

The Medium is Not the Message

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By Jonathan Kaplan

A few weeks ago, the U.S. Department of Education released a report that looked at 12 years' worth of education studies, and found that online learning has clear advantages over face-to-face instruction.

The study, "[An Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning: A Meta-Analysis and Review of Online Learning Studies](#)," stated that "students who took all or part of their class online performed better, on average, than those taking the same course through traditional face-to-face instruction."

Except for one article, on this Web site, you probably didn't hear about it— and neither did anyone else.

But imagine for a moment that the report came to the opposite conclusion. I'm sure that if the U.S. Department of Education had published a report showing that students in online learning environments performed worse, there would have been a major outcry in higher education with calls to shut down distance-learning programs and close virtual campuses.

I believe the reason that the recent study elicited so little commentary is due to the fact that it flies in the face of the biases held by some across the higher education landscape. Yet this study confirms what those of us working in distance education have witnessed for years: Good teaching helps students achieve, and good teaching comes in many forms.

We know that online learning requires devout attention on the part of both the professor and the student — and a collaboration between the two — in a different way from that of a face-to-face classroom. These critical aspects of online education are worth particular mention:

- Greater student engagement: In an online classroom, there is no back row and nowhere for students to hide. Every student participates in class.
- Increased faculty attention: In most online classes, the faculty's role is focused on mentoring students and fostering discussion. Interestingly, many faculty members choose to teach online because they want more student interaction.
- Constant access: The Internet is open 24/7, so students can share ideas and "sit in class" whenever they have time or when an idea strikes -- whether it be the dead of night or during lunch. Online learning occurs on the student's time, making it more accessible, convenient, and attainable.

At Walden University, where I am president, we have been holding ourselves accountable for years, as have many other online universities, regarding assessment. All universities must ensure that students are meeting program outcomes and learning what they need for their jobs. To that end, universities should be better able to demonstrate—quantitatively and quali-

tatively—the employability and success of their students and graduates.

Recently, we examined the successes of Walden graduates who are teachers in the Tacoma, Wash., public school system, and found that students in Walden teachers' classes tested with higher literacy rates than did students taught by teachers who earned their master's from other universities. There could be many reasons for this, but, especially in light of the U.S. Department of Education study, it seems that online learning has contributed meaningfully to their becoming better teachers.

In higher education, there is still too much debate about how we are delivering content: Is it online education, face-to-face teaching, or hybrid instruction? It's time for us to stop categorizing higher education by the medium of delivery and start focusing on its impact and outcomes.

Recently, President Obama remarked, "I think there's a possibility that online education can provide, especially for people who are already in the workforce and want to retrain, the chance to upgrade their skills without having to quit their job." As the U.S. Department of Education study concluded, online education can do that and much more.

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