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Can Online Learning Reproduce the Full College Experience?
Karen D. McKeown

Abstract

With the tuition cost of traditional colleges and universities soaring and education technology advancing, online courses and degree programs are becoming more common. Some critics argue that an online degree cannot provide all the important features of a traditional college education, from extracurricular activities to new professional networks, but the evidence disputes much of that criticism, especially for certain groups of students. Indeed, some aspects of online education may provide a better experience than a traditional brick-and-mortar college for some students.

There is growing recognition that online education may prove to be a disruptive force in higher education, potentially triggering a decisive change in the business model of colleges and universities.[1] Crucially, online education is beginning to move beyond its original constituency of older, working, and other non-traditional students and is attracting traditional students who formerly would have attended brick-and-mortar colleges.

The leaders of those established institutions may take comfort in a belief that their unique ability to provide a "full college experience" will continue to attract students who might otherwise be drawn away by the increased flexibility or—in some cases—lower costs of distance learning. Is this a safe assumption? Or will students find that they can indeed enjoy a full experience through online programs?

A compelling case can be made that an online college experience can come close to matching aspects of the college experience beyond just academics. For some students, the online experience with social and extracurricular features of college may even be superior.

Defining the "Full" College Experience

It is difficult to define the typical full college experience because the concept is open to such wide individual interpretation. Even among students who are living the experience, there is variation on what it does—or should—mean. This diversity reflects different values and goals, interests

Online classes are becoming a common feature of higher education, and this has led some educators to explore whether all of the features associated with a college experience could be accomplished online. The Center for Policy Innovation invited Karen D. McKeown to share her views on this subject. Ms. McKeown, formerly a Graduate Fellow in Health Policy at The Heritage Foundation, completed her master's degree in nursing online at Yale University.

and preferences. Additionally, there is an intangible aspect of the experience that eludes description. So the most useful approach is to review the components that are widely cited as elements of an ideal college experience.

Surveys indicate that would-be students have multiple reasons for selecting a given college. (See text box, "Top 10 Reasons Why Students Chose to Attend a Particular College.") For most, the basic purpose of the college experience, regardless of its other components, is to obtain a degree. Even here, however, there is diversity of motivation. Some students with specific goals, such as becoming an accountant, attorney, or nurse, seek both knowledge and a professional credential. Others with more general career goals may have observed how many jobs are posted with the requirement of a college degree. Some are pursuing a liberal education for its own sake, and many will not fit neatly into any single category.

Even for those students whose primary purpose is achieving a degree, social and extracurricular components of the experience may influence their choice of institution. For example, a student might choose Yale for the educational experience and connections, Ohio University for the social experience it offers, or the University of Phoenix for upward mobility within a given career.

Top 10 Reasons Why Students Chose to Attend a Particular College

(Percent who say the reason is "very important")

1. College has very good academic reputation (63.6 percent).
2. This college's graduates get good jobs (56.5 percent).
3. I was offered financial assistance (44.7 percent).
4. The cost of attending this college (41.6 percent).
5. A visit to the campus (41.4 percent).
6. Wanted to go to a college about this size (39.8 percent).
7. College has a good reputation for social activities (39.3 percent).
8. Grads get into good grad/professional schools (34.6 percent).
9. Wanted to live near home (20.1 percent).
10. Information from a Web site (19.2 percent).

Source: Bob Morse, "Students Say College Rankings Aren't Most Important Part of Decision," *U.S. News and World Report*, February 4, 2010, at *http://www.usnews.com/education/blogs/college-rankings-blog/2010/02/04/students-say-college-rankings-arent-most-important-part-of-decision* (January 30, 2012).

Components of the Traditional College Experience

The traditional college experience can be broken down into three broad components: educational, social, and extracurricular.

Educational Components. According to a recent Pew Research report, 47 percent of the public believes that the purpose of higher education is to "acquire specific skills and knowledge that can be used in the workplace."[2] Among college presidents, 86 percent believe that it is very important to "provide skills and knowledge that will be of *general* value in the working world," and 50 percent believe it is very important to "provide training for a *specific* career or profession."[3]

College students who do not have a specific career in mind may still be hoping that a college degree will improve their earning potential. Across Americans with a wide range of educational attainment, respondents in the Pew survey held

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1. Stuart M. Butler, "The Coming Higher-Ed Revolution," *National Affairs*, Issue No. 10 (Winter 2012), at *http://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/the-coming-higher-ed-revolution* (January 26, 2012). Also available at *http://www.heritage.org/research/commentary/2012/01/the-coming-higher-ed-revolution*.

