

NOT YET SOLD:

What Employers and
Community College
Students Think About
Online Education

A *Taking Stock*
Report from
Public Agenda

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SUMMARY

New survey data from employers and community college students raise important questions about the state of online education today. Both groups remain skeptical about the value of this fast-spreading mode of learning.

Important findings from this research include the following:

1. Most employers would prefer a job applicant with a traditional degree from an average school over one with an online degree from a top university.
2. Most community college students agree online classes require more discipline from students, but they are split on whether they teach students the same or less than in-person classes.
3. Many community college students who take online classes wish they could take fewer than they currently do.

BACKGROUND

Online education is rapidly moving into the higher education mainstream. Colleges and universities across the nation are embedding online education into their curricula and offering both hybrid and fully online programs. Online products range from video lectures—some just for residential students, others (massive open online classes, or MOOCs) for the world—to sophisticated learning environments, like Carnegie Mellon’s Open Learning Initiative. About a third of undergraduate students today take at least one of their classes online.¹

Online education promises to make college more accessible and, in the long run, more affordable for all Americans. Research suggests that some forms of online

education can result in equal or better learning outcomes for students compared to in-classroom instruction.² At the same time, however, online classes may not serve all students equally well. In particular, those who are already struggling to keep up with their college work are more likely to drop out of online classes than classes taught face-to-face.³ Separating hype from substance and tracking how online education is actually affecting students and other key stakeholders will be crucial as this way of teaching and learning evolves.

¹ I. Elaine Allen and Jeff Seaman, *Changing Course: Ten Years of Tracking Online Education in the United States* (San Francisco, CA: Babson Survey Research Group and Quahog Research Group, 2013).

² Barbara Means, Yukie Toyama, Robert Murphy, Marianne Bakia, and Karla Jones, “Evaluation of evidence-based practices in online learning: A meta-analysis and review of online learning studies,” (Washington DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2010); William G Bowen, Matthew M Chingos, Kelly A Lack, and Thomas I Nygren, “Interactive Learning Online at Public Universities: Evidence from Randomized Trials,” (New York, NY: Ithaka S+R, 2012).

³ David N. Figlio, Mark Rush, and Lu Yin, “Is it live or is it internet? Experimental estimates of the effects of online instruction on student learning,” (Cambridge MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2010); Di Xu and Shanna Jaggars, “Adaptability to online learning: differences across types of students and academic subject areas,” (New York, NY: Community College Research Center, Columbia University, 2013).

THIS RESEARCH

This research brief, which we envision as the first in a series, takes stock of the experiences and views of people directly affected by online learning in higher education—in this case, employers and community college students.

Community colleges serve nearly half the nation's undergraduate students and an overwhelming majority of first-generation college students. They are the best hope for many to acquire the skills, knowledge and credentials that will allow them to gain a foothold in the middle class. Online education provides the flexibility some students need to combine school with work and family responsibilities. For others, it is the only way to stay on track and complete requirements for often oversubscribed or problematically scheduled courses. At the same time, many community college students are underprepared for college and, according to the research cited above, may be better served by in-person instruction or, possibly, hybrid approaches than by online-only instruction.

Do community college students consider themselves well-served by online education? Do they think they're getting the same or a better learning environment than the classroom setting would provide? And what do employers think about online education? Are they inclined to look favorably on job applicants who have completed their education primarily online?

These are among the questions we examine in this research report, based on data from surveys of 656 employers (specifically, human resources professionals at companies and organizations who report looking for applicants with postsecondary credentials for at least

some of their positions) and 215 community college students. See the back of this brief for a fuller discussion of the methodology.

While we believe these results raise important questions about online education, we note that they do so within a rapidly changing context. Online education is becoming increasingly sophisticated, our knowledge of its pedagogical impacts is deepening and public and stakeholder opinion is evolving in kind.

