppy. Student 24 was deciding between Sage and the same nearby community college. After she was admitted to Sage, they followed up with a helpful program for matriculating students where students watched "a few different videos" and met "with a counselor who just really explained everything". The outreach "solidified" Student 24's intention to choose Sage over the other school: "Sage, I feel like, offered way more." Student 18 was also taken by the program's online-friendly approach to student services. She relates that as she was weighing college options, the availability of online counseling was a major selling point:

> I reached out to a counselor on Sage and they said, "You don't even have to come in. We even do the counseling appointments via, like a Zoom as well. I think it was Zoom or Skype. When she actually told me that, I was sold right away with that because I was like, if I need to reach out to a counselor or whatever, I can just email them, and they respond.

The value of this approach was especially apparent to Student 18 because it compared favorably to another college she had attended: "coming from another community college, I noticed a difference right away."

While most Poppy students also rated the application process as "easy", several commented they would have preferred more guidance and support in matriculating. As one first-time student put it, Poppy staff "never helped me out. I became really frustrated when I was there because they didn't understand that it's my first time going to college and I have to take off time to go there, you know, of course you can't do anything over the phone" (Student 7). The student was especially frustrated at needing to physically go onto the campus to get help. Others recounted "time-consuming" sessions on the phone with the registrar's office (Student 12) or going in for "multiple visits to the counselor's office on the weekends" (Student 8) to address transcript issues. Overall, more students recounted difficulties in the application process at Poppy than at Sage.

Discussion

This study explored students' use of information and motivations for institution choices when selecting fully-online two-year academic programs among a sample of students who ultimately chose community college programs. We find that students relied on a mix of information provided by the college (e.g., college websites and college personnel) and external information sources (e.g., family, friends and external websites) to make decisions. As our participants gathered information, students often started with information external to the college—e.g., information from web searches or recommendations from friends, family, or colleagues—and then relied more on on-campus sources of information such as websites and counselors as they narrowed their choice. College websites served as a marker of program quality for some students, as students felt that high-quality online programs should also communicate clearly in their college websites. Students, particularly from Sage, lauded admissions procedures that provided significant outreach and support; consistent with research

showing that administrators consider personal outreach crucial in recruiting online students (Ortagus & Tanner, 2019).

Students in our sample identified several factors that loomed large in their decisions to pursue their fully-online degrees at our two sample community colleges. Cost was a major driving factor. Students also wanted to be confident they would be able to access the coursework needed to graduate. They considered the robustness of online course offerings and whether multiple campuses were available to broaden the range of online courses they had access to, and whether campuses were sufficiently proximate to allow them to be on campus if needed for either meetings or coursework. Students valued the reputation of the colleges they attended, and some decided against for-profit options due to perceptions of lower quality or predatory approaches. Finally, students appreciated demonstrations that colleges would provide welcoming environments.

In some ways, our findings echo past work. For instance, the centrality of cost as a consideration echoes findings from past research around why students opt for community colleges (Iloh & Tierney, 2013, 2014). The importance of cost may also reflect the pressures often associated with nontraditional students, who may be maintaining financial independence or caring for dependents (Horn & Carrol, 1996; Bers & Smith, 1987; United States Department of Education, n.d.a.). Similarly, convenience has been identified as a primary concern of students enrolling in individual online classes in prior work (Benbunan-Fich & Hiltz, 2003; California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2017b; Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2017; Farris et al., 2003; Jaggars, 2014; Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2016; Lansing, 2017), and our students' accounts of needing consistent online courses to mesh with their schedules and academic needs echoes this work. Students in our interviews relied heavily on family and friends in forming opinions about schools' reputations; echoing prior work around undergraduate choice (Somers et al., 2006, but differing from work focused on fully-online enrollment at the graduate level which found more minimal influence of personal recommendations from friends and family (see Capranos & Dyer, 2020). Our findings suggest that the decisions of fully-online undergraduate applicants more closely resemble face-to-face undergraduate applicants than fully-online graduate applicants.

On the other hand, prior research around community college leaders' expectations post-COVID (Hart et al., 2025) found that some leaders expected students open to online courses to "shop around" for possible courses across entire state systems given the lack of geographic constraints. While our study was conducted pre-COVID, our findings suggest that many students may still prefer local colleges as their primary institutions, as they value being able to go into campus if needed.

