Enrollment, Persistence, Progress, and Achievement

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Introduction

Currently, online learning reaches millions of K-12 learners and its annual growth has been exponential over the past number of years. This growth has and will likely continue to lead to dramatic changes in the educational landscape. While online learning appears to hold great promise, a paucity of research addresses the pedagogical implications for students with disabilities (SWDs). Researchers urgently need to conduct investigations that describe what is happening in the field and demonstrate how online learning should be designed and delivered to impact these students' educational outcomes. The Center on Online Learning and Students with Disabilities (COLSD) has been conducting research in this area.

COLSD, a cooperative agreement among the University of Kansas, the Center for Applied Special Technologies (CAST), and the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE), is focused on four main goals:
1. To identify and verify trends and issues related to the participation of SWDs in K-12 online learning in a range of forms and contexts such as fully online schools, blended or hybrid instruction consisting of traditional and online instruction, and online courses;
2. To identify and describe major potential positive outcomes and negative consequences of participation in online learning for SWDs;
3. To identify and develop promising approaches for increasing the accessibility and potential effectiveness of online learning for SWDs; and
4. To test the feasibility, usability, and potential effectiveness of one or more of these approaches.

To meet the first two goals, the Center has conducted a number of activities. Exploratory research activities include case studies of two fully online schools; national surveys of purposeful samples of parents, students, teachers, and district and state administrators; interviews with members of individualized education program (IEP) teams; and a review of one state's student participation, retention, and completion data. Additionally, to describe the landscape of online learning for students with disabilities, the Center is conducting a series of forums with different stakeholder groups. The first forum was held with state department of education staff to provide an in-depth view from the state perspective. Other forums under

consideration include forums with school district administrators, online learning vendors, and parents.

Participants and forum topics

In the summer of 2014, COLSD staff began planning for the series of forums to shed light on the state of online learning and SWDs from the practitioners' perspective. The first forum was held with state department of education staff in a face-to-face gathering November 17th and 18th, 2014. Participants were staff members from six state departments of education and one local district administrator. A list of participants is included as an appendix to this report. The states represented at this forum were Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Massachusetts, Ohio, and Virginia. These states were selected based on three factors: (1) Each state has a relatively detailed state policy on online learning. (2) Each state has state-level activity in special education and online learning. (3) Each state is geographically diverse. While staff from other states had asked to attend the forum, the forum process and resource constraints required that a limited number of individuals participate in order to gather in-depth information. Although the experiences and information from the participating states do not represent the nation as a whole, they do provide an informed sample. Other than Massachusetts and Florida, each state's director of special education attended. Massachusetts and Florida's representatives were educational specialists with knowledge in both special education and virtual education.

COLSD staff reviewed previous literature reviews and other research activities (e.g., case studies, surveys, and interviews) to determine the topics for this first forum. Staff gave suggestions for collapsing some topics and extrapolating concepts from others. The final eight topics covered at the forum included the following:

- Enrollment, persistence, progress, and achievement;
- Parents' preparation and involvement in their child's online experience, including promising practices to support parents' roles;
- IDEA principles in the online environment (e.g., FAPE, least restrictive environment, parental notification, due process protections);
- Access to student data, including privacy concerns, sharing, integration, and instructional usage among the parties involved in online instruction (e.g., instructional setting, instructor, administrator, provider, and vendor);
- Teacher preparation -- both preservice and inservice -- for the online learning environment;
- Integration of optimal evidence-based instructional practices; availability of skill/strategy instruction in online environments;
- Utilization of the online environment's unique properties and affordances (i.e., those features that would not be possible or practical in the offline environment) in the areas of collaboration, personalization of instruction, and multiple means of demonstrating skill mastery; and
- Differential access to online learning across the state (e.g., computer or tablet access, connection speed, district restrictions to material access and assistive technologies).

Participants received a packet of materials prior to the meeting, including the agenda (see Appendix B), a list of the topics and questions to be considered, a draft of a Center publication entitled, "The Landscape of Online Learning," and the publication "Using Technology to Support At-Risk Students' Learning" by Darling-Hammond, Zielezinski, and Goldman. This latter publication can be found at https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/scope-pub-using-technology-report.pdf. The forum began with introductions and a comprehensive discussion of the importance of online learning and students with disabilities from each state staff member's perspective. Next, each state representative responded to a set of questions about the selected eight topics. In a round-robin fashion so each participant had an opportunity to describe his/her state's need, status, importance, and other perspectives pertaining to the topic.

For each of the eight topics, participants responded to six questions:
- How is the topic addressed in your state?
- How important is this topic?
- What direction is your state moving on this topic?
- What are the top challenges around this topic in your state?
- What is going well regarding this topic?
- What research question could have significant impact on this area?

