Online education is faulty and needs reform

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Letters from Academia

One theme prominent in the design of online courses is that academic practitioners assume that all students have the same preparation and skills and will start with the same level of understanding and knowledge. Further, those who first-generation college students often live in rural areas, or who come from difficult high schools usually do worse than the students taking courses from more advantaged backgrounds.

In their defense, the researchers used data from DeVry University, a for-profit college with an undergraduate 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 the students who take courses in conventional in-person classes.

Further, the online and in-person curricula 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 about 0.1 grade point on the traditional four-point grading scale. Students taking the course in-person earned slightly less than a B+ grade on average, while those taking an online course earned an A, providing evidence that these systems have a positive impact on online learning.

Yet, it has been the common wisdom that students who take online classes have grades reduced by 0.3 to 0.5 grade points or more, while students with prior higher GPAs 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 highly 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 choice. Most of the students enrolled in these kinds of courses attend for-profit institutions, which are non-selective and typically serve students with weaker academic preparation and fewer economic resources than those who attend more selective colleges and universities.

These findings do not support the belief that offering online courses is cheaper than in-person courses, nor do they support the belief that online education is advantageous for all students, or that it is cheaper overall. These concerns are not new, but the evidence is now overwhelming.

It is clear that online education is a mixed bag. The study, titled “Promises and pitfalls of online education,” raises some important questions that merit further investigation. For instance, what is the underlying cause of the significant differences between online and in-person education? How can we design online courses that can strengthen the quality of these courses and hence make online learning an option for the most in-need populations?