2. Paul Taylor, Kim Parker, Richard Fry, D'Vera Cohn, Wendy Wang, Gabriel Velasco, and Daniel Dockterman, *Is College Worth It? College Presidents, Public Assess Value, Quality and Mission of Higher Education*, Pew Research Center Social & Democratic Trends, May 16, 2011, p. 48, at *http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2011/05/higher-ed-report.pdf* (December 2, 2011).

3. *Ibid.*, p. 65 (emphasis added).

the accurate opinion that in general, people with a college degree earn substantially more than those who do not have a degree.[4]

Yet the appeal of higher earnings is attenuated by the costs associated with higher education. For example, even though 86 percent of college graduates believe their own education was a good investment, 75 percent of the public (compared with 57 percent of college presidents) feel that higher education is not affordable, and 60 percent do not believe it provides good value.[5] The majority of those who do not pursue higher education list financial constraints as the primary reason for their decision.[6]

Students generally seem to believe that traditional colleges do deliver a good education. Each year, the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) at the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles, administers a nationwide survey of first-year college students. In the spring of 2009, over 26,000 students from 457 institutions completed the survey. These students "reported overwhelmingly positive feelings about their first year on campus."[7]

Students reported that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of teaching (79.1 percent); relevance of classes to their planned career (68.0 percent); and interaction with fellow students (78.1 percent).[8]

But do students in the traditional setting actually take full advantage of all that is offered? The CIRP survey asked students how often in their first year they had participated in activities known as "'Habits of Mind'...behaviors that college faculty have identified as essential for success in college." Of the 11 habits, only one was performed frequently by over half of students: revising papers to improve writing.[9] Not even one-third of students had looked up scientific research or investigated a subject that was not required in class. Almost 10 percent of students had never asked a question in class.[10]

Social Components. As the definition of a liberal education suggests,[11] the full college experience comprises not only intellectual growth and development, but also a social component. Thirty-nine percent of the public and half of college presidents believe that the primary purpose of higher education should be "to help a student grow personally

and intellectually."[12] Of college graduates, almost three-quarters report that their education contributed to their intellectual growth, and two-thirds report that it helped them "grow and mature as a person."[13]

College is seen widely as a time when students find themselves and discover their passions. They may benefit by greater exposure to diversity—of ethnicities, cultures, beliefs, and ideas—than they have previously experienced. Many colleges promote social awareness and community involvement. Students can learn to think more critically and develop a broader perspective.

As part of this process, students may engage in significant, stimulating conversations and interactions with peers and instructors. Joseph E. Aoun, president of Northeastern University, describes the charm of

the chance encounters that come with membership in a diverse intellectual community. Whether a guest lecture, a conversation with a peer majoring in a different field, or the experience of befriending someone from a different background, place-based encounters can spark new

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4.   *Ibid.*, p. 37. The authors of the Pew report estimate that the net payoff for the "typical college graduate" is $550,000 in additional lifetime earnings. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

5.   *Ibid.*, pp. 31 and 65.

6.   *Ibid.*, p. 39.

7.   Sylvia Ruiz, Jessica Sharkness, Kimberly Kelly, Linda DeAngelo, and John Pryor, *Findings from the 2009 Administration of the Your First College Year (YFCY): National Aggregates*, University of California, Higher Education Research Institute, Cooperative Institute Research Program, January 2010, p. 2, at *http://www. heri.ucla.edu/PDFs/pubs/Reports/YFCY2009Final_January.pdf* (January 30, 2012).

8.   *Ibid.*, p. 4.

9.   *Ibid.*, p. 7.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.

11. As defined by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, "Liberal Education is an approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change. It provides students with broad knowledge of the wider world ... as well as in-depth study in a specific area of interest. A liberal education helps students develop a sense of social responsibility, as well as strong and transferable intellectual and practical skills." Association of American Colleges and Universities, "What Is Liberal Education?" 2011, at *http://www.aacu.org/leap/what_is_liberal_education.cfm* (January 30, 2012).

12. Taylor *et al., Is College Worth It?* pp. 2–3.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

interests and set students on fulfilling paths they might never have traveled otherwise.[14]

Moreover, the relationships formed at college often lead to life-long friendships and networks that persist far beyond the college years.

For many students, college also represents an opportunity to move away from home and learn to live with others (or alone) for the first time. Some view this as a time when they can begin to develop personal responsibility; others look forward to it as a chance to live without the rules and oversight they experienced at home.

But while the social experience can be enriching, for many students there can be dangers associated with some aspects of on-campus social activities. For students who face challenges in social settings, lack self-control, or are especially susceptible to peer pressure, the nature of college socialization can be problematic. For instance, excessive alcohol use is now one of the most common problems for students.[15]

For some students, the challenge is not that they are drawn too easily into college social life, but that they find themselves isolated from social activities and experience depression. Indeed, depression and other mental illness are becoming more prevalent on college campuses.[16] While there are many reasons for this increase and many students have pre-existing mental health conditions,[17] college campus life can create additional stress.

