Question: How does class size in online classes effect student persistence and outcomes?

There is very little research on this question, which prompted researchers at Stanford to conduct a large study (100,000 students enrolled in nearly 4,000 online for credit classes. Their primary research question was: does increasing online class sizes affect student GPA, credits received in the next term, and persistence in the next term?

In this study, the large classes had 34 students, on average, compared to 31 students in smaller classes. They concluded that “small changes in online college class sizes [e.g. going from 31 to 34 students] have no discernable effect on student learning or persistence in college.” (Bettinger, et al., 2015, pg. 4) I want to highlight that large online classes are considered 34. The majority of our online course offerings at Ohlone far exceed 34 students.


Question: Are online classes more work than in person classes?

YES. Studies abound that support this. While numbers vary in terms of estimation of the amount of increased work load, most studies place the increased workload demand between 30-50% compared to a face to face course (Finely et al., 2005; Zuckweiler, et. al, 2004; Visser, 2000; Artz, Judy 2011).

Many studies address the complexity of this topic by identifying that increased work load for faculty teaching online is due to a wide range of issues, including increased grading demands, increased preparation time, increased student email/ contact demands as well as issues that stem from lack of support and professional development by institutions that provide the skills to online instructors.

Question: What is the appropriate size class to facilitate interactive online courses?

This question assumes that interactive online courses are desirable. Online faculty are required to ensure that there is “effective weekly contact” between students and instructor as well as students and students. This type of contact requires courses to be interactive, thus our assumption underpinning this question is that interactivity is not only desirable, but required/ mandated.
A 2006 study surveyed 131 online instructors at a variety of institutions to determine faculty perception of optimal class size to achieve high levels of interaction appropriate for a given course as measure by Roblyer and Wienecke’s 2004 RAIQ (Rubric for Assessment Interactive Qualities in Distance Courses – see link to RAIQ below). “On average (a) instructors described their online courses as highly interactive, (b) the actual class size of the online courses was 22.8, (c) a class size of 18.9 was perceived as optimal to better achieve the course’s actual level of interaction, and (d) a class size of 15.9 was perceived as optimal to achieve the highest level of interaction.” (Orellana, 2016, pg. 229)

Judy Arzt conducted a survey of the literature to answer the questions “What is the ideal class size for online courses? What are the variables that affect optimal class size in this environment?” She published her findings in ERIC. Artz concluded that, “Although a review of the literature suggests class sizes between 12 and 21 are appropriate, the research also shows that a variety of variables besides class size affects student learning as well as student and instructor satisfaction with a course. These factors include the instructor’s experience and comfort teaching online, the qualities of technology employed, and the nature and experience of students enrolled in the course.” (Artz, 2011, pg 2)

RAIQ:  

Orellana, Anymir, “Class Size and Interaction in Online Courses,” Quarterly Review of Distance Education, v7 n3 p229-248 2006  
https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ875034


**Question:** How should colleges determine online teaching class sizes?

There have been a variety of approaches to the question. In general, the strategy is to reduce the online class size in comparison to the face to face course in order to account for the increased workload for faculty and keep class sizes small in an effort to promote student exchange and collaboration.

*The formula approach:*

Zuckweiler et al. (2004) findings suggest that online classes, on average, take 39.9% more time to teach. Thus, an online class size should be 39.9% smaller than that of its transitional counterpart.
Other researchers suggest that online class sizes should be reduced by 1/3 of the class size of its traditional counterpart because online classes take at least 1/3 more time to teach (Finley et al., 2005).


**Question: What criteria is Ohlone College determining online class size?**

There appears to be no systematic criteria in place for determining class size for online teaching.

Based on a quick review of online class offerings for Spring 2017 in webadvisor, class size caps range from 20-60 students. Variations in class size caps even occur within multiple online sections of the same course offering.

Informal and unsystematic interviews with 9 online faculty revealed anecdotally that:

- there is concern that the best student learning environment was not considered when increasing online class size;
- there is concern that faculty work load was not considered when increasing online class size;
- all felt that their classes were too large in terms of work load and optimal learning environments for students;
- some were not consulted before online class sizes increased in their departments;
- some felt pressured to agree to continually increase online class sizes in order to meet either enrollment pressures from administrators or student need for graduation requirements.