For instance, in 2011, less than a third of American adults (29 percent) thought the educational value of online courses was equal to that of classroom learning.⁴ Just a year and a half later, almost half (49 percent) said an online degree “provides a similar quality of education as compared to traditional colleges or universities.”⁵ Also in 2011, 51 percent of college presidents already believed online and classroom learning provide a similar quality of education.⁶ But a recent poll with college and university faculty suggests this group remains largely skeptical of online education. Just 26 percent of faculty felt that, at their institutions, online courses could produce student learning outcomes at least equivalent to those of in-person courses, although those with more personal experience teaching online classes held more favorable views.⁷

Public and key stakeholder opinion on online education will likely continue to evolve as online learning diversifies and expands across higher education and people gain experience with and exposure to it. We present our most recent survey findings on the subject in this brief.

⁴Paul Taylor, Kim Parker, Amanda Lenhart, and Eileen Patten, “*The Digital Revolution and Higher Education: College Presidents, Public Differ on Value of Online Learning*,” (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2011).

⁵FTI Consulting, “*Innovation in Higher Education, Public Opinion Survey Results*,” (Boston, MA: Northeastern University, 2012).

⁶Taylor, Parker, Lenhart, and Patten.

⁷Doug Lederman, Scott Jaschik, “*The 2013 Inside Higher Ed Survey of Faculty Attitudes on Technology*,” (Washington, D.C.: Gallup, 2013).

Although employers see a positive side to online learning, most prefer applicants who earn their degrees in the classroom.

According to our survey, employers recognize a niche for online education, especially for older students. And most (73 percent)⁸ say online learning requires the same discipline from students as traditional classroom instruction, or even more. Nevertheless, 4 in 10 (42 percent) believe students learn less in online-only degree and certificate programs than in more traditional programs, and 4 in 10 (39 percent) believe online-only degrees are easier to pass than more traditional ones.

Most employers believe there is a niche for online education, especially for older students.

Percent of employers who say the following statement comes somewhat or very close to their views:

Online-only degrees and certificates provide real opportunities for...

...older students to get valuable college credentials.

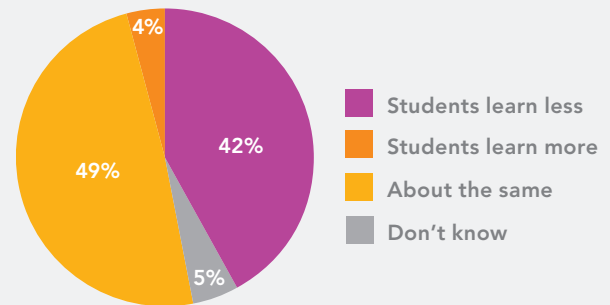
80%

...younger, first-time college students to get a high-quality education.

50%

At the same time, many employers remain skeptical of the quality of online programs compared to traditional programs.

Percent of employers who think students in online-only programs learn less, more or about the same amount, compared to students in traditional programs:



Many employers feel online programs require extra discipline from students.

Percent of employers who say online-only programs require more, less or about the same amount of discipline, compared to traditional programs:

More discipline

45%

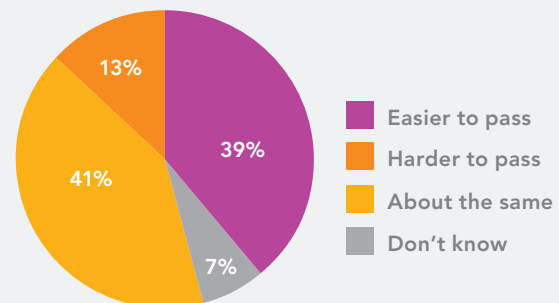
Less discipline

23%

About the same

29%

Percent of employers who say that, compared to traditional programs, online-only programs are easier to pass, harder to pass or about the same:



⁸Note the numbers in the corresponding chart below add up to 74 percent. This discrepancy is due to rounding.

In short, at least for now, most employers trust traditional instruction more than online education. Nearly all (82 percent) feel hybrid programs give students a better education than online-only programs. And when asked to choose, 56 percent of employers say they would prefer a student with a degree from an average school that was completed entirely in the classroom to one with a degree from a topnotch school that was completed entirely online (17 percent); 21 percent say it would make no difference.

