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EDITORIAL

The Trouble With Online College

Published: February 18, 2013 | 457 Comments

Stanford University ratcheted up interest in online education when a pair of celebrity professors attracted more than 150,000 students from around the world to a noncredit, open enrollment course on artificial intelligence. This development, though, says very little about what role online courses could have as part of standard college instruction. College administrators who dream of emulating this strategy for classes like freshman English would be irresponsible not to consider two serious issues.

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First, student attrition rates — around 90 percent for some huge online courses — appear to be a problem even in small-scale online courses when compared with traditional face-to-face classes. Second, courses delivered solely online may be fine for highly skilled, highly motivated people, but they are inappropriate for struggling students who make up a significant portion of college enrollment and who need close contact with instructors to succeed.

Online classes are already common in colleges, and, on the whole, the record is not encouraging.

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According to Columbia University's Community College Research Center, for example, about seven million students — about a third of all those enrolled in college — are enrolled in what the center describes as traditional online courses. These typically have about 25 students and are run by professors who often have little interaction with students. Over all, the center has produced nine studies covering hundreds of thousands of classes in two states, Washington and Virginia. The picture the studies offer of the online revolution is distressing.

The research has shown over and over again that community college students who enroll in online courses are significantly more likely to fail or withdraw than those in traditional classes, which means that they spend hard-earned tuition dollars and get nothing in return. Worse still, low-performing students who may be just barely hanging on in traditional classes tend to fall even

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further behind in online courses.

A five-year study, issued in 2011, tracked 51,000 students enrolled in Washington State community and technical colleges. It found that those who took higher proportions of online courses were less likely to earn degrees or transfer to four-year colleges. The reasons for such failures are well known. Many students, for example, show up at college (or junior college) unprepared to learn, unable to manage time and having failed to master basics like math and English.

Lacking confidence as well as competence, these students need engagement with their teachers to feel comfortable and to succeed. What they often get online is estrangement from the instructor who rarely can get to know them directly. Colleges need to improve online courses before they deploy them widely. Moreover, schools with high numbers of students needing remedial education should consider requiring at least some students to demonstrate success in traditional classes before allowing them to take online courses.

Interestingly, the center found that students in hybrid classes — those that blended online instruction with a face-to-face component — performed as well academically as those in traditional classes. But hybrid courses are rare, and teaching professors how to manage them is costly and time-consuming.

The online revolution offers intriguing opportunities for broadening access to education. But, so far, the evidence shows that poorly designed courses can seriously shortchange the most vulnerable students.

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tr Maryland
Thank you for publishing this. As a professor who has taught both in traditional and online courses, what you say rings very true. Online education is inferior for role modeling to students, assisting struggling students and allowing students to learn from each other in in-class discussions (which are in NO way replicated by online discussion boards). I do graduate admissions and I had a student try to tell me in complete seriousness that the online Organic Chemistry LAB she did at her kitchen table (with a kit sent from her online college) equaled the experience one can acquire in a full-fledged chemistry lab.

Unfortunately, these courses are academic crack to university administrators. They can charge the same tuition, but not have to pay for niceties such as classrooms, libraries, laboratories, etc. I am extremely distressed by the enthusiasm for these classes demonstrated by my administration. The administrators (many of whom are former professors) seem to have forgotten the potentially transformative experience which can happen in the life of students due to being part of a living, breathing, in-person academic community.

Have we become so reductionistic in higher education that education is only about putting facts from one person's head into another's? So profoundly sad.

Feb. 19, 2013 at 4:21 a.m.   RECOMMEND   523

D.T.   Sacramento, CA

As a professor who teaches solely online, I am aware of the limitations of online education. However, this editorial makes two important errors.

The first is to equate MOOCs (massive open online courses) with accredited online education. I teach courses with enrollments that range from 7 to 30. Certainly that kind of student/faculty ratio does indeed allow instructors to develop genuine relationships with students. The second is to assume that online dropout rates are due to the fact that the courses are online. Is it not possible that students who work full-time and who have families and other responsibilities have too little time to devote to their studies? Many students enroll in online classes thinking they will be easier than traditional courses. The opposite is the truth; online students are responsible for more of the learning than those in traditional classrooms where instructors and TAs hold their hands through lectures and class discussions.

