Degree Attainment in Online Learning Programs:
A Study Using National Longitudinal Data

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to compare degree attainment rates in online and not wholly online degree programs, using longitudinal data from a national sample. Longitudinal data, collected from the National Center for Education Statistics via Beginning Postsecondary cohort 12/14, were analyzed to determine if relationships between degree attainment, course type, and degree program existed. The largest sample size available for analyzing any combination of relationships was 6,770 students. Chi-square and log-linear analyses indicated a significant interaction between course type, degree program, and degree attainment at $p < .005$. In terms of degree attainment, results indicated that online learning lends to similar student success, to learning that does not take place in a fully online environment. Additionally, in an analysis of specific program outcomes, students taking online psychology programs were more likely to finish the degree program than students not taking all online courses, $p < .000$.

KEYWORDS

Degree Attainment, Online Degree Programs, Online Learning, Student Success

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, postsecondary education has changed considerably. Fluctuating enrollment, driven by changes in availability and qualification requirements of federal aid (Hopkins, 2012), as well as a mindset focused on degree attainment (ACoSFA, 2012), has forced higher education institutions to develop initiatives focused on student retention and completion rates. Such initiatives have included: limiting the number of hours for the attainment of a bachelor's degree (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2014), creation of early college high school programs (Zinth, 2015; Cowan & Goldhaber, 2014), and offering online degree programs to meet students' varying needs (Stoessel, Ihme, Barbarino, Fisseler, & Sturmer, 2015). However, online courses have proved to be one of the most viable solutions for long term financial solvency (Allen & Seaman, 2014; Twigg, 2003), as well as an opportunity to maintain, or even increase, student enrollment (Allen & Seaman, 2016). Enrollment in online learning has steadily increased since 2003, with more than one-third of students enrolled in at least one online course as of 2017 (Allen & Seaman, 2017).

This demand for online learning has caused a shift in how institutions are thinking about course design, pedagogy, and practice (Salmon, 2011, 2014). Pedagogy and accountability have become more inclusive of online learning, but translating instruction delivered in a face-to-face format into an online format does not always convert accordingly (Gillett-Swan, 2017). Thus, a debate as to whether online learning is comparable to that of traditional formats has led to deeply rooted, and divided opinions between administrators and faculty (Allen & Seaman, 2014; Lederman & McKenzie, 2017). Specifically, faculty members still doubt whether online learning can match traditional courses by rigorously engaging students in content (Lederman & McKenzie, 2017). The rationale is partly supported by the notion that administrators and vendors exaggerate potential financial benefits and stress difficulty in acquiring, and coordinating, the necessary resources to implement a quality online learning program (Lederman & McKenzie, 2017). However, when pedagogic practices specific to online learning are implemented in online courses, studies have found student course completion rates (Muljana & Luo, 2019), student motivation, end-of-course grades, student engagement, and satisfaction are positively affected (Gregory & Lampley, 2016; Soffer & Nachmias, 2018).

Pedagogic effectiveness refers to a student-centric approach where teaching and learning are influenced by an educator's reflection on theory, practice, and policy implementation, resulting in positive impacts on the learners (Keengwe, Mbae & Onchwari, (2016). By studying specific pedagogic practices, research reaffirms what may be considered best practices, or practices that are considered most effective (Sener, 2015). The concern, then, is how these best practices have been naturally adopted within the educational system, including transcending geographical distance between learners and instructors. Highly varied data currently exists to affirm how online degree attainment compares to degree attainment for students in face-to-face and blended learning environments (Ice, Díaz, Swan, Burgess, Sharkey, Sherrill,

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