PARENTS AND FAMILY PHYSICIANS MAY BE UNAWARE THAT A CHILD IS ENCOUNTERING SOCIAL OR MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS ON CAMPUS. IF COLLEGE PERSONNEL ARE NOT ATTENTIVE OR WILLING TO TAKE THE INITIATIVE, THE STUDENT'S CONDITION CAN WORSEN.

Recognizing the prevalence of depression among college students, in 2009, the National Institute of Mental Health released an informational brochure that listed the following risk factors specific to this population: "living away from family for the first time, missing family or friends, feeling alone or isolated, experiencing conflict in relationships, facing new and sometimes difficult school work, and worrying about finances."[18] This may help to explain why the 2009 survey found that 11 percent more college students reported feeling occasionally or frequently depressed at the end of their first year than they had at the beginning of the year.[19]

Federal laws intended to protect privacy can sometimes exacerbate these problems. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), for instance, makes it difficult for college authorities to divulge information to parents when students exhibit troubling behavior or their grades fall—unless the student gives permission. Thus, parents and family physicians may be unaware that a child is encountering social or mental health problems on campus. If college personnel are not attentive or willing to take the initiative—which unfortunately is often the case—the student's condition can worsen.

Extracurricular Components. Community-wide social and other extracurricular activities are also viewed as central to the college experience. The CIRP survey of first-year college students found that 11.7 percent had joined a fraternity or sorority.[20] This number was just under half as many as had expected to join when they entered college.[21]

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14. Joseph E. Aoun, "Learning Today: The Lasting Value of Place," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 8, 2011, at *http://chronicle.com/article/In-Learning-the-Lasting-Value/127378/* (January 30, 2012).

15. Over 40 percent of college students participate in binge drinking, and half of these report that "drinking to get drunk is an important reason for drinking." Half of these students picked up the habit in college. Indeed, college students are more likely to binge on alcohol than are their peers who do not attend college. Henry Wechsler and Toben F. Nelson, "What We Have Learned from the Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Study: Focusing Attention on College Student Alcohol Consumption and the Environmental Conditions That Promote It," *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, Vol. 69, No. 4 (July 2008), p. 3, at *http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/cas/What-We-Learned-08.pdf* (January 30, 2010).

16. Karen S. Peterson, "Depression Among College Students Rising," *USA Today*, May 21, 2002, at *http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/mental/2002-05-22-college-depression.htm* (January 30, 2012).

17. *Ibid.*

18. National Institute of Mental Health, "Depression and College Students: Answers to College Students' Frequently Asked Questions About Depression," n.d., p. 4, at *http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/depression-and-college-students/depression-college-students.pdf* (January 30, 2012).

19. Ruiz *et al.*, *Findings from the 2009 Administration*, p. 27.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

Students who do join fraternities and sororities view their membership as an important component of their college experience. Proponents of Greek life call attention to the high percentage of national and corporate leaders who were members of fraternities and sororities and the lifelong relationships that ensue from membership.[22] Studies suggest that members of these organizations are more likely than nonmembers to participate in community service, develop leadership skills, and complete college.[23]

That said, however, the negative aspects of Greek life have led some academic leaders to question whether the benefits outweigh the risks. Affiliation with Greek organizations, for instance, is also associated with poorer performance across a range of cognitive functions, and members are less open to diversity.[24] Heavy drinking is much more common among members than nonmembers, and this is exacerbated in Greek housing, where students are also more likely to experience alcohol-related crimes.[25]

College sports teams and events are among the most visible and popular components of a college experience. Attending sporting events and participating in varsity or intramural activities creates a sense of camaraderie and excitement. The increase—though small—in alumni donations when college teams are successful[26] suggests that for some students, attending college sports events and

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Online Education in the Humanities

A team that led a hybrid English nonfiction prose class in British Columbia described the experience in glowing terms. They observed that the Web allowed for interaction rarely found even in small classrooms—and never in large ones.

For instance, the online classroom allows "students to answer back to a text rather than a teacher, and thus can encourage students not to be excessively respectful of authority." Though at first concerned that "animosity might ensue from curt and direct criticism from other students," the instructors found instead that the students were "generally respectful of the perspectives of others, but not unwilling to engage fully and thoughtfully, and often provocatively, in intellectual discussion."

Ultimately, the team concluded that, compared with the traditional approach, "collaborative Web-based learning may be more likely to result in the pluralist, diversified kind of course we aimed for."

Source: Rob Breton *et al.*, "Online Learning and Intellectual Liberty: A Mixed-Mode Experiment in the Humanities," *College Teaching*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (June 2005), pp. 103, 106, and 107.

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identifying with their college's team are important aspects of their overall experience and that this identification persists long after graduation.

