Online Learning and Student Outcomes in California’s Community Colleges

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**SUMMARY**

California’s community colleges offer more online credit courses than any other public higher education institution in the country. By 2012, online course enrollment in the state’s community colleges totaled almost one million, representing about 11 percent of total enrollment. Indeed, practically all of the enrollment increases over the past ten years have occurred in online courses. Among students taking credit courses in 2011–12, one of every five took at least one online course.

These trends raise critical questions about the effect of online learning on student outcomes. In this study, we consider both short- and long-term outcomes, focusing on participation, course completion and passing, degree attainment, and transfer to four-year institutions. As the enrollment trends suggest, we find that online learning has provided new access to higher education, with online participation increasing for each of the state's largest ethnic groups. Still, participation is uneven across groups, with African Americans participating at relatively high rates and Latinos lagging all groups.

When we examine student outcomes, we find a surprising result: short-term outcomes are poor, but long-term outcomes are not. How does this break down?

In the short term, course by course, student outcomes are worse in online courses than in traditional courses. Students are less likely to complete an online course than a traditional course, and they are less likely to complete an online course with a passing grade. We find lower course success rates across all types of students, across a wide set of subjects, and
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