Most employers would prefer a job applicant with a traditional degree from an average school over an applicant with an online degree from a top university.

Percent of employers who would prefer a job applicant who:

Has a degree from an average school that was completed entirely in the classroom

56%

Has a degree from a top school that was completed entirely online

17%

It doesn't matter

21%

Percent of employers who say the following statement comes close or not close to their views:

Hybrid programs that involve a mix of online and in-person instruction give students a better education than online-only programs.

Very or somewhat close

82%

Not too or not at all close

13%

Community college students are split on whether the quality of online education is comparable to classroom instruction.

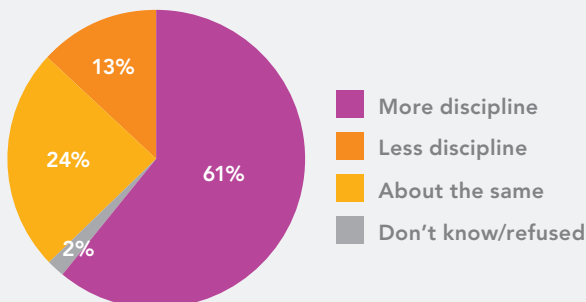
In response to quality and discipline questions, community college students' views on online education are similar to those of employers. Nearly all (85 percent) agree online classes require the same discipline from students as in-person classes, or even more—in fact, the majority of these students (61 percent) feel online classes require more discipline. At the same time, 4 in 10 (42 percent) believe students learn less in online courses than in more traditionally taught ones.

Unlike employers, however, many community college students (38 percent) think online classes are harder to pass than in-person ones. Very few think they are easier to pass (18 percent), and 39 percent see no difference.⁹

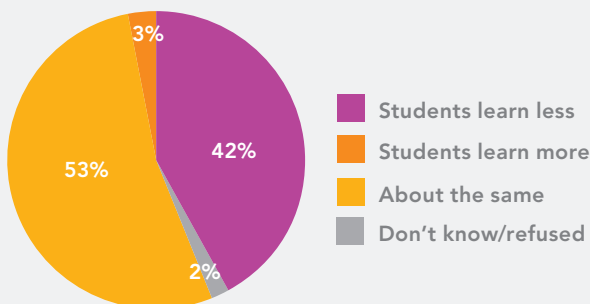
Most community college students agree online classes require more discipline from students, but they are split on whether online classes teach students the same or less than in-person classes.

Many students say online classes are harder.

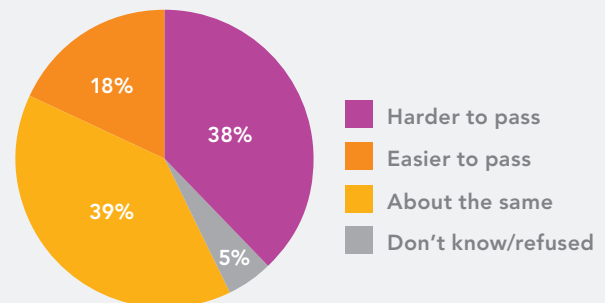
Percent of community college students who say online classes require more, less or the same amount of discipline, compared to in-person classes:



Percent of community college students who say students in online-only classes learn less, more or about the same, compared to students in more traditionally taught classes:



Percent of community college students who say that, compared to in-person classes, online-only classes are easier to pass, harder to pass or about the same:



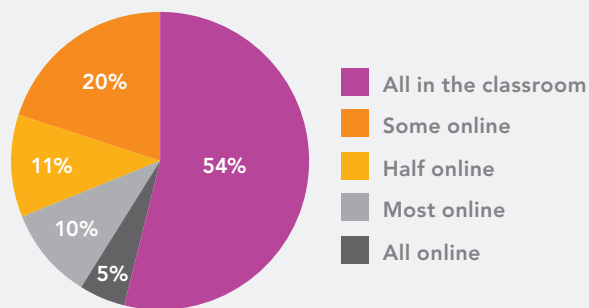
⁹ Note that the question wordings in the employer and community college student surveys differed slightly. Employers were asked about their opinions on online-only degree and certificate programs vis-à-vis traditional programs, while community college students were asked to compare online-only classes to in-person classes. These differences were introduced to make each set of questions most relevant to each group's respective experiences. It is possible, however, that we would have found more or fewer differences in opinions across these two groups had they been asked the exact same questions.