I agree with the conclusion of this tutorial: the most vulnerable students are the least likely to succeed online. However, they are the least likely to succeed in any educational setting. For many, the choice is not between the traditional classroom and online courses, but between online courses and no education at all. If a small number of those students are able to gain an education and earn a degree, then online education has succeeded in reaching students who would otherwise have been deprived of an education.

Feb. 19, 2013 at 4:24 a.m.   RECOMMEND   214

Stan Persky   Vancouver, Canada

One of the reasons that online courses are so attractive (leaving aside for a moment their advantages to students far away from the school, and those seeking less costly education) is because of the failure of mass lecture post-secondary learning, which is the dominant teaching method in North American universities. Undergraduate students especially, who find themselves in vast lecture halls with 500 or more students to a class and who have very little contact with an actual professor, report themselves bored and alienated from the lecture. That's why large numbers of them can be observed mainly engaged with their computers, updating their Facebook status, shopping online, watching YouTube, texting, and playing video games. They occasionally copy down a PowerPoint-projected note that they think might be relevant to the final exam.

I teach in an old-fashioned university, with 35 students to a class and face-to-face interaction. I know my students' names and something about their lives, I grade their written work, and I'm available several hours a week for individual tutorials. This "Socratic" teaching method now provides only a minuscule proportion of undergraduate teaching, though I believe it's the most appropriate way to teach first and second year students. Since we refuse to adequately fund this kind of teaching, the mass open online course appears to many students as a viable alternative to overcrowded impersonal lecture halls.

Feb. 19, 2013 at 5:44 a.m.   RECOMMEND   172

CoffeeBasedLifeform   Seattle

You forgot to mention a very salient feature of the Stanford course. It was free.

Feb. 19, 2013 at 4:58 a.m.   RECOMMEND   156

Bob Az   Phoenix, Arizona

My experience as an online adjunct in local community colleges, after several years teaching the same course "on-ground," bears this out. Students were frequently ill-prepared, from inadequate computer resources to lack of online skills to simple inability to read and write at a first-year college level. And they often disregarded guidance at the start of the semester that as a "real" credit course, they'd be expected to put in the 12 to 24 hours per week typical of a 4-credit lab science class. Many had no idea they'd have to give up anything in their busy lives, including vacations and family time, to succeed. As a result, typically half to three-quarters dropped the course or simply quit coming by the end of the semester.

There were a few notable exceptions who showed initiative and insight, including one fellow stationed in Kirkuk, Iraq. These were the ones who acted like traditional students: asking questions, responding to my comments on their work, and generally improving. Unlike so many of their classmates, they succeeded.

Feb. 19, 2013 at 5:42 a.m.   RECOMMEND   119

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sdavidc9   Cornwall Bridge, Connecticut

There is money to be made in online education, and the shape of online education is heavily influenced by that fact. Much policy is made by the standard of what it does to the bottom line, not how well it works. Educational scams can be profitable but do not work well.

Feb. 19, 2013 at 1:11 a.m.   RECOMMEND   114

AHS   large state univ. in the SW

Thank you!
I've been an adjunct university instructor for 15 years, the last two of which, due to a relocation, have been solely online. It is dreadfully frustrating to try to teach humanities -- in my case, religious studies and history -- at a distance to 85 students I will never meet and for whom there is no adequate forum for real discussion of issues. Learning is not simply about "information" -- it's also about process and involves reflection.
That said, I've had students for whom the format has worked well: they had specific reasons to need online classes and they were motivated and disciplined. But I fear that despite my best efforts, my students are getting a second-class experience. It's laughable when people laud Stanford, Harvard, MIT, etc., for their "innovations" -- their own students learn in a significantly different environment that includes a vibrant campus community. I am not the only one of my colleagues who sees a growing gap between those who can afford traditional on-campus learning, with that sort of community, and the vast number of other young people who are experiencing assembly-line higher education.

