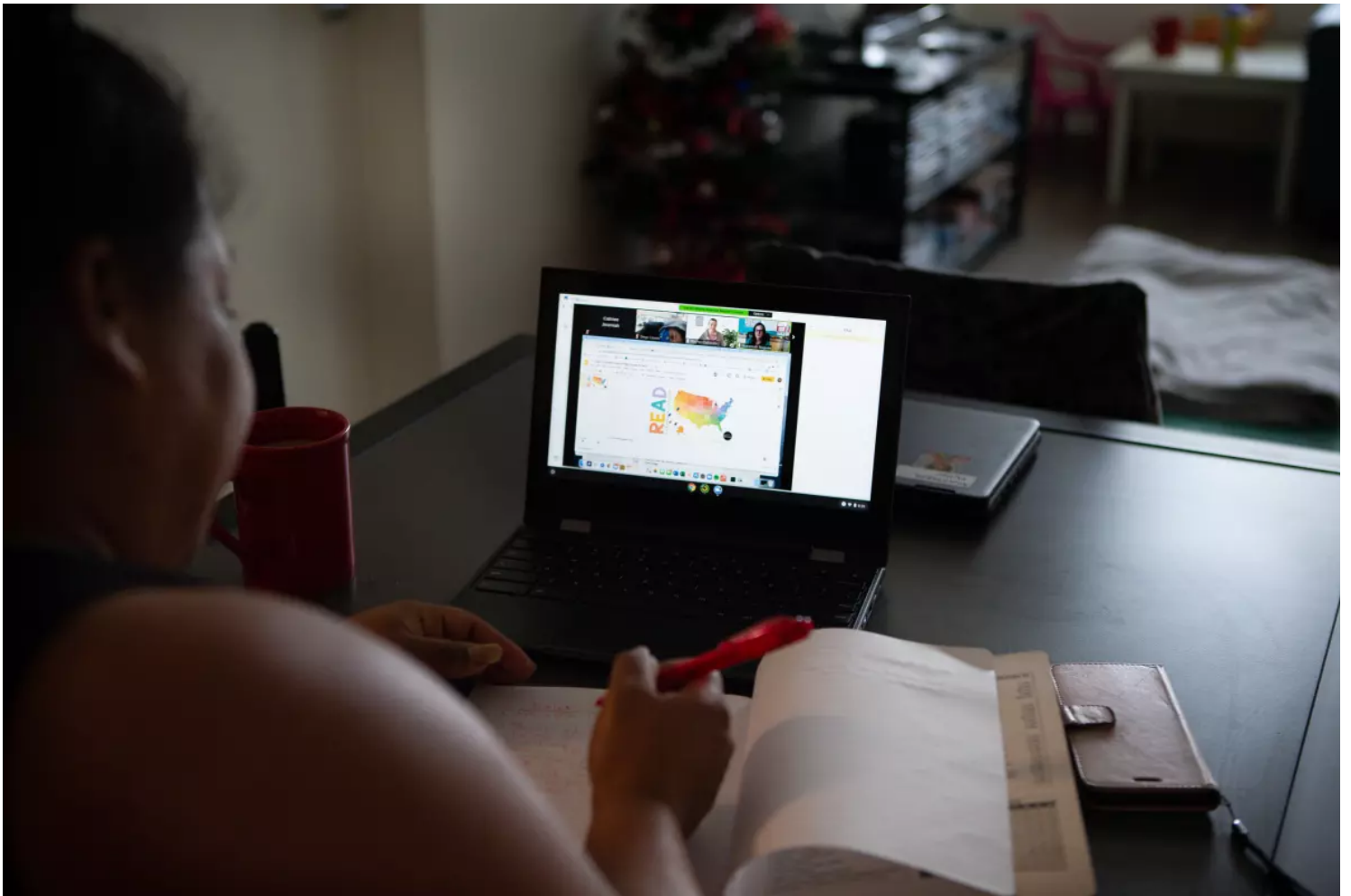


COMMENTARY

Opinion: By blindly embracing online learning, we risk reinforcing educational inequities



Janelle Miller resides at a homeless shelter has to facilitate online learning for her two children during the COVID-19 school closures. (Lisa Hornak/For The San Diego Union-Tribune)

If we're not thoughtful about our use of online learning, we will continue down the path of ever-evolving inequities that we should be trying to subvert.

