The Effect of Remedial Courses on Participation and Persistence Among Online Community College Students

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Competition for employment and job satisfaction are driving forces for obtaining a post-secondary degree. The U.S. Department of Education (2015) reported higher levels of education resulted in a higher employment rate in 2014. More Americans are pursuing higher education than ever before and by 2026 undergraduate enrollment rates are expected to increase (Institute of Education Sciences, 2017). Technology has enabled students to advance their education through online classes. Due to convenience, wide reach, relatively low cost, and ability to support the achievement of learning objectives, distance education is a growing method of education delivery. Many students who attend online classes work, have families and other obligations which make online schools a good option for pursuing a degree. However, if a student is not prepared or does not understand the demand of an online education, they may not succeed.

**Statement of the Problem**

The problem to be addressed in this study is that students who are not academically prepared to take online courses “consistently perform worse in the online setting than they do in face-to-face classrooms” (Bettinger & Loeb, 2017). A 2010 U.S. Department of Education study concluded that online versus face-to-face courses produce similar results. However, recent studies have argued that underprepared students struggle in online classes (Baily & Jaggers, 2016; Bettinger & Loeb, 2017). Still other studies have concluded that remedial courses are helpful, but the cost offset and time requirements to the student serve as a deterrent to taking remedial courses (Lundy, 2017; Saks & Truman, 2017). Considering the advantages of higher education and the conflicting nature of previous research, a careful examination of the effects of remedial courses in the online environment is needed.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study to investigate the use of remedial programs in preparing underprepared students to succeed in the online education setting. Through the lenses of technology and education, a meta-analysis of recent quantitative and qualitative studies will be used to synthesize information about remedial programs as a method of enhancing student’s readiness for the demands of the online setting. Meta-analysis is the procedure for combining data from multiple studies. The topic of online education is broad and covers public universities, community colleges, for-profit universities and many other forms of online education. To narrow the scope, this study will specifically investigate the community college population.

**Research Questions**

Remedial programs often involve developmental courses in math, reading and English. When students take remedial courses prior to fully matriculating into a school, it extends graduation time and often costs the student out of pocket. Understanding how the benefits and disadvantages associated with remedial courses affect student persistence and decisions to participate can provide administrators the necessary information to promote, enhance or omit remedial programs. Therefore, the following research questions will guide this study:

Q1: How does the cost and time of remedial programs effect students’ decisions to participate?

Q2: How do remedial courses effect underprepared student’s persistence to graduate from online community college courses?

**Study Significance**

The results of this study will be useful for students and administrators at community colleges offering online courses. Community colleges have higher enrollments of underprepared students than selective universities. Underprepared students drop out of the online classroom more often than they do the face-to-face classroom (Bettinger & Loeb, 2017). When students are not academically prepared to take courses, they are often given the option of attending remedial courses. Past studies are in conflict of whether remedial courses affect student persistence to complete online programs. This study will provide additional support for or against the effectiveness of remedial programs. Results will support students and administrators in making informed decisions. This study will also contribute to the existing literature on the topic of underprepared students in the online education setting.

**Conclusion**

Technology has been instrumental in expanding access to education. Students attend online classes to save time and money. Many students have families and work while attending school. However, underprepared students don’t persist to complete online programs as well as they do in face-to-face settings (Bettinger & Loeb, 2017). Past studies have argued for and against the benefits of remedial courses in better preparing students to succeed. This study will examine the use of remedial courses in community colleges by conducting a meta-analysis of qualitative and quantitative research. The goal of the research is to provide students and administrators with evidence-based inferences so that they make informed decisions about remedial program initiatives.

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