Feb. 19, 2013 at 4:24 a.m.   RECOMMEND   95

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tony zito   Poughkeepsie, NY

There is a potentially significant issue, academic honesty, which is not mentioned in this article. I teach at a community college where our online courses serve local students who are typically taking classes on campus at the same time. Remedial students do have to demonstrate success at college level course work before enrolling in online sections. Two years ago, online math courses began to

require a proctored final exam on campus. Since nearly all our online students are also on-campus students, this presents no particular inconvenience. Yet enrollment in online math classes began to plummet immediately. Nearly every proctored final has turned up at least one case, and sometimes several, of students who clearly had not been doing their own work. One must consider the possibility that the former popularity of online math courses (some of which had higher success rates than on campus sections) had something to do with the ease of obtaining illegitimate assistance on tests, homework, and projects when submitting work from a remote terminal.

Feb. 19, 2013 at 4:24 a.m.   RECOMMEND   93

Prof.Jai Prakash Sharma, Jaipur, India

The online education programmes could be helpful in increasing the access to education, as also to make it more affordable for the millions unable to move to colleges due to financial constraints, yet it would be a poor substitute for the face-to-face experience of real college life. At the most, the online education could be a good supplement to a traditional college education.

Feb. 18, 2013 at 11:17 p.m.   RECOMMEND   88

Taxpayer and Mother   NY

As an employer, I take any on-line degree with a grain of salt. I do not accept that they can prevent massive cheating. I am not certain some schools even care. The high tech solutions for preventing cheating are easy for students to beat. The "solution" of not allowing additional browsers to be open during tests? Use a second laptop. Requiring a final to be taken at a proctored location - leaves the ability of students to use substitutes with phony ID (just ask college bars ask common phony IDs are). Other test prevention tools are just as easily overridden. A few online classes - fine. An entire degree - I question. The accreditation agencies have done just as bad as credit rating agencies have done in the financial world. They make money by accrediting colleges, and have no motivation to withdraw accreditation.

The solution to all this is to change the bankruptcy law back to the pre-2005 law. Private student loans should be dischargeable in bankruptcy. This will discourage banks from lending for "education" that is worthless. As it is now, banks bear no risk. The taxpayers will pay the price, as these students will not be able to.

Feb. 19, 2013 at 7:49 a.m.   RECOMMEND   79

SK   Detroit, MI

Nailed it. Seriously. But the only other problem not mentioned is online cheating. Online services are sprouting up that offer to, for a fee, log on to a students online course and take the entire class. No credible system has been develloped to stop this. Thank you for helping slow down this run-away bus before it runs over countless college students.

Feb. 19, 2013 at 4:24 a.m.   RECOMMEND   76

Spence   Alaska

I have a granddaughter for whom the only way to get her degrees in graphic arts and art education was through on-line courses at AIU and U of Nebraska at Kerney. She had some very impressive instructors and course contents (I'm a BFA from Wisconsin and Nebraska on campus so I can compare) and has learned a great deal. She paid half her way, gave her all to the courses and met the instructors from Kerney in person, which made a huge motivation difference. She finished on time despite a baby and a toddler and

working. She is now gainfully employed as an artist (despite all the articles and surveys claiming there are no art jobs.) She worked hard selling herself and her portfolio to get her art teaching job and absolutely loves it. She and I split her schooling costs and she had a lot of husband babysitting support for night classes so she will finish without any outstanding loans. It can be done by superior, students with supportive family. I am impressed with how excellent on-line education can be when it is done properly and the professors and students are tech advanced enough to make it work. On-line education is still in its infancy in many respects, but when combined with on-campus seminars and apprenticeships, I believe it could be the best way to nationally upgrade post high school education and produce a high caliber workforce.

