



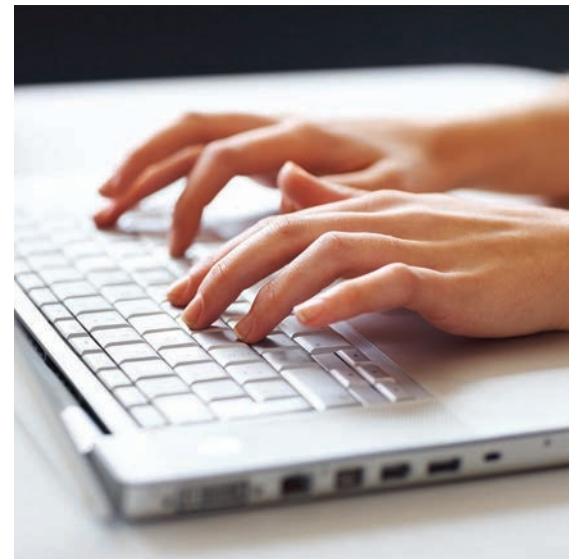
# Online Learning and Student Outcomes in California's Community Colleges

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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

across almost all colleges. Indeed, once we control for a full set of student characteristics (including overall grade point averages [GPAs]) and institutional factors, we find that online course success rates are between 11 and 14 percentage points lower than traditional course success rates. In addition, we find that online learning does nothing to overcome achievement gaps across racial/ethnic groups—in fact, these gaps are even larger in online classes.

However, when we examine long-term outcomes, the picture looks brighter. Students who take at least some online courses are more likely than those who take only traditional courses to earn an associate's degree or to transfer to a four-year institution. For some students, online courses offer a useful tool that helps them to reach their goals.

Online learning is still relatively new—and there is reason to believe that the online performance gaps that we identify in this report can be minimized with strategic planning and improved technology. Providing more online versions of high-demand courses should be one priority. Community colleges should also review the quality of current online courses and consider implementing a standardized learning management system to assess student behavior and engagement and to identify areas where improvement is needed. Finally, gathering information on the cost of developing and maintaining online courses is vital to understanding the potential efficiencies of online learning.

Governor Jerry Brown has proposed spending tens of millions of dollars to promote innovations in learning across California's higher education systems. With more funding and new initiatives on the horizon, the community colleges have the opportunity to make even greater strides in their online learning programs.

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