Connections Matter: How Interactive Peers Affect Students in Online College Courses

Eric Bettinger, Jing Liu, and Susanna Loeb

- Peer interactions are an integral part of higher education.
- The explosion of college online courses have dramatically changed how peers interact.
- In place of traditional face-to-face interactions, online discussion boards are now primary arenas for peer interaction.
Data: Full transcripts from two online courses delivered in 2010 by DeVry University. (> 2 million posts)

Measurement of peer interaction: Peer’s outreach to classmates.
—Without information on the hierarchy of posts, we identify whether a post has a peer’s name embedded.

Method:
(1) Leveraging the timing of course registration to solve students’ non-random sorting into classrooms.
(2) Instrumental variable approach to overcome the simultaneous nature of peer interactions, which is the so-called “reflection” issue.

RQ 1: How do interpersonal interactions in college online courses differ across students with different background characteristics and different levels of engagement in the course.

RQ 2: How do peer’s interpersonal interactions affect student course performance, especially for those who are less likely to be engaged in classroom interactions?
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