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Regional

Higher education faces quagmire with distance education

The debate over the advantages and disadvantages of online education heated up recently after news broke that Arizona State University (ASU) will offer its incoming students the option of a traditional freshman year – or one that is completely online.

In an announcement made last April, ASU officials said that the university would be offering a set of eight courses aimed at fulfilling the general education requirements in the freshman year in the form of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses). The courses will be offered in conjunction with EdX, a non-profit initiative created in 2012 by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University aimed at providing postsecondary courses online and for free to anybody.

ASU faculty will teach the courses. In order have these courses count for college credit at ASU, students will have to pass a final exam and pay a fee of no more than \$200 per credit hour.

Since their inception, MOOCs have attracted a lot of discussion. The partnership between EdX and ASU has only highlighted the debate over whether this approach heralds the future of higher education or is impractical and ineffective.

Both proponents and opponents of online education have used data to make their respective cases, even though much is inconclusive. However, that does not mean that there are no hard numbers we can look at in determining whether such an approach to higher education will work.

Despite the recent hype, distance education has

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been around since 1728 when Caleb Phillips, a Boston teacher of a novel shorthand writing method, proposed sending his lessons via mail to interested students living outside the city. Since then this methodology has seen an evolution driven by both new technologies and pedagogical approaches. All along, a great number of studies have been carried out in order to assess the effectiveness of such approaches.

In a study published almost simultaneously with the ASU announcement with the title, “Preparing for the Digital University,” scholars from several universities came up with a number of conclusions that are worth noting.

One conclusion was that student satisfaction varies between different demographics. Older and more professional students are more satisfied than the typical (traditional) undergraduate and graduate student with an online format, something long suspected by many who have seen a higher level of success among more mature, non-traditional students. These people, of course, are not the main demographic being served by colleges and universities, particularly public ones.

This conclusion is consistent with the results of another recently released study. As reported in a recent issue of “The Chronicle of Higher Education,” a group of researchers from the University of California-

Davis presented data at a meeting of the American Educational Research Association in April that showed that community college students throughout California were 11 percent less likely to finish and pass a course if they chose the online version instead of the face-to-face form of the same class. Since community colleges serve about 45 percent of college students in the United States, these findings are significant.

Sometimes the effects of online education go beyond academic performance. Research at Kennesaw State University showed that students taking totally online, asynchronous classes (like most MOOC's) were less inclined to civic engagement than those taking the same courses in a face-to-face format.

These and other studies are just examples among the hundreds of scholarly publications that deal with the whole issue of distance education and that should be informing us in our discussions on this topic. So, why is there so much debate about this issue? The reasons are manifold.

One of the reasons is the American propensity to fall in love with fads, particularly when it comes to “technological fixes.” But what is there to fix? The problem is very simple. Higher education in this country is the most expensive per pupil in the world. And with diminishing public funding, the costs are being passed on to the students and their families, increasing the economic disparities in society. The less affluent you are, the more likely you will be to complete a college education burdened with student loan debt.

Therefore, college administrators – particularly at public institutions – are rushing to ride the bandwagon of online education in the belief that it will offer a path to a cheaper degree by reducing the labor force in postsecondary institutions, namely faculty. But why is Arizona State taking the lead? The reasons are very simple. First, its president, Michael Crow, is well known for being a risk-taker, not afraid of trying untested approaches to higher education. The second has to do with public funding for colleges and universities in his state.

According to a 2013 study by the Center of Budget and Policy Priorities, a think tank that analyzes the impact of federal and state budget policies, the state that has reduced its appropriations to higher education the most since the 2008 recession is Arizona. More than 50 percent of funding was cut in just five years. To make things worse, there is talk among Arizonian politicians to reduce support for higher education to zero in the foreseeable future, making funding of postsecondary institutions in that state totally uncertain.

The question is are we making the right pedagogical decisions based on what is best for the students? Or are we living under the illusion that we can actually have a prosperous but uneducated society?

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