Supporting Community College Students Online: Filling Knowledge Gaps for Success

What Colleges, Funders, and Policymakers Need to Know

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Colleges, federal and state policymakers, and funders need…

Data on **outcomes reported separately** for online versus in-person students

Evidence of **sound return on investment** for online support services

A better understanding of **what supports work best for different students** and why

Research on what skills, knowledge, and supports can be bolstered with online learning technology and **when technology is not appropriate**

Information about the **resources instructors need** to effectively teach online courses

Online learning enrollment at public community colleges is increasing, which means new education opportunities for community college students juggling school, family life, and work. This shifting education landscape can increase access among previously underserved students and produce a new, diverse crop of talent for employers. But data show that fully online learners (students completing coursework or degree programs where all instruction takes place virtually) tend to have less favorable outcomes, such as lower course completion rates and less satisfaction.

For students taking in-person classes, support services (such as academic advising, personal supports, and career navigation assistance) have shown promise in facilitating success. But less is known about how to support students completing online coursework and degrees.

Better data about student outcomes and which supports work best for online learners will help shape decisions among higher-education administrators at the college, state, and federal levels about how to channel scarce resources. This evidence will also inform funders and policymakers interested in investing in, scaling and sustaining effective approaches. Below are five key knowledge gaps that need to be addressed.

1) HOW TO BETTER ASSESS COLLEGE AND PROGRAM-LEVEL OUTCOMES

Data about academic and employment outcomes are typically not reported separately for online and in-person students by college or program. Although some colleges and programs are tracking such data for internal use, greater transparency is needed to fully understand academic outcomes for online learners and to measure improvements over time. **Colleges** should collect and publicly report on data about their students' college and program-level outcomes, both for in-person and online student groups. **Federal and state policymakers** should champion consistent reporting on this data across colleges.

2) WHETHER EVIDENCE FINDS A RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Cost is an important consideration for administrators implementing online courses, programs, and supports for learners. They need to understand (1) whether online programs save colleges money compared with in-person programs, given the up-front costs required to introduce and maintain new technology and curricula; and (2) whether online support services have a strong return on investment relative to those for in-person programs (through a lower time to completion, degree

attainment, or transfer, as well as reduced attrition). **Colleges** should track this information and regularly assess these efforts for performance improvement. Rigorous, independent research is also needed to understand cost implications and the return on investment.

3) WHICH SERVICES WORK BEST FOR DIFFERENT STUDENTS

More data are also needed to effectively design and market support services for different types of students. Students' learning needs and motivations for pursuing online courses may differ based on their level of academic preparedness or other factors, such as whether they are juggling child care and work or combining online coursework with military service. **Researchers, policymakers, and funders** should sponsor, conduct, and invest in further research about supports that consider student characteristics and the perspectives of students involved in online learning.

4) WHEN TECHNOLOGY ENHANCES OR DIMINISHES LEARNING

Colleges have more to learn about how to use technology in a way that supports but does not replace essential human interactions. For example, video counseling sessions for rural students unable to access a campus can promote interaction, but the use of automated technology for that counseling may not be appropriate. **Colleges** should engage in research to assess when technology can supplement or replace in-person supports and personal interactions (as well as when technology falls short). It is also important to understand how the supports online students need differ from the supports classroom students need.

5) HOW TO BEST SUPPORT THE ONLINE INSTRUCTOR

Instructors are critical for cultivating students' learning experiences and success online, and the importance of strong learner-to-instructor engagement in online learning is well documented. Students who attend classes on campus can talk with instructors after class to ask questions and cultivate a connection. Online learners do not have this opportunity, so colleges must explore ways to provide or simulate in-person interactions between instructors and online learners. Limited professional development resources for faculty and the need to hire adjunct instructors close to the start of the semester can be a barrier to supporting online instructors at many community colleges. **Colleges and researchers** should examine how to best support online learners despite these limitations.

ADDITIONAL READING

Supporting Community College Learners Online (full report)
Amanda Briggs, Semhar Gebrekristos, and Shayne Spaulding **https://urbn.is/2IaCtc2**

How Community Colleges Can Better Support Online Learners (fact sheet)
Amanda Briggs, Semhar Gebrekristos, and Shayne Spaulding **https://urbn.is/3aphSgb**

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