False Assumptions

Students have come to embrace online learning in masse; elite colleges and universities now offer online courses; and evidence mounts for the quality of such offerings when well designed and administered. Yet many academics continue to hold on to the increasing outdated assumptions that online learning is of inherently poor quality and that any institution offering it must be a degree mill. Neither of those notions is accurate, but both point to a larger issue: the mistake of viewing all higher education questions through the lens of a traditional, campus-based experience. Current debates over the nature and future of higher education often treat higher education monolithically, as if there were just this one form of higher education, when in fact there are multiple higher educations at work in the United States.

The higher education that tends to most often shape our debates is the one consisting of four-year, first-time, full-time students going directly from high school to college—the campus-based college/university most often depicted in movies and television and novels and cherished by those who had the privilege of being educated in this way. That higher education is about getting a degree and an education, but it is also about coming of age. Although technology can help improve the educational experience, it does little to augment or replace the magic and messiness of human relationships in this context.

At Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU), we offer this traditional, coming-of-age higher education on our main campus. It is a special experience, and it is well-crafted for the young students who come to us, for the most part, straight out of high school. It is very much about surrounding those young men and women with mentors and holistic learning opportunities that include travel abroad, student organizations, service learning, athletics and team play, and much more.

In contrast, most working adults have had all the coming of age they need. They are best served by a second higher education—that of online learning. These students often go back to school because life is telling them that they need a degree. So they try to make it work amid lives of work schedules, school meetings, kids’ dance recitals and soccer practices, military deployments, and more. Many adult learners are working all day, rushing to class, maybe grabbing a drive-thru dinner on the way, and then leaving class the minute it is done in the hopes of getting home before their kids are in bed. There is little time for leisurely chats, for sitting under leafy trees debating the meaning of life, and certainly not for the kinds of organizations and activities we make available to traditional students.

Four Cs shape these adult students’ needs: credential (getting a degree as quickly as possible while maintaining quality), cost (being able to afford the degree), and convenience (having delivery methods that work for them). They want quality, of course, and they’d love to have more time for long, exploratory conversations. But those desires are trumped by the four primary drivers of choosing a program.

That’s why online learning has become dominant for these students: it offers a far more convenient approach to education at a lower cost so that they can complete their degrees and earn needed credentials. In addition, for those who know this world and work in it and study it (and study in it), the arguments that online learning is of lesser quality seem increasingly out-of-touch and ill-informed. Several early players in the for-profit education world sullied the reputation of online learning in ways that linger, and in truth, it wasn’t as good ten to fifteen years ago. As a result, we asked ourselves: “How do we make an online class as good as a face-to-face class?”

Today, that question is being reversed. The best-designed online courses are often superior to traditional courses, since they allow much better optics into the teaching and learning that is under way, are more student-centered, and are every bit as rigorous. The SNHU online programs have 24/7 optics in every active section offered. We perform predictive analytics on students and wrap services around them. We map students’ use of learning resources to success on assignments, and we constantly tweak courses to optimize them. A trained faculty mentor looks in on every section of every course every week. When traditional academic teams visit, which they do often, they are often amazed at the level of analytics we employ in service to academic quality. In contrast, insight into the quality of their own teaching and learning does not go much beyond mid-term grades and end-of-term student evaluations.

Of course, that’s the beauty of very small, mentor-based educational environments. Traditionalists can rely on their well-trained faculty working in close physical proximity to students. They can depend on the judgment of faculty members and do not need to do all that we do in online education to ensure student learning outcomes and support. But that doesn’t mean that the traditional model is superior (indeed, there is some evidence to support the idea that it is not). The traditional model is simply different—appropriate for 18-to 21-year-old students and the mode of educational delivery they need. Unfortunately, some critics don’t see the differences, understanding neither adult learners and what they need to be successful nor the ways that online learning has developed a robust and high-quality response to those needs. As a result, policies and thinking designed for traditional students are often imposed on older working students, making their return to college more difficult than it needs to be.
Similarly, whereas online learning may help traditional higher education, it certainly cannot and should not displace the important coming-of-age college experience of young adults. At SNHU, we have become a national leader in online education, but we have also expanded our traditional campus, growing 50 percent over the last four years, adding full-time faculty, and keeping a commitment that our on-campus students will be able to take 66 percent of their courses with full-time faculty. We have recently completed a state-of-the-art library and learning commons, and we have expanded opportunities for these students in everything from study abroad to internships. Online courses may become an increasing part of how on-campus students learn within the traditional context, but they can’t provide the physical and human context that 18-year-olds need to realize their potential and become fully mature adults.

So when critics rail against online education and worry that it will ruin the coming-of-age experience of young adults, they are committing the common mistake of confusing two forms of higher education—along with the student populations served and what those distinct populations seek and need in their educational experience. Traditional students today make up less than 20 percent of all college students in the United States. Meanwhile, online education is daily transforming the lives of the 37 to 40 million adults who have some credits and no degrees (as well as the millions more who have no credits at all) at a time when 70 percent of all new jobs require a two-year degree or at least its equivalent.

The latter group of students—the older adults—might wish they had been able to spend time on a campus, but their lives didn’t work out that way. For them, online learning means a second chance at the degree that can change the trajectory both for their current lives and for the future lives of their families.

Notes

Paul LeBlanc (p.leblanc@snhu.edu) is President of SNHU.

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