The pattern of information use reported by students also appears to be similar to findings reported by Bers and Smith (1987), namely that nontraditional students do not tend to engage in a sequential search process, but rather that search and choice happen simultaneously with students deciding on a particular college as soon as it appears to meet most of their needs. We find that for some students who relied primarily on familiarity and word of mouth, those students trusted this information enough to expect a satisfactory outcome without a broader consideration of options.

On the other hand, students who engaged in more comprehensive search processes related that availability and clarity of information was an important factor in their final decision. With this in mind, institutional websites should be both comprehensive and easy to navigate with up-to-date information about the college, course and program offerings, and enrollment processes. If availability of information contributes to college choice (Iloh & Tierney, 2014), and online students make rapid choices simultaneously with their search process as suggested by Bers and Smith (1987), then it is particularly important that institutions make sure that needed information is readily available. Our findings suggest that students are disinclined to search extensively for needed information before moving on to the next school or program option, especially if they view disorganized websites as a marker of program quality.

Our study has some important limitations. The interviews presented in this study capture only a small range of the experiences of students enrolling in fully online degree programs. Participants were predominantly female and older than traditional college age (25+), and their processes, influences, and access to information may be different from that of other groups. We drew from just two colleges, and it may be that the choices made by these students would differ in other settings. Additionally, we do not capture the processes and experiences of students who made different final decisions; this is an important delimitation to our work caused by our decision to sample students in community colleges. Future research is needed to explore the processes of those students who considered fully online degree and certificate programs and ultimately rejected the online route in favor of a traditional face-to-face pathway. Moreover, recent research suggests that college students are becoming more open to online courses in the post-COVID era (Bright & Vogel, 2024; Tang et al., 2025); it is possible that student preferences for fully-online programs may also have shifted post-pandemic. Future research should explore this possibility.

Nonetheless, our findings have important implications for policymakers as colleges face expanded use of online courses post-COVID. Community college stakeholders have voiced concerns that students would be drawn away from local colleges' programs by broader online choices—including options to enroll in non-proximate colleges or in the system's first fully-online college, Calbright (Hart et al., 2025; Watanabe, 2018)—yet if students make decisions based on familiarity with an existing brick-and-mortar campus, and if students prefer to have a local "home college" to preserve the option for in-person interactions if needed, that fear may be unfounded. This set of findings echoes those of other studies showing that graduate students sought information on local options even when intending fully-online attendance that theoretically eliminated geographic constraints (Capranos & Dyers, 2020), and that fully-online students have become increasingly likely to prefer local campuses over time (Clinefelter et al., 2019). Existing colleges may want to present prospective students with enrollment options on-campus and online, promote the availability of student support, and affirm community ties through a carefully developed website providing clear, timely information. Colleges should also find ways to adapt student support services, at admissions but also for processes such as counseling and financial aid, to support fully online students without requiring them to come to campus. Similarly, it is important that colleges continue to recognize that it is the convenience of online courses that draws students to fully online degree programs. Attention to these processes should help colleges recruit and serve fully-online students going forward.

Declarations

Ethics Board Approval

This study was conducted with approval by the University of California, Davis IRB (#1297729).

Conflicts of Interest

We have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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Appendix A

Table 1

Participant Characteristics for Each Site, Compared to Full College

	Poppy College		Sage College	
	Sample	Full College	Sample	Full College
Characteristic	%	%	%	%
Gender				
Male	20	55	10	40
Female	80	45	90	60
Age Range				
24 and under	26	45	10	65
25 – 29	27	20	40	15
30 – 39	20	20	30	10
40 and over	27	15	20	10
Race/Ethnicity				
Latino	40	30	30	40
White	27	40	60	40
Asian/Pacific Islander	13	15	20	5
Black/African American	7	5	0	5
Other	0	15	0	15
Declined to Answer	13	0	0	0

Note. Source: authors' tabulations from participant survey data (Columns 1 and 3), and fall 2019 enrollment figures from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (Columns 2 and 4). College-data rounded to nearest 5% to preserve anonymity of colleges. Numbers for race/ethnicity categories in Sage sum to more than 100 due to respondents reporting multiple ethnicities. For consistency with Poppy's race reporting, race and ethnicity were combined into a single category. For example, if ethnicity was identified as Hispanic/Latino and race was left blank or identified as White, students were coded as Latino.