Beyond the visible Greek life and athletics, campus colleges offer many other extracurricular activities, including student government; multicultural activities; participation in community service projects; and opportunities to join professional, religious, political, and other interest organizations. Students can participate in or attend theater, music, and other cultural events; work with the student paper; join clubs; or even study abroad. Through this broad range of activities, students can expose themselves to new interests,

ideas, and people they might not otherwise have encountered.

Here again, students are able to form networks of relationships that can last throughout their lives. Thus, extracurricular and educational activities combine to create the full college experience and, hopefully, more broad-minded and thoughtful individuals.

Can Online Education Reproduce the Full College Experience?

Given the scope and richness of the full college experience, varying as it does from one individual to another, can online or mostly online education hope to reproduce it? If

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22. Davide Dukcevich "Best Fraternities for Future CEOs," *Forbes*, January 31, 2003, at *http://www.forbes.com/2003/01/31/cx_dd_0131frat.html* (January 30, 2012), and University of Missouri, Kansas City, "National Statistics," 2011, at *http://www.umkc.edu/getinvolved/fsa-national-statistics.asp* (January 30, 2012).

23. Amy J. Shultz, "Closing the Gap: Historical Values and Modern Characteristics of Greek-Letter Organizations," Colorado State University *Journal of Student Affairs*, Vol. 20 (2011), p. 51, at *http://www.sahe.colostate.edu/Data/Sites/1/journalofstudentaffairs2010-2011final.pdf#page=49* (January 30, 2012).

24. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

25. Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse and Violence Prevention, "Fraternity and Sorority Members and Alcohol and Other Drug Use," August 2008, p. 1, at *http://www.higheredcenter.org/files/product/fact_sheet5.pdf* (January 30, 2012).

26. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

this is not possible, can it instead produce a different experience of equal value for some or all students?

Educational Components of an Online Education. Early online degrees were targeted mainly at students who were seeking to enter or advance in a specific profession that requires the degree and often at working individuals for whom a traditional campus experience was not a real option. Online education has proven attractive to such students largely because it allows them to pursue their studies at a time and place convenient to them. Moreover, if a student can accrue less debt by pursuing a degree online—through lower tuition, lower living expenses, and/or the ability to work part-time or full-time while in college—the increased earning potential accompanying the degree may appear to be more immediate and thus more attractive.

The demographics of students using online education services do reflect these well-recognized benefits of online education. In 2011, the U.S. Department of Education released a report analyzing online undergraduate courses, programs, and students. This report found that online students are more likely to be older and to study computer sciences and business. Although 20 percent of all undergraduates take at least one online class, this number drops to 15 percent among students younger than 24. Similarly, while 4 percent of all undergraduates are enrolled in an online degree program, only 1 percent of students under age 24 are pursuing their degree fully online.[27]

The statistics in this report also suggest that some majors are more easily adapted to the online environment than others. For example, many more classes and degrees are offered in business, computers, and information technology than in science and the humanities.[28] Nevertheless, some schools have experimented successfully with online and hybrid classes in these latter fields. (See text box, "Online Education in the Humanities.")

THE EVIDENCE DOES SUGGEST THAT ONLINE CLASSES CAN STIMULATE INTELLECTUAL GROWTH COMPETITIVELY WITH CAMPUS-BASED CLASSES.

Despite its attractiveness for certain students and courses, can online education match the effectiveness of face-to-face classes? Increasingly, studies and surveys suggest that the answer can be yes. A meta-analysis of available research performed by the U.S. Department of Education in 2010 found that "[s]tudents in online conditions performed modestly better, on average, than those learning the same material through traditional face-to-face instruction."[29] Nor does the efficacy of online education appear to be limited to a narrow stratum of students: The analysis also found that "[t]he effectiveness of online learning approaches appears quite broad across different content and learner types," including "undergraduates ... graduate students and professionals ... in a wide range of academic and professional studies."[30]

Still, questions remain about the ability of online education to meet educational objectives beyond a focused degree plan. As part of a liberal education, traditional colleges offer a wide range of electives for students to broaden their experience or discover new interests. Online schools seeking to increase their selection of elective courses may choose to collaborate with other institutions. A model for this concept is the Virtual College of Texas, which allows students to take online classes from any community college in Texas while remaining students of their local colleges.[31] A variant of this model could allow a group of online programs to offer a wide range of electives. Another option could be to allow students and instructors to create independent, for-credit courses, as is possible in many traditional colleges.

The evidence does suggest that online classes can stimulate intellectual growth competitively with campus-based classes. The 2008 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) found that, compared with their counterparts in traditional classrooms, online students were more likely to "[v]ery

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27. Alexandria Walton Radford, "Learning at a Distance: Undergraduate Enrollment in Distance Education Courses and Degree Programs," U.S. Department of Education *Stats in Brief*, October 2011, at *http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2012/2012154.pdf* (January 30, 2012).

28. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

29. Barbara Means, Yukie Toyama, Robert Murphy, Marianne Bakia, and Karla Jones, *Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning: A Meta-Analysis and Review of Online Learning Studies*, U.S. Department of Education, Revised September 2010, p. xiv, at *http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/tech/evidence-based-practices/finalreport.pdf* (January 30, 2012).

30. *Ibid.*, p. xv.

31. Virtual College of Texas, "What VCT Offers Students," at *https://www.vct.org/students/student_what.html* (January 29, 2012).

often participate in course activities that challenged them intellectually, [v]ery often participate in discussions that enhanced their understanding of different cultures, [and v]ery often discuss topics of importance to their major." These students were also as likely to "[v]ery often participate in discussions that enhanced their understanding of social responsibility."[32]

In 2011, the NSSE found that online students use a broader array of reading strategies than classroom-based students. The report suggested that this may be a result of the higher level of independence required by online classes.[33] These findings support the theory put forth by Charlene Dykman and Charles Davis that online learning is particularly well suited to newer approaches to instruction in which the teacher functions as a "guide at the side" rather than as a "sage on the stage."[34]

Moreover, technology may allow instructors to tailor education to the individual in a way that would not be possible in a traditional classroom. For example, the Khan Academy, which offers free online lectures at the high school level, has developed techniques to track students' progress in a way that allows instructors to individualize assistance for each student.[35]

Though it might seem obvious that the propinquity offered on campus must lead to better relationships between students and professors, this is not always the case, as

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Online Science Education

One analysis compared performance and interactions of upper-level histology students participating in a fully online (including lab) course at Colorado State University with the performance and interactions of students taking the same course, taught by the same instructor, in the classroom. The online students performed better on tests than those on campus, and "[t]he online settings had a greater proportion of high-level interactions… than the on-campus setting." Students in the online class "unexpectedly formed on-line study groups and organized their own review sessions without the instructor's intervention."

Noting that the instructor and students interacted socially in the online class but not in the classroom, the authors postulated that this might explain why "students in the on-campus lecture were reluctant to pose questions even when prompted to do so by the instructor." The authors conclude that:

[F]ace-to-face contact does not automatically foster interpersonal relationships between students and instructors. These patterns [of interaction online], along with the sense of "bonding" reported by the distance students and instructor, illustrate the importance of learner-instructor interactions and how these can be used to encourage student participation.

Source: Regina Schoenfeld-Tacher, Sherry McConnell, and Michele Graham, "Do No Harm—A Comparison of the Effects of On-Line vs. Traditional Delivery Media on a Science Course," *Journal of Science Education and Technology*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (September 2001), pp. 257, 258, and 263.

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the example of the science course demonstrates. (See text box, "Online Science Education.") Moreover, students can interact online with field experts they would never meet in person, as one instructor has described. (See text box, "Interacting with Experts.")

It would appear, then, that student interactions with professors can be meaningful either in person or online. The medium does not determine the outcome; rather, the quality

of interaction depends on how the medium is used.

Increasingly, online education can engage students at least as fully as traditional classroom instruction can. Instructors can adapt online teaching to fit different learning styles, allowing students to enjoy a level of flexibility and customization that is difficult or impossible to achieve in a typical campus classroom. Online classes may also encourage increased interaction

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32. National Survey of Student Engagement, "Promoting Engagement for All Students: The Imperative to Look Within: 2008 Results," p. 16, at *http://nsse.iub.edu/ NSSE_2008_Results/docs/withhold/NSSE2008_Results_revised_11-14-2008.pdf* (January 29, 2012) (bullet points omitted).

33. National Survey of Student Engagement, "Fostering Student Engagement Campuswide: Annual Results 2011," p. 17, at *http://nsse.iub.edu/NSSE_2011_Results/ pdf/NSSE_2011_AnnualResults.pdf* (January 29, 2012).

34. Charlene A. Dykman and Charles K. Davis, "Online Education Forum: Part One—The Shift Toward Online Education," *Journal of Information Systems Education*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Spring 2008), p. 12, at *http://www.lmunet.edu/factools/ctl/articlesteachingonline/TheShiftTowardOnlineEducationDykman.pdf* (January 29, 2012).

35. Butler, "The Coming Higher-Ed Revolution."

by offering a more informal "class" atmosphere. For instance, new technology makes it both possible and permissible for students in online classes to pass notes[36] or talk during class.[37]

Social Components of an Online Education. Even if online education programs can provide a desirable intellectual experience, can they appeal to students who want to pursue a more traditional education with a full extracurricular experience? Does online education hold potential for these students?