Feb. 19, 2013 at 4:51 a.m. RECOMMEND 70

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anonymous NYC

I don't think we should be evaluating online programs versus traditional college programs as mutually exclusive options. In addition to hybrid classes themselves, there is the possibility of taking some courses online and some in-person, either within a semester or in alternating semesters. Consider the example of a student who needs to continue working part-time or who could live at home except for the fact that the university is too far to drive back and forth to every day. Perhaps the student could take 2 courses in a 5-course program online and take 3 at college. This might enable the student to reduce her at-school days to 2 or 3 days per week (so the long commute would not need to be done every day) and give her more flexibility regarding working hours (e.g., working during the day and taking a class at night). She would still enjoy the benefit of interactions at the college for some days and courses. Online courses also could be taken during summers to reduce workload in the fall and winter semesters. That might help students who have trouble carrying a full course load. Some students might even choose to work nearly full-time for a semester or two in internships or similar programs while taking a course online.

Feb. 19, 2013 at 4:21 a.m. RECOMMEND 61

Beth St. Augustine, FL

I am currently enrolled in an online master's program in library and information science at FSU, and the program there is actually extremely interactive. I attend a weekly two-hour class for each of my courses through the Blackboard Collaborate platform. Through this, professors give traditional lectures, and present slides or webpages through a whiteboard that all of the students can see; students can "raise their hands" to ask questions or to comment, and then either type the question/comment in the chatbox that everyone sees, or speak to the class through our microphone headsets, that we're all required to have. In the classes I've taken so far, students type in the chatbox nearly constantly through class, providing myriad points-of-view simultaneously on the topics at hand, in a way not possible in a traditional classroom. The professors in my program are very much into group work, which is certainly one way to force students to interact with one another; groups are usually provided with their own separate Collaborate rooms to meet in, and talk about our projects. In both the classroom and group rooms, all sessions are recorded, so you can go back to hear anything you may have missed. I realize not all online programs work this way, but I am very satisfied with mine.

Feb. 19, 2013 at 5:43 a.m. RECOMMEND 57

JP Oregon

College administrators have for many years envisioned a future in which survey courses are delivered online. These are typically large

classes and they are expensive to staff. The move online classes is all about saving money, not about improving education. Tuition wouldn't be reduced, despite the fact that colleges would save a bundle on online delivery. Just think how many professors (salaries and benefits) could be let go and how much additional money could be funneled into programs that really matter...like sports. There's no doubt that some things can be taught very successfully to some people online. But there are limits and this is a money grab.

Feb. 19, 2013 at 5:37 a.m.   RECOMMEND   54

Jonathan   NJ

The idea that most college classes are just lectures is just plain wrong. In an English department, where I teach, for example, anyone who did not include extensive class-participation discussions of the reading, small group work, in-class writing, and other techniques that empower students rather than having the instructor just talking, would be regarded as a very poor teacher. It's true in some situations in other subjects where there are very large classes, but college teaching--including good online courses, which make use of Skype-like technology so that instructors can interact one-on-one or with small student groups in real time-- is a lot more than lectures. Lecturing is one of the least effective methods of teaching, and good college teachers realize it. When lectures occur, it's because there has been a failure to invest in enough instructors to keep the classes small enough for good discussions--which is a different issue.

In reply to James Brown   Feb. 19, 2013 at 6:52 a.m.   RECOMMEND   52

Kathy B   Seattle, WA

Thank you for writing this editorial. There is a bit of a rush to embrace online teaching as a low-cost alternative to adequately funding higher education. Online courses offer great opportunities for highly motivated, self disciplined talented students, but the record for the majority of students speaks for itself.

One more problem with online courses: Conscientious efforts must be made to ensure that students taking online assessments are the same ones who are registered for the course. There have even been instances of students paying others to take the course for them. This can be more difficult to detect when professors never meet their students.

Feb. 19, 2013 at 5:45 a.m.   RECOMMEND   52

John   Big City

I like being taught in the classroom. It would be nice if it weren't so expensive. It would be a lonely world if we stayed at home and did everything through the computer.

