

# Study: Online undergrads learn well without strong class bond

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College students participating in a new study on online courses said they felt less connected and had a smaller sense of classroom community than those who took the same classes in person – but that didn't keep online students from performing just as well as their in-person counterparts.

The study by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln gauged students' perception and performance in three undergraduate science courses that had both online and face-to-face class versions. It found that online [students](#) did not feel a sense of cohesion, community spirit, trust or interaction, elements that have been shown to foster effective classroom learning.

At the same time, in the portion of the survey about students' perception of their own learning, online students reported levels equal to those reported by face-to-face students and at the end of the day, their grades were equivalent to their in-person peers.

"Previous research has shown that students who feel like they are connected to their classmates tend to enjoy their classes more and ultimately get better grades," said Robert Vavala, a UNL agronomy graduate student who authored the study. "We wanted to determine if online students felt the same way about their classes that face-to-face students did and if so, whether or not that affected their grades."

Researchers assembled the data from a survey of more than 250 students enrolled in three different entry-level science courses at a large

Midwestern public university. The same instructors taught both versions of each of the courses.

Though the results may suggest that face-to-face courses are no more effective for student learning than online courses, Vavala said they also show that online courses could be even more effective if they could foster a culture of class cohesion, spirit, trust and interaction among students.

How does an instructor do that? Perhaps more one-on-one contact and timely feedback between the instructor and online students, according to the study. All three instructors involved in the study said they felt creating a sense of community in their classes was very important, and worked to simulate that experience for online students.

"Because online classes lack actual face-to-face contact, instructors face many challenges in creating classroom community. One of those challenges is that community might not be as important to the online student as it is to their in-person peers," Vavala said.

**More information:** The study, which was authored by UNL's Vavala, Deana Namuth-Covert, Courtney Haines, Donald Lee, James King and Carol Speth, appeared in a recent edition of *The Journal of Natural Resources and Life Sciences Education*.

Provided by University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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