Students who choose to pursue their college degree online often do so because it allows them to live wherever they want. This flexibility can translate into a significant financial benefit, since they can live in a lower-cost setting than is available on campus. Moreover, while a student attending online classes could opt to move away from home and even live with student roommates, he is less likely to do so than his counterpart attending traditional classes. For many, leaving home to attend college is a rite of passage, an essential part of becoming an adult.

Yet economic considerations are already altering the cultural environment of college life. In a 2009 survey, 12.8 percent of college students said the economy would affect where they chose to live. The same survey found that 58.5 percent of college students planned to live at home, compared with 49.1 percent who chose to live at home just two years earlier.[38] With well over half of

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> ## Interacting with Experts
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> An instructor in a traditional classroom at a small university in Virginia has provided a broader educational experience to students by including online discussions with experts from the field. Among other experts, students have had opportunities to interact via a discussion board with the author of their textbook and the developer of a research tool the students had used.
>
> Students have expressed being impressed and inspired. In a deeply personal discussion board entry, one student described her struggle to confront prejudice in her own family. And one of the guest experts wrote to a student, "You and your classmates are doing exactly what I have hoped you would do … THINKING and DISCUSSING. Keep it up!"
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> Although these online interactions took place in an otherwise traditional class, it is not difficult to conceive of similar interactions occurring in a primarily online environment where students would already be accustomed to the online setting.
>
> **Source:** R. Michael Medley, "Inviting Experts to Class Through Computer-Mediated Discussions," *College Teaching*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (Spring 2005), p. 73.

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college students living at home, the "traditional" college experience has already changed, with an increasing number of students having to seek social options beyond those normally associated with brick-and-mortar institutions.

It is also not safe to assume that attending college in person will automatically lead to interesting philosophical conversations with peers. Survey results reveal that students engage in conversations about politics or religion substantially less in college than in high school.[39] Here again, a combination of interactions with online instructors and classmates, together with ongoing personal relationships in

the student's community, may offer as much or more in the way of social life as attending campus would offer. Online interactions may allow shy or less confident students to feel more comfortable engaging in discussion than they would in person.

Attending college online may also help to address those situations where peer pressure and social challenges are a problem rather than a benefit for certain students at traditional campus colleges. To be sure, students who view drinking parties as an attractive part of the college experience may be unlikely to choose online education, but for those who wish to avoid excessive drinking and the problems associated with it,

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36. Rob Breton, Steve Doak, Wendy Foster, Desiree Lundstrom, Lindsey McMaster, Jeff Miller, Ulrich Rauch, Morgan Reid, Warran Scott, Tim Wang, and Jonathan Wisenthal, "Online Learning and Intellectual Liberty: A Mixed-Mode Experiment in the Humanities," *College Teaching*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (June 2005), pp. 102–109.

37. Alan Schwarz, "Online High Schools Attracting Elite Names," *The New York Times*, November 19, 2011, at *http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/20/education/stanfords-online-high-school-raises-the-bar.html* (January 26, 2012).

38. Kathy Grannis, "NRF's 2009 Back-to-School and Back-to-College Surveys," National Retail Federation, July 14, 2009, at *http://www.nrf.com/modules.php?name=News&op=viewlive&sp_id=756* (January 29, 2012).

39. Ruiz *et al.*, *Findings from the 2009 Administration of the Your First College Year*, p. 26.

online programs can be a less stressful alternative. Even among campus-based college students, the lowest level of binge drinking is found in underage students who still live at home with their parents.[40]

While online education will not alter the underlying prevalence of mental illness noted in college students, it may reduce some of the stressors created by traditional campuses. Moreover, in the case of students who study from home or within an existing community of friends and available services, a non-campus educational experience can be more supportive. If they do experience problems, those who know them best will often notice symptoms earlier than strangers who are not familiar with them would.

For many students, an online education may provide more social continuity than a campus-based education. As Byron Henderson from the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives at the University of Saskatchewan notes:

> Too often, educators imagine that life-long learning is about courses, a view that sells short the strength of academic communities. The power of life-long learning for higher education resides in its ability to tie a life to the traditions of scholarship and the richness of great institutions bound by great histories of thought.
>
> Online learning is not just a way to deliver courses. It is a way to tie the student and graduate scholar (now in a job) to the

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Virtual Student Community

In addition to traditional classes, the University of Maryland University College offers online classes to students around the world. The history department, in which online enrollments made up nearly 85 percent of all enrollments in 2005, has made it a priority to engage its students beyond the virtual classroom.

The program encourages students to work toward membership in the national history honor society, Phi Alpha Theta. As online students have joined the society, they have also begun to participate in regional Phi Alpha Theta meetings, with one student flying in from Spain to present research. Unable to attend traditional induction ceremonies, the online students have been creative: One year, students from around the world, not just inductees, submitted photos of places with historical significance for an online ceremony.

