Online education is faulty and needs reform

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Online courses have become very popular — and very controversial. A 2014 report showed that for the fall of 2014 there were 5.8 million students taking online courses, making up 31% of all their degree-seeking students. Online courses are often offered by for-profit institutions, and many colleges and universities are offering them under a number of premises, ranging from the belief that offering online courses is cheaper to the belief that online courses are simply the wave of the future. It has been the common wisdom that students consistently perform worse in an online setting than they do in a traditional classroom. But recent studies of online courses increase their likelihood of dropping out, while much fewer students fail or withdraw from courses, so online education fulfill its original promises?

In a study published last June by the Brookings Institution — a non-partisan think-tank based in Washington, D.C. — the authors concluded that the evidence is mixed, but overall somewhat negative. The study, titled “Promises and pitfalls of online education,” found that the results are not consistent with many other things, that “in their current design, online courses are difficult, especially for the students who are least academically prepared and have fewest resources.”

In order to clarify these issues, the researchers used data from DeVry University, a for-profit college with an enrollment of more than 50,000 students nationwide. DeVry’s students, on average, take two-thirds of their coursework online, which means that they could make meaningful comparisons with the rest of their students who take courses in conventional in-person classes. Further, their online and in-person semester are identical in most ways with many professors teaching both versions.

Some of the results of their research were that taking a course online reduces student grades by an average of roughly a B- grade on average, while those taking it online earned a C, providing evidence that students learned less in the online setting. They also found that taking an online course increases the probability that a student will drop out of school by 9 percent. As expected, the negative effects of online courses are concentrated in the lower- performing students. Lower performing students, who take online courses, were roughly 5 points or more, while students with higher GPA’s showed a much smaller effect on their grades. Thus, “while online courses may have the potential to differentiate coursework to meet the needs of students with weaker incoming skills, current online courses, in fact, do an even worse job of meeting the needs of these students than do traditional in-person courses,” according to the study.

The general conclusion of the study was that students in online courses perform substantially worse than students in traditional-in person courses and that experience in these online courses impact performance in future classes and their likelihood of dropping out of college. “These findings are consistent with prior studies of online education in other settings, such as community colleges and high competitive four-year institutions that also showed that online courses yield worse average outcomes than in-person courses.”

Despite these numbers, online courses continue to be an alternative to some students who, because of personal circumstances, have no other choices. Yet, most of the students enrolled in these kinds of courses attend for-profit institutions, which are non-selective, and typically serve students who have weaker academic preparation and fewer economic resources than those who attend more selective colleges and universities. “If there is indeed a better way to offer these courses,” the authors of this study think so. They believe that online education is faulty and needs reform.