As a closing exercise, participants described their top leadership challenges in regard to online learning for students with disabilities.

Enrollment, persistence, progress, and achievement

This document, the first in the series of forum proceeding papers, presents participants' responses to the set of six questions on the topic of enrollment, persistence, progress, and achievement for students with disabilities in online programs. This topic was identified from COLSD's research as well as other published and anecdotal information. For example, COLSD's initial research activities found that students with disabilities who are enrolled in an online learning environment encounter curricular and textual materials that are too difficult for them (Deshler, Smith, & Greer, 2014; Greer, Rice, & Deshler, 2014; Rice & Deshler, 2015; Rice & Greer, 2014; Rice, 2014), are counseled out of online classes or programs (Greer, Rice, & Carter, 2015), have strained relationships with online teachers (Carter & Rice, 2015), and fail to complete courses or other educational targets such as semesters or school years (Rice & Deshler, 2014; Rice & Mellard, 2015).

How is this topic addressed in your organization?

When asked how enrollment, persistence, progress, and achievement for students with disabilities in online learning were addressed in their states, the answers were vastly divergent. No uniform way exists for monitoring enrollment, persistence, progress, and achievement in online learning settings. Similarly, as states work on solutions for these issues, they use different strategies. Within the states represented, very few if any local education agencies (LEAs) have developed ways to collect and assess these types of data. Additionally, they do not have the capacity to evaluate the information based on students' disability categories. Many

participants voiced difficulty with communication among offices whose responsibilities overlap in the virtual school setting, and the cumbersome job of deciding on a uniform structure for gathering and evaluating such data.

The participants indicated that parents, special education staff, and education staff responsible for the enrollment processes for online school environments all play a role in the necessary coordination of deciding what environment is appropriate for students with disabilities and enrolling and placing them appropriately. Other participants shared that having special education offices and online schools working together to serve students with disabilities is crucial to integration and coordination of educational program and related services. However, the communication between the two offices is minimal. The thread woven through all of the communication difficulties was the lack of best practices, or some other type of structure that lent itself to the use of common language and uniform procedures that would clarify the roles of all involved entities.

How important is this topic from your perspective?

Participants agreed that the multiple facets of enrollment, persistence, progress, and achievement were an important challenge in online instruction for students with disabilities. However, the level of priority was not the same for all participants. Some stated that this topic was "very important," while others identified areas such as access and instruction as more crucial topics of conversation. Nearly all participants shared the sentiment that online program enrollment has grown rapidly, and that LEA administrators are having difficulty keeping pace with their ability to collect and analyze persistence, outcome, and demographic data.

What direction do you see your state going on this topic?

Understanding next steps or future directions depends on the collection and analysis of data comparing the success and demographics of students across environments: fully online, blended, and traditional. Several participants indicated this information was needed and many states have started focusing on the development and implementation of the needed policies and procedures during the past two years.

The next steps for state education agencies (SEAs) are not limited to instructional or curricular domains. Not only is curriculum and instruction online, but national, state, and local assessment is being moved online as well. Multiple participants iterated that online testing seems to be part of the least restrictive environment and is the most accessible option for all students, not just students with disabilities. Many states will likely require individualized education program (IEP) directives for students to take paper tests in most subjects in the near future. Through the participant discussion of future directions of online education, the differences among states were expressly evident. Some states found the transition to having more online learning environments easier than others, which explains some of the discrepancies in tracking enrollment, persistence, and progress across states. Some participants said that traditional ideas in their states regarding technology, teacher preparation, changes in education, and parent choice played a large role in the difficulty of getting technology accepted in the classrooms, or in place of classrooms.

The participants who identified their states as being further along in the adoption of blended and fully online environments predicted that a next step in the evolution of online learning would be building the capacity to have instructional technology follow students from school to school. Those representatives who identified their states as less progressive regarding online learning communicated the need for a commission to approve more virtual charter schools as a next step for their states.

What's the top challenge faced?

Participants indicated that one of the most frequently found challenges around the development and implementation of policies about monitoring online enrollment, persistence, progress, and achievement included a lack of precedent and structure. A lack of precedent or structure included definitional issues. Several participants reported a need for universal definitions and understanding of the terms like "persistence" versus "retention," what qualifies as a "blended" environment, and what parent "coaching" includes when their child is enrolled in a fully online school. The level of involvement necessary for parents whose children are enrolled in an online school is not often understood and subsequently not executed. Due to this lack of information, some families enroll their student and are unprepared for their expanded role, sometimes causing poor persistence, progress, and achievement.

