

Rhetorical War Over Online Versus In-Person Instruction

The chancellor of Northeastern University described in-person learning as “the gold standard,” sparking outcry from administrators of online education who strongly disagree.

By

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Online education leaders have bristled at rhetoric painting in-person education as superior.

Kenneth W. Henderson, the chancellor of Northeastern University, [posted a letter](#) on the university website late last month telling students and faculty members that the Boston institution intended to open as planned for the spring semester because “in-person learning remains the gold standard.”

The statement, which was not caveated in any way, struck many in education circles as strikingly unnuanced, especially for a chancellor whose institution offers a robust catalog of online courses. Henderson is not Northeastern’s top administrator, and while at most institutions the chancellor is the top person, in a new structure implemented by Northeastern, Henderson is a cabinet member.

Henderson’s comment comes at a time when many parents and students across the country are clamoring for a full return to in-person instruction amid the COVID-19 pandemic, putting pressure on university officials to keep their institutions open, particularly at universities such as Northeastern, where a strong emphasis on in-person and experiential learning is often coupled with a high price tag.

Leaders of the online education movement say whatever the motivation, Henderson’s “gold standard” rhetoric and comments like it unfairly marginalize well-designed online courses.

[Thomas Cavanagh](#), vice provost for digital learning at the University of Central Florida, oversees the highly regarded [UCF Online](#) platform and takes issue with assertions that in-person learning is superior. UCF Online has a 25-year history and offers more than 100 online programs to about 6,600 students who are not able to attend in person. Additionally, 75 percent of UCF’s 70,000 in-person students also take at least one online course.

Cavanagh sees the increasing use of rhetoric diminishing online education as the result of “pent-up demand” for normalcy and the social aspects of in-person education, particularly for students who sought an in-person experience and had online learning foisted on them because of the pandemic. But he said that rhetoric is simply inaccurate.

“I don’t think it’s fair to paint all of online learning with some sort of broad brush of inferiority, because it’s just simply not the case, as backed up by our research, as well as a lot of research from others,” Cavanagh said. He called Henderson’s comments “a little regressive” and said that given the body of evidence in favor of online learning’s efficacy, he had hoped education officials would move past such sweeping generalizations.

“I don’t think any particular course is superior or inferior based just on modality,” Cavanagh said. “It’s all based on design and faculty engagement.”

Cavanagh said his UCF colleagues have studied the efficacy of online learning since the mid-1990s and have found no significant difference in outcomes between face-to-face and well-designed asynchronous online coursework. He said courses that blend online and in-person instruction have proven to outperform both modalities on their own. UCF research shows online and face-to-face courses have the same withdrawal rates, at about 4 percent, he said, and online courses outrank face-to-face courses when it comes to student perception of instruction.

Like Cavanagh, [Russell Poulin](#), executive director of the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies, and other respected leaders whose organizations comprise the [National Council for Online Education](#) are tired of what they see as lazy stereotypes. They plan to release an open letter aimed at students in the coming weeks to counteract the marketplace rhetoric they are hearing and that they said conflates quality online education with emergency remote learning over Zoom.

“High-quality online learning is the result of specifically trained faculty members, intentional instructional design and a host of other important ingredients that we have been fine-tuning for more than 25 years,” the letter states.

Poulin put it in layman’s terms: “Any one of us can take a basketball and take a shot at a hoop. Those who practiced every day for years are more likely to swish the free throw.”

As the Omicron wave continues to crest, it is unclear how soon many universities will resume in-person classes and, if they resume, whether they will stay open if new variants emerge. In recent weeks, many institutions, including Duke, Georgetown, Stanford, Harvard, Vanderbilt and Northwestern Universities, announced they will wait until mid-January or later to resume classes. While [Harvard](#) said Monday that in-person instruction will begin Jan. 24, student anger over paying full tuition for remote learning remains an issue, reflecting the larger tensions most university leaders have faced as the pandemic drags on. A [petition](#) Harvard students circulated early in the pandemic’s first wave said the shift to online “might not reduce the value of the Harvard College brand, but it does severely diminish, if not fully impede, our ability to make connections.”