BY ERIN M. EVANS

OCT. 11, 2023 5:45 PM PT

Evans, Ph.D., is an associate professor of sociology at San Diego Mesa College, faculty vice president for AFT Local Guild 1931 and a court-appointed special advocate for foster youth with Voices for Children. She lives in Santee.

Whether or not online learning is an effective tool for increasing accessibility is an increasingly fraught topic for those of us working in community college districts. As a professor of sociology at San Diego Mesa College, I'm not just referring to making college and university courses more accessible to people with neurodivergence and physical disabilities. People experiencing forms of structural violence, like institutionalized racism, sexism, heteronormativity, gender bias and classism also face obstacles to accessing higher education. These obstacles cause the inequities in education that community college administrators, faculty and staff are trying to address.

What do we mean when we say that online courses are more "accessible"? For students with physical disabilities, we are saying that it is easier for them to learn online rather than deal with inadequacies in transportation, physical buildings and other social spaces. For students with medical disabilities, it is easier to have flexible, self-paced classes when you are forced to take a full load of courses to keep your financial aid and, more importantly, your health insurance. For students with neurodivergence, it's easier to stay in the digital shadow rather than deal with the myriad repercussions of ignorance and social stigma. For students who can't afford a car or the super high price of gas or for people concerned with overconsumption of fossil fuels, we are saying that online learning is better than spending upwards of four hours on a bus. (That's how long the trips to-and-from Mesa College took from North Park last time I tried it.) Or, for students who are caregivers for kids, parents and other loved ones, the only option they have for taking courses at all is online because these necessary forms of care work are entirely unpaid. These are the most common reasons my faculty colleagues use to justify the escalating increase in our online classes. Before COVID, not even 5 percent of Mesa College's sociology courses were offered online. Now, my colleagues and I have to fight tooth-and-nail every semester to keep only about 50 percent of our sociology program's courses face-to-face.

Sociology faculty at Mesa College are fighting this hard because students who opt for online courses are sacrificing the creative deep thinking and relationship-building that can only happen with spontaneous, face-to-face social interaction. More importantly, we are encouraging them to make that sacrifice by providing more courses online while also allowing our institutions to remain structurally inaccessible for face-to-face learning. With the option of online, what motivates policy-makers to make our in-person classes more accessible? Nothing does.

Education requires creative problem solving and spaces for spontaneous and often nonverbal communication. It requires spaces where spontaneous remarks, facial expressions, delicately stuttered sentences, and other unique, informal and often unintentional types of communication end up sparking important ideas and extinguishing bad ideas. In a recent [study](#) on nursing students, researchers found that the benefits of online learning depended on the course content, and that “motivation to learn, teamwork and quality of discussion may be compromised due to the lack of socialization and interactions between students and tutors.” Face-to-face classrooms are where these seemingly unproductive physical, in-person, interactions blossom organically and substantively.

Accessibility means addressing the structural arrangements that perpetuate inequitable access to higher education and access to the [“hidden curriculum.”](#) It means addressing the economic and political structures that prevent many of our students from ever experiencing idyllic four-year residential colleges and universities. The imperative to maintain high enrollment is derived from the structural pressure to make education a commodity, instead of a human right. And that same structural pressure makes online learning more convenient and therefore more “accessible.” (This is leaving out the issue of disparities in access to technology.) If we blindly embrace the moving train of online learning, we risk blindly reinforcing the very structures we are trying to dismantle.

At best, online learning is a tool, but not a silver bullet for accessibility. At worst, it is a market-driven project that fetishizes “flexible learning.” Online learning could actually

be a bullet in the foot of equity if it's not used with careful self-reflexivity, moderation and the highest standards of academic integrity.

Social arrangements that separate us into bosses and workers and that require hyper-efficiency and hyper-production for the sake of making profit are the same arrangements that make higher education less accessible to people from under-served and marginalized communities. Dependency on software corporations like Canvas, and a “butts in every seat” approach to enrollment, reinforce interconnected forms of inequity. If we're not careful and thoughtful about our use of online learning, we are going to continue down the path of ever-evolving inequities that we should be trying to subvert.