Many community college students wish they took fewer classes online.

Just under half (46 percent) of the community college students surveyed are taking at least some of their classes online, including 5 percent who take all of them online. Community college students who take classes online, however, are about twice as likely to say they would prefer to take fewer rather than more classes online than they currently do (41 percent versus 20 percent), perhaps because they feel online classes require more discipline and are harder to pass but teach students less than in-person classes.

About half of community college students take classes online.

Percent of community college students who take classes online:



Many community college students wish they took fewer classes online.

Percent of community college students who:

Want to take fewer classes online

41%

Want to take more classes online

20%

Say they are taking about the right amount online

39%

Base: Community college students who are taking classes online.

CONCLUSION

These survey findings suggest many employers and community college students are not yet convinced of the value of online education. As the online revolution marches on and opinion evolves, will employers become more accepting? It certainly seems likely they'll get more used to online education, given its growing prevalence. How they view online degrees, though, will probably depend on the quality of the new hires they encounter from online programs, and how these hires compare to those who have gone through traditional programs. Their lingering skepticism may also indicate a general need for better communication between colleges and employers about the knowledge and skills the latter seek in their employees.

Will more community college students find online education useful over time? This research suggests community colleges have work ahead of them to ensure the types of online education they offer meet the diverse needs of their

students. Online education should serve as an effective option for the students who want it or can best benefit from it and not become a burden or obstacle for those who don't.

We must also take continuous stock of other key stakeholder perspectives, in particular those of faculty. The views of this critical group are likely to shift quickly as well, as online education platforms become more ubiquitous and sophisticated, as faculty come to understand how online education affects their day-to-day jobs and long-term careers and as they see how their students respond to it.

In sum, tracking this changing picture of key stakeholder and public opinion will be important if we hope to ensure the rise of online learning increasingly meets the needs of students and society.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

The findings summarized in this report are part of a larger ongoing project researching the views of various student and employer groups on higher education issues. As part of this larger study, Public Agenda collected survey data through telephone interviews with representative samples of human resources (HR) professionals from four major United States metropolitan areas between April and May 2013. We also collected survey data from a nationally representative sample of current community college students between February and June 2013 via telephone and online interviews.

Public Agenda designed the survey instruments and analyzed the data. Data were collected by Social Science Research Solutions, Inc. (SSRS). All data were weighted to correct for variance in the likelihood of selection for a given case and to balance the sample to known population parameters in order to correct for systematic under- or over-representation of different types of community college students and employers. The margin of error of the weighted data for the HR professionals survey is +/- 4.18 percent. The margin of error of the weighted data for the student survey is +/- 7.9 percent. As always, the margin of error is larger for subgroups within samples.

This brief is based on the following samples:

656 human resources professionals from the Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Detroit and El Paso-Las Cruces metropolitan areas. Interviewees were randomly selected from organizations listed in the Dun & Bradstreet database. In the Philadelphia, Los Angeles and Detroit areas, organizations with 50 or more employees were included; the El-Paso-Las Cruces sample included organizations with 10 or more employees. All respondents said that positions in their organizations "sometimes," "often" or "always" demanded a postsecondary credential.

215 current community college students. All interviewees were enrolled at a community college. The majority (94 percent) were completing classes toward a certificate or degree at this school; 6 percent said they were taking classes but not looking to graduate with a certificate or degree.

For details on the demographic characteristics of these samples, visit: <http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/not-yet-sold>

SOURCES

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Bowen, William G, Matthew M Chingos, Kelly A Lack, and Thomas I Nygren. *Interactive Learning Online at Public Universities: Evidence from Randomized Trials*." New York, NY: Ithaca S+R, 2012.

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