How online courses boost college completion but lower actual learning (in 3 charts)


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Gregory Ferenstein (http://venturebeat.com/author/ferenstein/)
The availability of online learning is doing some really strange things to California's community college students: It's dramatically increasing their persistence to a degree, but it's lowering how often they finish each course with a passing grade.

“In every academic subject area, students are less likely to succeed in online than in traditional courses,” explains a new report from the Public Policy Institute of California.

On the other hand, the report says, “It appears that the availability and flexibility of online courses help many students achieve their long-term educational goals.”

Over the long term, students taking 60 or more credits are much more likely to get a degree when they take classes online.

![Figure 10. Long-term outcomes are better for students who take online courses](http://venturebeat.files.wordpress.com/2014/05/persistance.png)

But, as for completing and passing each individual course, the report states, “We find that online course success rates are between 11 and 14 percentage points lower than traditional course success rates.” Bummer.

![Figure 5. Success rates are lower in online courses](http://venturebeat.files.wordpress.com/2014/05/learning-comparison.png)

And online courses exacerbate the already disturbing gaps related to age, gender, and race.
All of these data points jibe with previous research looking at how online learning does, indeed, hurt minorities and other students.

In fairness, online learning is still evolving. I’ve been experimenting with some of the online massively open online course (MOOC) providers, Coursera and Udacity, and I’ve found them to be quite innovative.

For instance, I never attended in-class lectures where I took helpful quizzes peppered throughout lectures. The constant interactivity of MOOCs at Coursera and Udacity are really helpful. And Udacity has a paid personal online tutor that is super helpful. Every time I have a question, I have someone who can help on demand.

But at least for now, innovation doesn’t always add up to a quality education.