The Role and Influence of Online Degree Programs in Higher Education

The proportion of college students enrolling in online courses has grown considerably in recent years, increasing from 5.9% in 2000 to 42.9% in 2016. Among college students who enroll in online courses, 24.4% enroll in exclusively online degree programs (authors' calculations using National Postsecondary Student Aid Study data). Despite the growing prevalence of online education in higher education, the effectiveness of online degree programs has been called into question in recent years. To examine the impact of online degree programs, particularly among underserved students, the proposed project will address three primary areas.

First, we will use national data (Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study: 2012-2017) and an inverse probability treatment weighting approach to examine the influence of enrolling in online degree programs on students' academic outcomes. The primary outcome of this component of the proposed project will be students' likelihood of degree completion. We will also explore whether underserved students (e.g., Black, Hispanic, and low-income students) are less likely to graduate when they enroll in online degree programs as opposed to face-to-face degree programs. Finally, we will examine whether enrolling in online degree programs at certain types of institutions (e.g., public, private nonprofit, for-profit, two-year, four-year) has varying impacts on students' likelihood of degree completion, particularly among underserved students.

Regarding the novelty of the proposed project, it's important to establish what the proposed study will add to what we know about the role and influence of online degree programs in higher education. Prior work focuses primarily on comparing the short-term outcomes (exam scores, grades in the class, etc.) of online students to those of face-to-face students in the same type of class. This work is typically focused on a single class at a single institution and does not speak to the long-term outcome of degree completion. The only prior study examining the influence of online enrollment on *long-term* academic outcomes, such as degree completion, was only able to use 2004 online enrollment data and did not consider distinctions across subgroups of students or whether the institution was for-profit, private (nonprofit), or public. The prior study using 2004 online enrollment data (the only national longitudinal data on online education that was available at the time) did not have enough students who enrolled in *exclusively* online degree programs in 2004 to make reliable claims. To be clear, the proposed study represents a major and much-needed advancement of what we know about online degree programs in higher education. The BPS data we're proposing to use will leverage **2017 data**, consider different subgroups of students (i.e., underserved students), and categorize different institution types offering exclusively online programs when showing the long-term outcome of graduation.

We don't know enough about what happens to students down the road after enrolling in online degree programs. As a growing number of online degree programs continue to surface, it's critical to offer evidence-based recommendations for policymakers considering the conditions under which online degree programs can benefit college students. The study we propose will do exactly that by offering rigorous, nuanced, and recent evidence pertaining to the role and influence of online degree programs in higher education.