What's the Ideal Mix of Online and Face-to-Face Classes?

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U. at Albany

If students rarely set foot on campuses, says Peter Shea, they may feel less invested in their education.

Is there a tipping point at which students who take a blend of online and in-person coursework are doing too much online? That question goes to the heart of something called the online paradox.

The online paradox has inspired much debate, and it describes two seemingly contradictory things. The first is that community-college students who take an online course are more likely to fail than are those who take it face-to-face. The second is that community-college students who take some online classes are more likely to complete their degrees than are those who don't take any.

One theory as to why this paradox exists is that online coursework may be more challenging for students who struggle academically, or the classes may be of poorer quality, hence the higher failure rate. But the flexibility of online education enables students to work around obstacles that stand between them and a degree, like work, family obligations, or distance from campus. That means they are more likely to achieve their long-term goals if they mix in a few online classes.

But is it possible to determine how many online courses a student can take before the risks outweigh the benefits? Peter Shea and Temi Bidjerano decided to find out. The two researchers looked across the State University of New York's 30 community colleges, tracking outcomes for more than 45,000 students who first enrolled in an associate-degree program in the fall of 2012.

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The ratio that seems to lead to the most success for a full-time student, they found, is two online courses to three on-campus courses. In other words, students who take more than 40 percent of their courses online lose some of the benefits that help lead to degree completion.

Mr. Shea, associate provost for online learning at the University at Albany, which is part of SUNY, suspects that this may have something to do with the advantages that each provides. Online classes offer flexibility, for sure. But if students rarely set foot on a campus, he says, it's possible they feel less invested in their education.

By contrast, engaging with professors and classmates in person reinforces their identity as students and may provide supports that computer interactions can't match, he says. And that could be what carries them through. (The

researchers found that students who qualify for remedial education benefit from a similar combination of coursework.)

But there are nuances in that ideal ratio. Mr. Shea and Ms. Bidjerano, an associate professor of education at Furman University, determined that students at campuses with higher-than-average graduation rates could handle more online coursework — as many as three courses per term in a full load — probably because the college has a better support system for all of its students. At colleges at the other end of the spectrum, where graduation rates are problematic, students would be better off taking no more than one online course per term.

Mr. Shea cautions that he and Ms. Bidjerano were examining only one measure of success: degree completion. Education confers other benefits, of course, and those shouldn't be ruled out. "We need to be thoughtful about this," he says. "This is not a one-size-fits-all solution."

The study, "Online Course Enrollment in Community College and Degree Completion: The Tipping Point," will be published in a forthcoming issue of the *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning.*

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