Table 2

Code Hierarchy for Codes Used in This Paper

Code Group, *Theme*, Subcode	Description	Example
Choice of College	Discussion of factors that impacted their choice of the current college students attend. Includes discussion that a factor is a plus or a minus, is important or is not.	See below
Financial	Discussion of financial considerations in choosing current college. May include raw cost, financial supports available, etc.	*"Most of it was online and then when they do call me, when you sign up for information they call you and I would ask them all these questions and then it really truly came down to financial aid and being able to afford $4000 a month was just too much right now."*
Reputation	Discussion of reputation as a factor in college choice. Includes having heard from others about a college, or being generally aware of it as having good programs or good supports. May include factors that erode trust (e.g., thinking colleges use predatory recruitment). May also include familiarity (e.g., based on prior attendance)--school as a "known quantity".	"So, just those little things of like, it was such a high-quality school, their [Sage's] rates on how many people were getting degrees and stuff, it just was phenomenal."
Logistics		See below
Proximity	Mentions of proximity as a reason for attending college--e.g., because students expect they may have to go into campus either for an odd in-person course or two, or because they may have to use student services, have tests proctored, etc.	"Well it's [Poppy is] close for me if I did need to go in to take a test or something or other. It's the closest college for me."
Choice of Classes	Discussion of availability of classes that are of interest. Includes availability of online classes or breadth of online offerings if those weighed into students chose a particular college.	"At some colleges, there would be, let's say that you needed two colleges, or two courses to complete a degree. Which is unrealistic, but for sake, we'll pretend. One of those courses could be available online every single semester, and then randomly it will change it on campus only. So I didn't really feel comfortable pursuing a degree from where that was a possibility."
Multiple Colleges	Discussion of benefits of having multiple colleges as options, in the context of a district. Coded if the fact that multiple colleges are available plays into the choice of whether to attend.	"So, I like that, that they gave you the option where you can kind of take the class, regardless if it's on their campus or offered through their school that [Poppy's district] offers through their core colleges, if you can't get into a class. If their online class is full, at

		least you can try and see if they have it at another one [campus]."
Application Process	Discussion of the application process--considerations on whether the application process makes it easy or difficult to complete and apply	Like I said, from the minute that I started doing my registration and the financial aid and everything, for me it has been a really good experience. Everybody's been very flexible and very welcoming. It's just worked out very well, especially I think coming from another community college I noticed a difference right away.
Sources of Information		
External Sources: Human	Mention of people NOT affiliated with college who helped provide information--family, friends, colleagues, people affiliated with other government agencies, etc.	"I had two or three of my clients who were, probably a good ten years younger than me, who walked me through every single thing, and really gave me a good idea of what to expect, or not what to expect"
External Sources: Web	Mentions of websites outside of those from home college. This can include home sites of other colleges they did not ultimately go to as well.	"I use Google. I go through the ones that look like they have meaning, but I guess one site that I do like to look at is called Quora, Q-U-O-R-A dot com, and those are basically forums where a person can ask a question about anything and a lot of people will give their insight on it, or they'll give you the information, or they'll even give you links towards information too. I kind of like that website, because there's a lot of people who tend to use it, and they definitely will reach out to you and answer your question if you have one."
College Sources: Web	Mentions of using home college website to get information--e.g., on degree options, course availability, to learn more about supports, or the college generally	"If I hadn't found that [Poppy] website there, it would be very difficult for me to find out what was 100% online."
College Sources: Human	Mentions of talking to humans at the home college (or other college sites) to decide whether to apply/in help with application process. Includes counselors (academic, financial aid, admissions, etc.), Vet Center personnel, etc.	And I did have to spend a lot of time on phone with the registrar's office, just to figure out which category I was under. So that was kind of time consuming, and they don't want to speak to you, unless you have already applied and have a student ID. So it was a little bit time consuming, versus just click, click, click, apply, you're done.