Participants also noted that communication issues exacerbate the challenges of monitoring students' enrollment, progress, and achievement. Consistent communication among all entities involved in online education has not been an easy feat. For example, a primary challenge of the participants was that between the online schools and parents, the online school has the responsibility to inform, support, and ensure that parents of students enrolled in a fully online school monitor their children's schoolwork.

Some states addressed unique challenges faced by their online schools relating to enrollment, persistence, progress, and achievement. For example, states that currently have a limited number of online charter schools (often called cyber schools in the field of charter schools) have been challenged with the traditionally simple act of procuring additional licensing for, and partnerships with, online charter school programs. In some states where online school attendance is increasing, education entities are looking for ways to engage students and enhance student retention and persistence. For example, some schools require more active participation than mere attendance and reading of course texts. Deeper participation could include recorded examples of the materials or live participation on discussion boards. Furthermore, state representatives conveyed that many LEAs with online options reported that students enrolled in fully online schools are a transient group. Many students dis-enroll and re-engage in the same or different online school programs at much higher rates than those in traditional settings. This pattern of change in the enrollment also contributed to the difficulty of understanding students' progress and achievement.

What are the various stakeholder concerns?

Stakeholder concerns varied greatly; however, as indicated earlier one of the main concerns is that LEAs may deem online enrollment as an easy solution for educating students

who may be difficult-to-serve in traditional settings. In addition, participants indicated that advocacy groups are cautious about suggestions that online learning environments be considered for difficult-to-serve students. Such placement suggestions are often made due to a student's emotional or behavioral difficulties, not because an online learning environment is best for the student. While the environment may be appropriate for some, the critical test is that student rights, needs, and best interests are served to the fullest capacity possible. The questions raised by forum participants pertained to when and how the online learning environment accommodated individual learner needs as opposed to merely changing delivery method or curricular content.

The last shared concern, funding for online schools, has become a top challenge for state education agencies. Some states are concerned because online providers calculate fees differently than traditional schools. For instance, online providers may be paid by the minute, but school funding is focused more closely to the average number of students served daily. In general, participants agreed that fiscal policies need to change to address both transience of student population and online learning in general.

Additionally, several representatives expressed concerns about the use of online learning environments for purposes not congruent with student needs. This incongruence happens most frequently with students who are deemed difficult to serve in traditional school settings, such as those students with autism, behavioral disorders, or emotional disturbance. Other concerns raised by participants included misuse of the online environment for students with disabilities (e.g., Will they have annual measureable objectives monitored in the same way? Would enrolling students who are not meeting specific annual measurable objectives in a virtual school be a way to cheat the system?); competition with traditional schools for enrollment; and meeting parent needs for information about accessibility for their children with disabilities.

What research questions could have a significant impact?

Participants were asked for their perspectives on important research questions. The general sense was that since no uniform structure exists for starting, funding, monitoring, and evaluating online programs, research could be very exploratory or descriptive in nature. One of the significant challenges to such research is the lack of uniformity or consistency in the collection and evaluation of student data regarding their enrollment, persistence, progress and achievement. Much data needs to be collected, and numerous questions need to be answered to assess the best practices of online learning. For example, what is the best practice for providing fiscal support to online schools in order to support enrollment, persistence, progress, and achievement? Which students do best in online learning environments and why? What strategies are best for helping students with disabilities in online learning environments? For which disability categories do online schools really make sense, and what supports are necessary to ensure appropriate services are provided for these students? Why is the transience rate so much higher in the online school population than in traditional learning environments?

Implications

The discussions on this forum topic suggest many potential challenges for policy and practice. Online instruction is viewed as a rapidly changing landscape for education and these changes touch on most all components of students' education. As a consequence of this rapid expansion LEA administrators are having difficulty keeping pace with their ability to collect and analyze persistence, outcome, and demographic data. Yet, the data about the participation and success of students with disabilities in online learning environments requires increased attention to further answer even the simple level of policy and practice questions raised by participants and others. For example, current policies and practices do not yield information about the disaggregation of student information by disability categories. As a consequence SEA and LEA staffs lack information for assessing the enrollment, participation, persistence, specific outcomes and benefits across disability categories. This lack of information and shared understanding lead several representatives to express concerns about whether online learning environments were being promoted for purposes not congruent with IDEA and addressing student needs.

The group suggested that one research area with important implications was the identification of best practices for data collection, analysis, and review, which they believed would greatly benefit all parties involved with the online learning movement. Suffice it to say that an increase in the data collection of many variables would help to assess the value and progress of students' online learning program enrollment and achievement.

