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Abstract

A highly touted feature of the so-called global 'revolution' in higher education is the trend to use information technology to reach a broader clientele. Although there is evidence that students may be learning the material in on-line courses as well as in traditional face-to-face universities, how well students learn content is not the only reason they persist to a degree, and student persistence is an important goal of higher education institutions. In this paper, we make the case that the life conditions for students attending virtual universities are different from those of 'traditional' students in face-to-face universities, and that this difference puts a particular (largely non-pecuniary) premium on time to degree. With our data from a Catalan virtual university, the Open University of Catalonia (UOC), we are able to test this hypothesis directly by using the heterogeneous degree structure of the Catalan/Spanish higher education system to estimate whether the number of courses required to get various degrees (the length of the degree program) is significantly related to student persistence.

06.2.2026

The study analyzes several cohorts of students (those who entered in 2000?2003) studying in the UOC and estimates the factors that influence their degree completion. We find that the completion rate is generally low, but that students taking shorter degree courses at the UOC are much more likely to complete their degrees. This suggests that, given their clientele, on-line universities operate under very different constraints from their face-to-face counterparts. Our results are important for higher educational researchers, who have mainly focused on younger populations attending face-face universities. They also can serve university administrators who launch distance education degree programs and make high stakes decisions about them with little or no information on the likely behavior of their older students, and can serve employers who are deciding whether to subsidize their employees to take advanced degrees through on-line programs of study. (HRK / Abstract übernommen) Carnoy, Martin, E-Mail: carnoy@stanford.edu