

# Study: Online community college courses found to be ineffective

Jenny Ung, USA TODAY [\\_ \(http://www.usatoday.com/staff/10046874/jenny-ung\)](http://www.usatoday.com/staff/10046874/jenny-ung) Published 7:00 a.m. ET May 22, 2015

Online courses offer flexibility, a self-paced schedule and the added bonus of not requiring a physical classroom.

But a UC Davis study (<http://www.aera.net/Portals/38/Newsroom%20-%20Recent%20Research/Online%20Course-taking%20and%20Student%20Outcomes.pdf>) – authored by Cassandra M. D. Hart, Elizabeth Friedmann and Michael Hill -- presented in April at the [American Educational Research Association](http://www.aera.net/Newsroom/RecentAERAResearch/OnlineCourse-TakingandStudentOutcomesinCaliforniaCommunityColleges/tabid/15916/Default.aspx) (<http://www.aera.net/Newsroom/RecentAERAResearch/OnlineCourse-TakingandStudentOutcomesinCaliforniaCommunityColleges/tabid/15916/Default.aspx>) found online courses at community colleges have been less successful than courses taught face-to-face.

"People coast on the knowledge that they can access courses at any time," said Cassandra Hart, assistant professor at the University of California-Davis (UC Davis).

Not only do students gravitate toward online classes because of their flexibility, but also because they're perceived to be easier.

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MeiLi Jensen, a student at Mesa Community College taking online courses, said people assume that they "can just put it off and do it later." The lack of student-teacher communication and disinterest in the online course are other contributing factors, she added.

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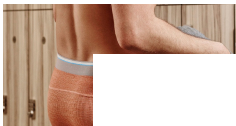
"I personally prefer face-to-face (courses) so you can get your questions answered right away by the professor and so you don't get in the habit of procrastinating," Jensen said via email. "You're forced into doing your homework."


Online students have, on average, higher first-term GPAs than face-to-face students, according to the study. But the grades and completion rates of face-to-face courses within the study still trumped those of online courses.

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The study found only 79% of students completed their online course, while 85% of students completed their face-to-face course. Meanwhile, 56% of students passed their online course, whereas 63% of students passed their face-to-face course. Overall, the study found that if a student were to take a course in person and then take the same course online, the student would be 11% less likely to finish and pass online.

Course Characteristics, Students first enrolled in 2008-09

	(1) All Courses  mean/sd	(2) FtF Course Sections  mean/sd	(3) Online Course Sections  mean/sd
Completion Rate (%)	83.63 (37.00)	84.58 (36.12)	85.50 (36.12)
A/B/C Rate (%)	61.41 (48.68)	62.52 (48.41)	63.00 (48.41)
Accept Rate (%)	42.20 (49.39)	42.37 (49.41)	42.50 (49.41)

Source: AERA

The study looked at 217,000 students from the beginning of the 2008 academic year through the end of the 2012 academic year in the California community college system. The study focused exclusively on courses taught in lecture or discussion formats. It excluded students who already hold associate or bachelor's degrees and high school dual enrollment programs.

The results of the study were broken down into three components: whether the student completed the courses, whether he or she completed the courses with passing grades and whether he or she completed the courses with A or B grades.

Michael Hill, a Ph.D. student and an author of the study, has been teaching online classes since 2009. He struggled with transitioning from teaching in a traditional face-to-face setting to an online course because it was difficult to connect with students, he said.

"In a face-to-face setting, the instructor has considerable latitude to make modifications to everything from teaching style to assignment instructions on-the-fly," Hill said via email. "If students look confused, you may see blank stares in a classroom and find other ways to present a given concept. However, in an online class faculty don't get the same kind of instant feedback from students."

While there have been many college institutions and system have conducted similar studies, this study notably highlights the consistently negative relationship between online classes and student outcomes, Hart noted.

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"The story around this body of literature is that (this has been) developing very consistently across different states," she said. "We've been looking at differences in impact in different types of groups, different types of students, and different types of courses that we studied, and students are doing less well in online courses compared to face-to-face courses."

Studies conducted in Virginia (<http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/online-learning-virginia.html>) and Washington (<http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/adaptability-to-online-learning.html>) by Di Xu and Shanna Smith Jagers from Columbia University in 2011 and 2013, respectively, produced results similar to those in the UC Davis study.

The consistency of the results is important for California policy, according to the study.

"Policymakers in California and other states are interested in exploring whether online courses can be used to expand student and improve outcomes," the study said. "The results suggest that there may be costs to this strategy, although formal cost-benefit analyses should explore whether the greater likelihood of course non-completion or failure offsets the possible cost savings associated with online courses."

The study's results indicate students need more support in online classes. In order to combat student disengagement, Hart advised professors to require assignments to be done more frequently or have more check-ins.

"This is to make sure the same kind of structure that is present in face-to-face classes is carried through to online classes," she said.

Hybrid classes, which combine online and face-to-face instruction, would also be helpful to community colleges, Hart said.

But Jensen said hybrid classes would only work if the majority of the instruction takes place in the classroom.

Hill suggested using "on-the-fly" video announcements or live virtual meetings using AdobeConnect or Google Hangouts. Participation requirements through discussion boards or learning management systems, such as D2L and Blackboard, can also help faculty flag students who are becoming disengaged, he added.

Although community college students struggle with online courses, online enrollment is still increasing, according to a study (<http://www.itcnetwork.org/component/content/article/1171-its-2014-distance-education-survey-results.html>) on distance learning.

But Hill emphasizes that the UC Davis study is not a referendum against online education.

"We now have the technology to create online social and collaborative environments, blending pedagogy and technology," Hill said. "If people's lives can revolve around Facebook and Twitter, it stands to reason we can translate that into a learning environment. Is it the same as a traditional classroom? No. But let's recognize that, conduct more research to understand the strengths and weaknesses of each, and use that knowledge to build better learning environments."

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