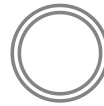# Challenges to Evaluating Online Education:
Learning from Experience

UCEC
University of California
Educational Evaluation Center

Specific Questions to Address Today
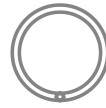
- Global Challenges Evaluating Online Education

- The Importance of Local Data

- Complexity of Evaluating Locally

- Policy Takeaways

Global Challenges

- **Fundamental Problems**
  - **Definitional**
    - What do we mean by Online
  - **Medium versus Content**
    - Media/Method Confound (Smith & Dillon, 1999)
  - **Appropriate Comparisons**
    - Online versus Face-to-Face
    - Actual Online versus Conceptual Online
  - **Understanding what you want to know**
    - Outcomes/Approach/Media

Importance of Local Data

- ## One Big Question is Clear
  - Online CAN be effective…critical question is whether the way you do online is effective and under what conditions

- ## The remaining questions are just as difficult
  - Is it more efficient than other methods?
    - What are the tradeoffs?
    - Under what conditions?

- ## The importance of local evaluations is high
  - However, all the fundamental problems apply locally as do globally, but are exacerbated by specific characteristics of the program

Complexity of Local Evaluation

- **Must Decide What to Evaluate**
  - Local constituencies can make this difficult
    - Faculty have goals for evaluation
    - Local administrators
    - System administrators
  - Choosing appropriate outcomes is also challenging and represent different goals
    - Grades
    - Persistence
    - Grades in subsequent courses
    - Decreases in time to degree
    - Impact of context to improve future implementation

Complexity of Local Evaluation (cont.)

- **Must Decide How to Evaluate**
  - Randomization is difficult given student choice
  - Getting student grades and records across multiple campuses is difficult for other quasi-experimental methods
  - Data collection can be difficult
    - If system is not uniform, what is collected and how it is collected can be challenging
    - Faculty autonomy can be a challenge—full cooperation is necessary to have a successful evaluation
      - Some faculty more invested than others and cooperation can be difficult to get if they are worried that their own pedagogy or courses are being evaluated
      - Online courses receiving more scrutiny than regular courses

Complexity of Local Evaluation (cont.)

- ## Must Decide How the Evaluations are Used
  - Accountability, Research, or Improvement
    - Full participation will be difficult in a system like UC if there is the perception by faculty that the evaluation will be used to make decisions about the quality and viability of particular courses
    - Research requires much more time to finish and results generally are not available until a substantial time past the conclusion of the class—particularly when the outcomes are long-term
    - Improvement requires quick turnaround and appropriate staffing to allow for this turnaround

Policy Takeaways

- Local evaluations matter more than global statements about effectiveness.

- The vast amount of information that can be collected means that we must be much clearer about what we want to know from our evaluations.

- There are a lot of challenges to doing this type of evaluation in a realistic setting, appropriate resources and expectations need to be exercised and cannot be globally fixed.

- Evaluation is important, but the local context and decision matrix can deeply affect the evaluation's level of success in meeting its goals.