Guest speakers participate in discussions in the department's online community. Describing this community, the academic director from 1999–2006 said, "Student isolation is prevented, and student enthusiasm to participate in every professional opportunity is evident in the collaborative projects they undertake and student interest in our larger profession."

Source: Bud Burkhard, "Creating a Virtual Student Community at the University of Maryland," *American Historical Association,* May 2007, at *http://www.historians.org/Perspectives/ issues/2007/0705/0705tea1.cfm?RefBy=e070503A* (January 30, 2012).

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ongoing community of scholars in which the student found her way as an academic.[41]

Rather than setting aside four years to create social connections, online education allows students to integrate the college experience more seamlessly into the social networks and connections of life as a whole.

Extracurricular Components of an Online Education.

For young people today, social interactions are much less constrained by geography. Students can and do develop meaningful relationships with online classmates and maintain relationships and interact online with people of similar interests through online clubs and organizations.

Many extracurricular activities, such as producing a school newspaper or participating in a chess club or reading group, translate well to the online environment. As online education grows in popularity, institutions are therefore moving to meet the demand by offering opportunities to their distance students. (See text box, "Virtual Student Community.") Moving forward, one can envision opportunities for students of various online institutions and programs to collaborate in creating local and regional meetings and activities.

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40. Wechsler and Nelson, "What We Have Learned from the Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Study," pp. 3–5.

41. Byron Henderson, *The Components of Online Education: Higher Education on the Internet,* University of Saskatchewan, Centre for the Study of Co-operatives, 1999, p. 54, at *http://www.usaskstudies.coop/pdf-files/OnlineEd.pdf* (January 29, 2012).

Other important extracurricular activities may not seem to lend themselves as easily to online replication. For example, one study found a positive correlation between early career earnings and social engagement for students who participated in community service and cultural events.[42] Yet students can engage in these activities independently, outside of the formal college setting. A comparison of the volunteer work of students before and after they entered college found that students may reduce volunteer work by as much as 22 percentage points after they enter college.[43]

BECAUSE ONLINE STUDENTS CAN PARTICIPATE IN THEIR REGULAR CLASSES FROM ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD, IT IS EASIER TO SPEND A SEMESTER OR YEAR ABROAD THAT IS MORE CLOSELY INTEGRATED INTO ONE'S COLLEGE EDUCATION.

Online schools can encourage student participation in community service by offering for-credit service learning courses, a practice that has increased student participation at nonresidential colleges whose student bodies commute to campus.[44] For example, online students at Florida Tech have even created an online service fraternity,[45] which, if it proves successful, could serve as a prototype for similar organizations in the future.

Can online education reproduce the college sports experience? While exact replication of the college sports experience will prove challenging, online schools could offer what, for many students, might be considered an adequate approximation.

Online students seeking to affiliate with a sports team have several options. If their online program is through an established university, there may be a school team they can cheer on from the virtual sidelines. Alternatively, it is not uncommon for sports enthusiasts to support a team with which they have no geographic ties; online students can also experience the pleasure of supporting teams unconnected with their college. For those wishing to attend sporting events in person, there are often local teams. While actively supporting one's campus college teams is indeed part of campus college life, supporting teams that are not associated with their alma mater is a normal and rewarding part of life for millions of Americans.

Online students who desire more active participation may be able to join community league athletics, engage in other sports, or coach Little League games. In the future, "[i]t is even possible to imagine consortia of 'virtual universities' organizing intramural and intercollegiate sports in home cities rather than on a campus."[46] Beyond sports, online programs can offer other ways to affiliate with their school. For example, the virtual history community at the University of Maryland sells T-shirts as a fundraiser and "to provide a collective identity."[47]

Online students who want to experience a semester abroad have many options. Even traditional campus-based students who choose to study abroad often do so through a school or organization other than their primary institution. Online students would have the same array of options. Moreover, because online students can participate in their regular classes from anywhere in the world, it is easier to spend a semester or year abroad that is more closely integrated into one's college education.

Students in online classes are also often able to interact with people from an even wider range of cultures and backgrounds than their counterparts on brick-and-mortar campuses. In fact, for many students, the campus experience may be less of an opportunity to get to know people from different cultures and backgrounds than students assume. The 2009 survey of first-year college students found that students were 14.4 percentage points *less* likely to interact socially with someone from

42. Shouping Hu and Gregory C. Wolniak, "Initial Evidence on the Influence of College Student Engagement on Early Career Earnings," *Research in Higher Education*, Vol. 51, No. 8 (December 2010), p. 763, at *http://www.springerlink.com/content/j836k7w418x1n00v/fulltext.pdf* (January 29, 2012).