An Addendum to “By blindly embracing online learning, we risk reinforcing educational inequities.”

I was constrained to 800 words in the opinion piece that was published in the *San Diego Union-Tribune* on October 11th, and I want share some data on equity gaps related to online learning that I couldn’t include in it. I’ll start with the digital divide.

According to The Pew Research Center, about four-in-ten adults with lower incomes do not have home broadband services (43%) or a desktop or laptop computer (41%). The San Diego Community College District serves many of these students. The Pew Research Center also reported that, “racial minorities and those with lower levels of education and income are less likely to have broadband service at home.”¹ The below table of data is drawn from Pew Research Center's website tracking at-home broadband service by race.

Home Broadband Adoption by Race			
Date of data collection	white	Black	Latinx
1/18/2018	72%	57%	47%
2/7/2019	79%	66%	61%
2/8/2021	80%	71%	65%

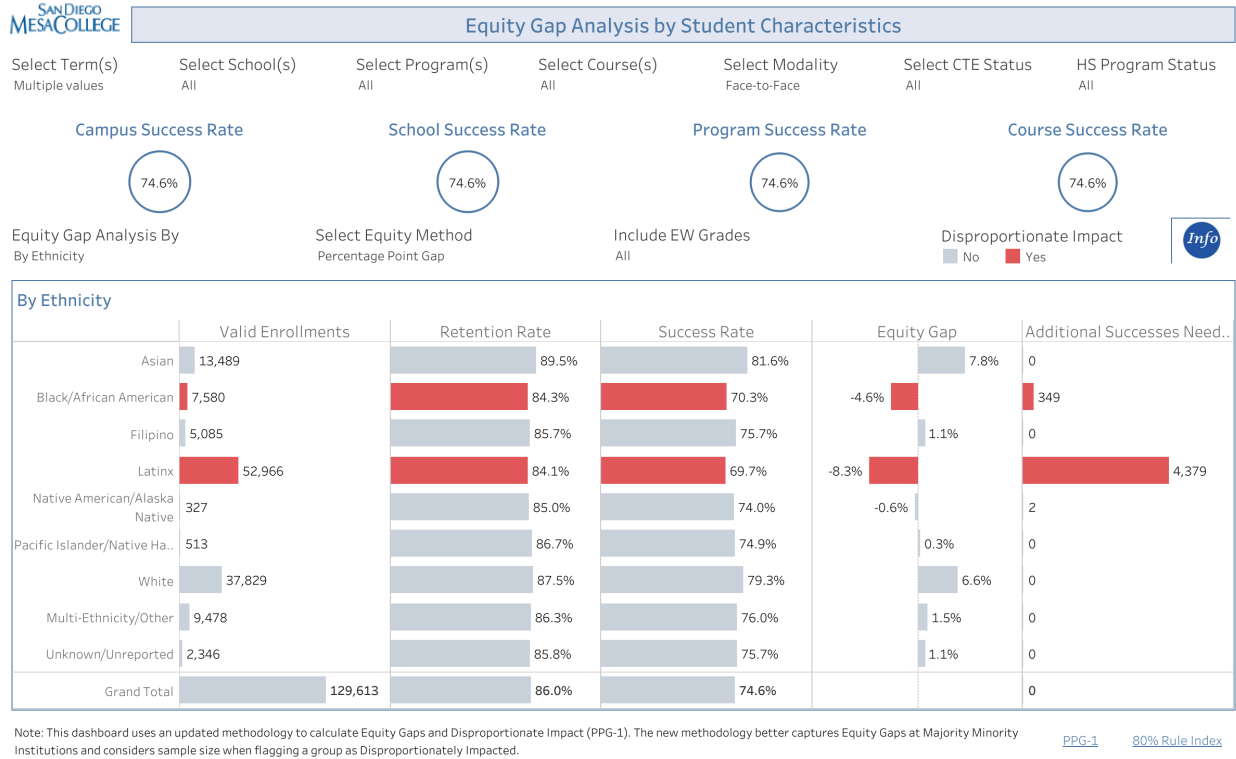
The same Pew Research poll reported complete equity of at-home broadband adoption by gender, with 77% of all men polled reporting at-home broadband access, and 77% women have high speed internet at home. If these data on gender were disaggregated by race, we would surely see the intersectional equity gaps where women of color are even more of a disadvantage in terms of having high speed internet at home. These data, coupled with the tendency for students to use smartphones for their course material, indicate that maintaining fair access to face-to-face classes should be a priority until access to high speed internet becomes a publicly provided good.

