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8/1/07

## Online Students Get Higher Course Grades:

### An Educational Myth

In 2005, Allen and Seaman published their report *Growing by Degrees*, which indicated that online education was a part of most colleges' long-term plans and would become a staple of higher education. Two years later, online college degrees are being issued in records numbers. Community colleges and universities across America note their online student success rate by posting such headlines as "Online Students Win Record Number of Viterbi M.S. Degrees" ("Online Students," 2007) and "Number of Century College Students Taking Online Classes More Than Doubled This School Year" ("Number," n.d.). In an effort to keep up with the growing demands for online courses, educational institutions are developing virtual classrooms and flexible education programs to work with the already established Distance Learning departments.

Increasing online student enrollment can be accounted for, in part, by institutions' promises: "classroom attendance is never required. Set your own weekly study schedule and 'attend class' anytime—anywhere you have access to a PC. Work and family responsibilities, travel, shift changes or commuting problems never will interfere with your studies" ("Online Degree" 2007). This rapid increase in degree issuing and higher online enrollment numbers combined with the provocative idea of a convenient do-it-anywhere, at-any-time educational

experience provokes the question: Do students expect to earn higher grades in their online courses?

In March, April and May of 2007 a confidential Web survey was posted to randomly selected higher education online classrooms, which included community colleges, public and private four-year colleges and universities across the country. No consideration was given to the subject of the course. The survey sought to determine whether students' ground school course grades were comparable to those they received in online courses and whether they anticipated higher grades in online courses. This was followed by six informal interviews conducted with students from University of San Francisco and University of California.

Respondents were made up of college freshmen (29.2%), sophomores (38.7%), juniors (10.2%), and seniors (7.3%). The remaining 16.8% included Running Start and continuing education students and others in certificated programs. Of the 137 respondents, 73% indicated they had taken between 1 and 5 online courses, 19% had taken between 6 and 10 online courses, and 3.7% had taken 11 or more. Remaining respondents were comprised of those just beginning online courses or those who had taught them.

The most prevalent reason cited for enrollment in an online class included time constraints (78.1% of respondents); other reasons students gave included that online courses were the only ones available, that their degree plan required it, that it was an easy way to get a high grade, that they enjoyed the online learning environment, that a ground school was unavailable to them, or a combination of the above reasons.

The survey asked questions regarding grades students consistently received for online courses and the grades they received for ground school courses. Students were permitted to indicate more than one category. When asked to indicate their GPA for online courses, 31

students (22.6%) reported that they maintained a 4.0. For ground school courses, 36 students (26.3%) indicated a 4.0 GPA. In the next category, 51 students (37.2%) reported maintaining a 3.5 to 3.9 GPA in online courses compared with 49 students (35.8%) in ground school courses. Twenty-five students (18.3% of respondents) indicated they fell in the 3.0 to 3.4 GPA range for online classes while 35 students (25.6%) maintained a GPA in that same range in their ground school courses. For online classes, 15 students (11%) maintained a 2.5 to 2.9 GPA compared with 18 students (13.1%) who maintained that GPA in their ground school courses. One student (0.7%) indicated an online GPA of 2.0 to 2.4; 7 students (5.1%) maintained that same GPA in their ground school courses. No students indicated a GPA between 1.5 and 1.9 in either online or ground school courses. There were only 2 respondents who indicated GPAs lower than 1.5: 1 student (0.7%) maintained a 1.0 to 1.4 GPA in ground school classes and 1 student indicated a GPA lower than 1.0 in online classes.

When compared, these responses indicated marginal differences between the grades students received in online courses and those they received in ground school courses. There was a 3.7% difference between 4.0 GPAs received in ground school and online classes, with the slight majority maintaining a 4.0 GPA in their ground school courses. Responses in the 3.5 to 3.9 GPA range category showed a 1.4% difference between ground school and online course grades, with more students doing slightly better in online courses. The 3.0 to 3.4 category had the most notable difference of 7.3%, with most students indicating maintaining higher grades in online courses. In the 2.5 to 2.9 GPA range, there was a difference of 2.1%, with the slight majority receiving higher grades in their ground school courses. Of those in the 2.0 to 2.4 GPA range, there was a 4.4% difference: again students received higher grades in their ground school courses. In the 2.0 to 2.4 range, 4.4% reported doing better in ground school courses. No

respondents fell into the 1.5 to 1.9 GPA range. Only one respondent (0.7%) indicated maintaining a GPA lower than 1.0, and this was for online classes.

When asked, “Do you expect to receive a higher grade for an online course?” 36 students (26.3%) marked “yes” while 102 students (74.5%) marked “no.” Many of the reasons given by those students who expected a higher grade had to do with the extra time, convenience, and flexibility they perceived they would have in an online course. Some comments appended to this question by respondents were as follows:

I believe that I can get a higher grade in an online course because I control time spent on reading, research and studying. . . . I have more time to spend on items that are graded as opposed to the thoughts, opinions and philosophies of my educator.

Working online permits a student to work and study at their own pace rather than pacing with the class.

Online courses allow me to log in and work on my own time; therefore, I never miss a class or lecture. I can “attend” class whenever and where-ever is convenient at the time. . . . I learn better on my own; I prefer an online course over a classroom course for most subjects.

These sentiments were echoed by the six students who participated in informal interviews in March and April of 2007. All six students believed that they should receive higher grades for their online courses because they have more time to “work the course” and as such felt they “put much more time and effort into their studies.”

Students who indicated that they expected higher grades also believed that online courses were more organized, efficient, and predictable:

A standard ground classroom is a waste of time from a grade standpoint. . . . Often professors' lectures have little to do with tests and essays. A textbook, emails to/from professor, and Google provide me with the tools I need to do well. . . . In an online course, what is expected of me is clearly laid out. In a ground classroom, there is too much talk and not enough rubric.

. . . Most online courses seem to be more organized than ground based classes. Many online courses let you know what every assignment will be for the entire semester, at the start of the semester (not so much with ground based courses).

Most of the [online] courses I have taken . . . . require minimal writing or discussion entries and the format is always the same: read a chapter, write a couple hundred words, respond to someone else's posting and maybe take a ten question quiz. There is no discussion or frank exchange of ideas. Learning comes from exchanging ideas: getting a good grade online comes from regurgitating what you read.

The data indicates that though students' GPAs for both online and ground school courses appear artificially high, the differences between students' grades in an online environment versus a ground school are minimal. This suggests that overall grading standards are lower than in the past but are at least as stringent for online courses as they are for ground schools.

More significantly, while students indicated relatively small differences in the grades they received from their online and ground school courses, a large percentage of these same

students—more than 25%—anticipated higher grades from online courses, and many of them cited extra time, convenience, and the organization of the class as reasons for this expectation.

These comments can be interpreted two ways:

1. Students believe that grades should be based on the amount of time and effort they put into a course and not necessarily on acceptable grading guidelines as outlined by the individual academic department.
2. Students believe that they can learn the essential graded material more efficiently because they will not have to deal with the superfluous aspects of classroom interaction.

Online education is a relatively recent phenomenon and avenues for further research might uncover possible problem areas including such issues as whether curriculum assessment is keeping pace and why some students believe that higher grades are easier to achieve in online courses even though there is little evidence to support that they are.

## References

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