43. Ruiz *et al.*, *Findings from the 2009 Administration of the Your First College Year*, p. 26.

44. Robert G. Bringle and Julie A. Hatcher, "Implementing Service Learning in Higher Education," *Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (March/April 1996), p. 231.

45. Daniel Luzer, "A Real Online Fraternity," *Washington Monthly*, May 1, 2010, at *http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/college_guide/blog/a_real_online_fraternity_1.php* (January 29, 2012).

46. Butler, "The Coming Higher-Ed Revolution."

47. Bud Burkhard, "Creating a Virtual Student Community at the University of Maryland," American Historical Association, May 2007, at *http://www.historians.org/Perspectives/issues/2007/0705/0705tea1.cfm?RefBy=e070503A* (January 30, 2012).

a different racial or ethnic group in college than they did in high school.[48]

Transforming the "Full" College Experience

There will always be students who are pursuing a higher degree solely or primarily to achieve specific career goals and who have comparatively little interest in achieving a full college experience. Many of these students are older or already working and have been early adopters of online education, which has offered them the flexibility they need in achieving their ultimate goals.

At the other end of the spectrum will always be students who, for various reasons, want only the traditional on-campus college experience. For some of these students, the campus appeal may consist in the opportunities to interact in person with professors and classmates. Others may be pursuing majors, such as science or performing arts, that are less easily adapted to the online environment. Still others may be seeking aspects of the traditional social or extracurricular experience that they do not believe can ever be replicated or replaced by online education.

Between these two ends of the spectrum are students who are increasingly willing to consider online education as it gains wider visibility, acceptance, and sophistication and as traditional institutions of higher learning become less accessible financially.[49] For these students, a key factor in their choice will be the ability of online programs to provide a college experience that not only matches the academic content of a traditional college, but also includes

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Hybrid Education

Nurses who pursue their master's degree in Nursing Management, Policy, and Leadership (NMPL) at Yale School of Nursing (YSN) attend class once a month. The rest of the time, they interact with classmates and instructors online. Students commuting from as far away as Texas, Nebraska, and even Vancouver, British Columbia, have been able to study at Yale while continuing to live and work in their home communities. Although the monthly travel requires commitment, they have found that meeting their instructors and classmates in person adds richness to their online interactions. Additional texture is provided by the variety of perspectives brought from around the country and even the world: One instructor, for example, taught the class while living and working in Singapore.

The students in the program also developed rich relationships with each other. As new students entered the program, they were welcomed into the group. Friendships formed between students who never had classes together even though these students spent little time interacting in person. As evidence of their affiliation with the school and each other, graduate and current NMPL students were disproportionately represented at the YSN reunion held in the fall of 2011. As one program alumna expressed it, "I know that if I ever need anything, these people have my back."

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an adequate level of the social and extracurricular components that the students desire.

It may well turn out that, for many students in the near future, a hybrid higher education experience may be the best approach, offering the best of both worlds by combining online features with some degree of face-to-face interaction. Indeed, there are almost limitless combinations possible. Some online science classes already require attendance for labs. Many degree programs offer combinations of fully online and fully face-to-face classes. Individual courses can combine online learning with classroom time. For example, many classes at the Open University in Great Britain are fully online, but some have a residential school requirement, during which students spend a day or a week learning in person.

The onerous alternative assignments for students who are unable to attend residential classes provide incentives to participate in these face-to-face experiences, some of which even allow students to travel abroad. Harvard offers some degrees online but requires one or two summers on campus, and the nursing school at Yale offers a hybrid master's degree in nursing management, policy, and leadership. (See text box, "Hybrid Education.")

Students pursuing a fully online program enjoy particular advantages such as flexibility. They can participate at the time and pace that best suits them. Moreover, online

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48. Ruiz *et al.*, *Findings from the 2009 Administration of the Your First College Year*, p. 26.

49. Butler, "The Coming Higher-Ed Revolution."

programs are beginning to reproduce many of the elements once thought to exist only on campus. Instructors aided by technology are now better able to personalize the learning experience for online students.

Increasingly, students who choose fully online programs are able to exercise far greater control over their own educational and extracurricular experiences. One can imagine an online program offering advisers to assist students in creating their individual experiences, which may combine virtual activities with online classmates and face-to-face experiences in their communities. It is also easy to envision a future when students from various online programs join together locally and regionally to network, create clubs, and even form sports teams.

Conclusion

Students who try online education are likely to find in the near future that these programs can indeed offer most of a full college experience, albeit in a different format. Many components of the experience can be replicated or even improved online. Other components may not translate directly, but students who are willing to be creative can replace many of these components with similar experiences in their communities.

Thus, online higher education in the future is likely to change the meaning of a "full college experience." Even students who are initially resistant may find value in online learning as they take advantage of the flexibility it offers or its ability to link them with other students and leaders in their fields with whom they otherwise might never have connected.

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