One of the most frequently reported challenges around the development and implementation of policies about monitoring online enrollment, persistence, progress, and achievement included a lack of precedent and structure. The lack of precedent and significant variation in the practices raises questions of how to ensure comparability, consistency, and quality of the experience for learners and their instructors. An implication is that SEAs and LEAs lack uniform procedures for enrolling students and monitoring their persistence, progress, and achievement in online learning settings. Similarly, this variation creates challenges for communication across the varied stakeholder groups. Essentially, the stakeholders realize that they might think that they are describing online learning but that the specifics of the experience are distinct. Many participants voiced difficulty with communication among offices whose responsibilities overlap in the virtual school setting, and the cumbersome job of deciding on a uniform structure for gathering and evaluating such data.

Participants noted that one of the most significant changes of education through online environments is the increased role of parents in their children's online education. The parents' role in online instruction is expanding and critical to students' success. The concern, however, is whether parents understand this implication of online participation or are appropriately prepared for this more active involvement. Similarly, the change in roles for classroom teachers indicates significant needs for additional professional development for both groups (parents and teachers).

The discussions lead to several questions for further investigations:

1. What student, instructional, and curricular data should be collected for online learning environments? Who should be directing and managing these data collection activities?

2. What are the best practices for ensuring enrollment, persistence, progress, and achievement for students with disabilities in online learning environments?
3. What strategies for increased enrollment and program persistence have been most effective for LEAs that have had successful growth in their online learning presence?

Look for the next installment in this forum proceedings document series.

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Deshler, D., Smith, S., Greer, D., & Rice, M. (2014, April). *The barriers, challenges, and opportunities of online learning environments for SWDs.* Presentation at the annual meeting of the Council of Exceptional Children. Philadelphia, PA.

Greer, D., Rice, M., & Carter, R. A., Jr. (2015, April). *"Like they're the only ones": Online educators providing special education services.* Presentation at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association. Chicago, IL.

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Appendix A

Forum Participants

OSEP AND COLSD FORUM
Practices and Challenges in On-line Instruction for Students with Disabilities

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Appendix B

Forum Agenda

OSEP and COLSD Forum
**Practices and Challenges in On-line Instruction for
Students with Disabilities**

NOVEMBER 18-19, 2014
AGENDA

Tuesday, November 18, 2014

| 8:30 – 8:45 | Welcome | *OSEP staff and Bill East* |

8:45 – 9:10 Introductions: Your SEA experiences with online instruction (Questions suggested in the second cover letter)

9:10 – 9:15 Overview *Explanation of how we hope this discussion proceeds*

9:15 – 10:30 Discussion *Topic #1:* Enrollment, persistence, progress and achievement; Disaggregated by disability category

10:30 – 10:45 Break Check in with the office; Refresh your brain

10:45 – 11:45 Discussion *Topic #2:* Parent preparation and involvement in their child's online experience; Promising practices to support parents' roles

12:00 – 1:00 Lunch Task: Evaluation and planning (Handout)

1:00 – 2:15 Discussion *Topic #3:* IDEA principles in the online environment (e.g., FAPE, least restrictive environment, parental notification, due process protections)

2:15 – 2:30 Break

2:30 – 3:30 Discussion *Topic #4:* Effective and efficient student response data access, sharing, integration, and instructional usage among the parties involved in online instruction (e.g., instructional setting,

		instructor, administrator, provider, and vendor) and addressing privacy concerns
3:30 – 4:30	Discussion	*Topic #5:* Effectiveness of teacher preparation in the online learning environment; Promising or negative practices that facilitate (negate) professional development
4:30 – 4:45		*Wrap-up, suggestions for improving our process and preview for day 2*

Wednesday, November 19, 2014

8:15 to 8:30	Review	*Review of yesterday and preview of the today's activities*
8:30 – 9:15	Discussion	*Topic #6:* Integration of optimal evidence-based instructional practices; availability of skill/strategy instruction in online environments
9:15 – 9:30	Break	
9:30 – 10:30	Discussion	*Topic #7*: Utilization of the online environment's unique properties and affordances especially those features that would not be possible or practical in the offline environment: collaboration, personalizing instruction, multiple means of demonstrating skill mastery
10:30 – 11:45	Discussion	*Topic #8:* Differential access to online learning within and across your districts (e.g., computer or tablet access, connection speed, district restrictions to material access & assistive technologies)
11:45 – 1:00	Lunch	Leadership challenges: What are 2-3 questions that you need answered about online learning and students with disabilities to help you provide state leadership?

| 1:00 – 2:00 | Discussion | Your views on: (1) The Center's future activities, (2) Value of this forum and (3) Stakeholders for future forums |
| 2:00 – 2:15 | Wrap Up | *Reimbursement issues and closing comments; Thank you and safe travels* |