Feb. 19, 2013 at 4:51 a.m.   RECOMMEND   52

Scott Cole   Ashland, OR

If college is to be regarded as a time of transition to the professional world, then there is something to be said for requiring an student to have to get up in the morning, get dressed, and make it to an 8 am class across campus (all the better if it's in the depth of winter). It's difficult to imagine that crucial kind of ethic--that of having to show up--being instilled by an online course.

Feb. 19, 2013 at 4:24 a.m.   RECOMMEND   47

Sarah D.   Montague, MA

You nailed it. It's like the automation we find in so many parts of our lives, such as recorded telephone answering protocols that most

businesses have. "For your convenience, please listen to the following menu . . . " MY convenience? Rot! It's purely about money and, incidentally, not having to have more of those pesky things called employees.

In reply to JP   Feb. 19, 2013 at 5:53 a.m.   RECOMMEND   45

GEM   Dover, MA

Regrettably, this editorial is crudely conceived and both premature and obsolete. "Online education" is a primitive expression to use in addressing the meteoric rise of MOOCs—especially ed-X—launched less than a year ago.

The MIT course in advanced computer design enrolled 155,000 students in 170 countries, and only 7,200 passed the final exam, but that was more than MIT could produce on the ground in 40 years; a 16-year-old Mongolian student got a perfect score on the final, answered a question of an African student, and they formed a small global discussion group of enrollees; the Mongolian student will matriculate at MIT next fall.

Armed with over $80 million in research and course-development funding, ed-X is addressing the need you cite by joining with two local community colleges, the city of Boston, and the entire University of Texas system, to develop remedial and elementary courses for students needing that work.

In any discussion of MOOCs, the distinction must be made between "training" (knowledge- and skills-development) and "education" (self-development). MOOCs are universally paradigm-shifting for training, which can with the Internet be a mechanical process. Education and especially liberal education (strong humanities component) are necessarily a social process, involving communication (at which the Internet excels); here MOOCs promise is yet to be demonstrated but already beginning with ed-X courses on the Greek Hero, Justice, and others.

Feb. 19, 2013 at 7:11 a.m.   RECOMMEND   45

Winthrop   The flats of e'side Buffalo, NY

Yup, teaching smart people is easy.

The rest are a problem

Feb. 19, 2013 at 5:45 a.m.   RECOMMEND   45

Miskatonic   Minneapolis

One of the main things undergraduates learn in college is time management -- juggling multiple classes, outside jobs, assignment deadlines, etc. I have worked with high school seniors and college seniors and I would say that the number one difference between them is not extra knowledge (though college students ought to know more), but time management and the ability to meet a deadline. Difficulty managing the college workload, and balancing it with a personal life, is probably the main reason first year students drop out of school. Online classes are great for really motivated students who already have certain skills and are able work on their own, but the reality is that most beginning college students just aren't to this point yet. They need support and good role models in order to develop these skills. This is why online classes, even small online classes, have a lower success rate than classroom courses.

Feb. 19, 2013 at 4:51 a.m.   RECOMMEND   39

Jay L.A.

As a university instructor, I agree that online could work for courses presently taught in large lecture halls, as in such cases interaction with faculty is already minimal. But I don't teach lecture halls. My classes normally range from thirty to forty. Not only would students miss the interaction, but a substantial portion of the semester is taken up with student presentations, done in teams. It's an excellent, involving pedagogical technique, but would be unrealistic to attempt in an online format. Let's face it: online is being pushed to save money. But its costs in terms of instructional quality should also be considered.

Feb. 19, 2013 at 4:51 a.m.   RECOMMEND   36

Kidipede   Portland, Oregon

I taught online classes for years, and while it's true that the students are more likely to drop the class, that's largely because they're already marginal students - typically extremely busy people who have jobs and families to manage as well as their studies. People who have nothing to do but college usually choose traditional in-person classes, and of course such people are more likely to succeed.

Rather than blaming online courses, we might want to examine the idea that it's reasonable for any young person to work full time, take care of children, and go to college simultaneously.

(And I spent hours every week in online discussions with my students, and graded essays they wrote every week.)

Feb. 19, 2013 at 4:51 a.m.   RECOMMEND   36

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