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The Trouble With Online College

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.

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. 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 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.