Note. We exclude codes and sub-codes that we did not draw on for this paper, e.g., codes in the "motivation for college enrollment" family, which related to students' goals in returning to college generally, "motivation for online degree or certificate," which coded why students preferred online course-taking. These codes were out of the scope for this paper.

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

<u>Introduction</u>

Good [morning/afternoon], and welcome. My name is [interviewer name], and I'm from [Institution (Blinded for Review)]. I'll be recording this interview so that I don't miss any important details. I'm going to start the recording now [START RECORDING].

Okay, let's get started. We are talking with students who are taking fully online classes to earn degrees (and certificates?) at [Institution name] as well as other schools to get a better understanding of the factors that were important to you when you decided to pursue your education fully online at [Institution Name]. We are also interested about the sources of information that you used to learn more about different program options.

Before we get to the questions, I want to make sure you are informed about what the study entails and that you consent to participate. I'm going to read a short form to you, and at the end, I will ask you whether you agree to participate.

[Read Consent Form, ask respondent to indicate consent.]

[If participant agrees to participate, express appreciation; if not, thank the participant for considering participation and let them know that their participation will be halted at this time.]

[Interviewer Background]

Because my focus is truly on *your* experience, I want you to take charge of the interview. I have some guiding questions, but I really want to know about your experience, your thought process, and your challenges. Please feel free to take me in the right direction. If my questions don't make sense, please let me know and don't hesitate to ask for clarification.

Guiding Questions

1) I'd like to get started by asking you to introduce yourself and tell me what program you are attending and which degree or certificate you are working toward.
   a) Probe: Specific discipline

2) What were you doing when you decided to go back to school? What made you decide to return to school and pursue your degree/certificate?
   Additional probes, if needed:
   a) What do you want to do with your degree/certificate?
   b) Were you working full-time or part-time when you decided to enroll, and are you working now?
   c) Do you have a family you are taking care of? How did that factor into your decision?
   d) Did you go to college right out of high school?
   e) How long do you anticipate that it will take you to complete our goal?

3) Tell me about when you first started thinking about starting a fully-online degree.
   a) Did you attend any other colleges before this?
   b) Did you ever take college classes face-to-face before you decided to pursue your fully-online degree?
      i) How did you do in those classes?
      ii) How was your experience of taking face-to-face classes?
   c) What factors contributed to you decide that you wanted to pursue an online degree/credential program at this time?

4) Tell me a bit about how you looked for a program—how did you first hear about **{Institution Name's}** program? (Probes: Did you hear about the program through friends/family/colleagues/teachers/advertisement, etc.)

5) After you learned about **{Institution Name's}**, where else did you look for information to learn more about it?
   a) Did you talk to friends or family members?
   b) Did you talk to professional colleagues?

6) Additional probes for a and b: Why did you talk to those specific people? Had they taken classes or a full degree online?
   a) Did you read online reviews? From what websites?
      i) Can we do a screen share and you can you walk me through some of the places you looked?
   b) Did you use an online search engine (Google)? Do you remember any of the key search terms you used?
   c) Did you get advice from a counselor? High school or college
   d) Did you talk to someone from the college/university?
   e) What other sources of information did you use?

7) What sources of information did you find most helpful as you decided which program to enroll in? What made that source of information especially helpful?

8) Which sources of information did you feel were the most reliable/accurate? Why?

9) Which other schools and programs did you consider, including this one, and why did you ultimately choose **{Institution Name}**?
   a) What made you consider those schools?
   b) What did you rule out?
      i) Why did you specifically rule out those schools?
   c) Did you consider attending at a physical campus? What factored into your decision to consider attending a physical campus, and ultimately to attend virtually instead?

10) What are the biggest factors that ultimately made you decide on this program?

11) When you made the decision was it easy to enroll? Were there any parts of the enrollment process that seemed difficult or burdensome?
   a) What did you do next?
   b) What steps, if any, did the college or university take to support you as you were enrolling?

12) If someone were to come to you now for advice about enrolling in an online program, what advice would you give them?

13) Is there anything else that you think I should know about your decision-making process in enrolling in an online program?