[David A. Armstrong](#), president of Florida’s [St. Thomas University](#), said he sees other institutions’ hesitancy to reopen as an opportunity to emphasize the connections students can make at St. Thomas, which has been fully open through most of the pandemic. Armstrong said he has poached students from more prestigious institutions by committing to staying open.

St. Thomas was one of only two universities whose sports programs played every game scheduled in the fall of 2020, Armstrong said. The institution has run multiple advertising campaigns highlighting that St. Thomas will stay open and offer the full collegiate experience despite what Omicron brings.

“We just did a commercial, again, during another surge because we knew what was going to happen—people were going to start shutting down,” Armstrong said. He compared the in-person experience St. Thomas is offering to the life-changing and truth-revealing red pill depicted in the science fiction film *The Matrix*. In the film, those who swallow the blue pill live in a state of contented ignorance. He said the ad uses the film’s analogy, telling viewers, “If you want the blue pill, then be stuck in your room and virtual ... but if you want the red pill, and to get a full college experience, come to St. Thomas University.”

The ad has yielded a significant number of inquiries, Armstrong said, adding that a full college experience is “what students want, and that’s what they pay for.”

Poulin said closed campuses create problems beyond just missed athletic events—foremost among them, he said, is the reliance of many institutions on poorly planned remote instruction. The rhetoric conflating remote and online education troubles him, because it doesn’t make clear that often instructors with no history of teaching online are being thrown into leading remote courses without training. Often these emergency-basis remote courses are plagued by technical problems and are synchronous, a recipe for disengagement and poor results.

[Steve Mintz](#), a historian at the University of Texas and an [Inside Higher Ed blogger](#), said that in his experience, highly interactive, immersive and participatory online education can be superior to the in-person version of the same class.

“Some classes can actually be better if taught in a fully online or hybrid format,” Mintz said in an email. “My US History Survey with 1,500 students was actually more interactive than its in-person counterpart. We had breakout sessions, ongoing chat, and small group meetings—which didn’t occur in the in-person version.”

[Van Davis](#), service design and strategy officer for [Every Learner Everywhere](#), which advocates for equitable outcomes in U.S. higher education through advances in digital learning, said examples like Mintz’s get at the flip side of what’s driving the “gold standard” rhetoric. He said even as many in academia are conflating emergency remote online education with deliberately designed online education, many are also conflating face-to-face education with highly interactive education. Often, he said, in-person education is not highly interactive.

“The gold standard isn’t the modality,” Davis said, calling Henderson’s use of the phrase problematic. “The gold standard has to do with the level of interaction that students are able to have with each other, and that students are able to have with the content, and that students are able to have with instructors.”

But Davis said many 18-year-olds don’t want a fully online education, meaning college leaders are motivated to sell the merits of in-person education without as much nuance as they should.

“The rhetoric that gets used has a lot to do with who the target audience is for that rhetoric,” Davis said.

Henderson was unavailable for an interview, but [Constance Yowell](#), the senior vice chancellor for educational innovation at Northeastern, stood by his gold-standard comment and said it was referring to the entire experience Northeastern offers, not just the classroom experience.

“We are a university that embraces a broad approach to experiential learning, and we believe that learning in person is a gold standard,” Yowell said. “That’s why [students] come to Northeastern, and that’s what we promise them.”

Yowell said it’s a “misnomer to reduce this to an online versus in-person debate,” but she also underscored the clear advantages she believes in-person education offers to students.

“What we do know is that learning requires experience that requires practice; it requires being out in the real world, making mistakes, coming back and learning from those mistakes with experts,” Yowell said. “There’s no instance that I’ve ever seen where that can happen 100 percent virtually.”