I’m going to use the data dashboard provided by Mesa College’s Office of Institutional Effectiveness for the rest of this addendum. For the sake of brevity, the parameters for these data are very broad because this addendum is meant to simply demonstrate the need for a substantive conversation across schools and campuses. I drew from all terms available—summer 2016 to spring 2023—and all schools at Mesa College. The rest of the parameters are labeled. Again, these data are extremely easy to retrieve and are purely descriptive. They do not control for changes in

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/internet-broadband/>

demographic populations, for differences between disciplines, and many other variables that should be included in future analyses.

The first graph are data for face-to-face courses:



The second graph contains data from online synchronous and online asynchronous, and excludes hybrid and hyflex courses, but note that data including hyflex and hybrid are only slightly different when they are included.

Equity Gap Analysis by Student Characteristics

Select Term(s) Multiple values | Select School(s) All | Select Program(s) All | Select Course(s) All | Select Modality Multiple values | Select CTE Status All | HS Program Status All

Campus Success Rate: 73.0% | School Success Rate: 73.0% | Program Success Rate: 73.0% | Course Success Rate: 73.0%

Equity Gap Analysis By: By Ethnicity | Select Equity Method: Percentage Point Gap | Include EW Grades: All | Disproportionate Impact: No (selected), Yes

[Info](#)

By Ethnicity		Valid Enrollments	Retention Rate	Success Rate	Equity Gap	Additional Successes Need..
Asian	27,112	91.6%	83.7%	11.9%	0	
Black/African American	16,977	83.4%	63.5%	-10.2%	1,732	
Filipino	10,687	88.5%	77.6%	4.8%	0	
Latinx	100,705	85.3%	68.0%	-8.3%	8,344	
Native American/Alaska Native	609	82.9%	68.0%	-5.1%	31	
Pacific Islander/Native Ha..	1,172	86.4%	68.5%	-4.5%	53	
White	74,129	88.6%	77.7%	6.6%	0	
Multi-Ethnicity/Other	19,586	86.3%	73.0%	0.0%	2	
Unknown/Unreported	4,389	84.9%	70.4%	-2.7%	118	
Grand Total	255,366	87.0%	73.0%		0	

Note: This dashboard uses an updated methodology to calculate Equity Gaps and Disproportionate Impact (PPG-1). The new methodology better captures Equity Gaps at Majority Minority Institutions and considers sample size when flagging a group as Disproportionately Impacted. [PPG-1](#) [80% Rule Index](#)

Two characteristics of these data stand out. First, the equity gap for Black/African American students jumps significantly from -4.6 to -10.2, which is alarming and, alone, demonstrates the need to address the ongoing increase in online courses. Second, the data for white students reflect a positive equity measure of 6.6% for both face-to-face and online modalities, which indicates that this is likely not a problem with instructors being deficient in their online teaching skills. The data also indicate a need for more robust and thorough analyses of course and learning outcomes across disciplines.

I hope that this is just the start of a desperately needed conversation that will include empirical analyses. For faculty at Mesa College, I encourage you to use OIE’s dashboard to explore data on your discipline. ([Here’s a link to access the dashboard.](#)) For instance, the sociology program at Mesa College had a narrowing equity gap for Latinx and Black students until the onset of the pandemic and the increase in online teaching. If I had the time, I’d explore this one simple data point across every discipline, along with the myriad other outcomes we’re seeing and experiencing. Again, I hope we can take a breath, step back from our panic to increase enrollment, and more earnestly the best pathway for providing truly equitable and excellent higher education.

Thank you for your time and attention,
Erin Evans
eevans@sdccd.edu