

Online Universities Are Gaining Acceptance, Pollster Says

By GOLDIE BLUMENSTYK

National surveys show that a majority of Americans think online universities offer a lower quality of education than do traditional institutions. But a prominent pollster, John Zogby, says in a book being released today that it won't be long before American society takes to distance education as warmly as it has embraced game-changing innovations like microbrewed beers, Flexcars, and "the simple miracle of Netflix."

The factor that will close that "enthusiasm gap" is the growing use of distance education by well-respected universities, Mr. Zogby predicts in the book, *The Way We'll Be: The Zogby Report on the Transformation of the American Dream* (Random House).

The book, which is based on Zogby International polls and other studies, also touches on public attitudes toward politics, consumer habits, spirituality, and international affairs, and on what men and women really do want from each other. Mr. Zogby says polls detect signs of society's emerging resistance to big institutions, and its de-emphasis on things and places. "We're redefining geography and space," he says—and a widening acceptance of online education is part of the trend.

Today there is still a "cultural lag" between the public's desire for flexible ways to take college courses and what the most-established players offer, Mr. Zogby said in an interview with *The Chronicle* on Monday. "There's a sense that those who define the standard haven't caught on yet," he said.

But Mr. Zogby writes that polling by his organization shows that attitudes about online education are changing fast. His polling also points to other challenges that colleges will face as they race to serve a worldwide generation of 18-to-29-year-olds that Mr. Zogby calls "First Globals."

In one 2007 poll of more 5,000 adults, Zogby International found that 30 percent of respondents were taking or had taken an online course, and another 50 percent said they would consider taking one. He says the numbers might skew a little high because this poll was conducted online and the definition of an online course was broad, including certificate programs or training modules offered by employers.

Only 27 percent of respondents agreed that "online universities and colleges provide the same quality of education" as traditional institutions. Among those 18 to 24 years old, only 23 percent agreed.

An even greater proportion of those polled said it was their perception that employers and academic professionals thought more highly of traditional institutions than online ones.

Rapid Shift in Attitude

Yet in another national poll in December 2007, conducted for Excelsior College, 45 percent of the 1,004 adults surveyed believed "an online class carries the same value as a traditional-classroom class," and 43 percent of 1,545 chief executives and small-business owners agreed that a degree earned by distance learning "is as credible" as one from a traditional campus-based program.

Mr. Zogby said that differing attitudes in two polls within a year show that "the gap was closing"—and he said that wasn't as surprising as it might seem. As with changing perceptions about other cultural phenomena, "these paradigm shifts really are moving at lightning speed."

That, says Mr. Zogby, is why he writes about online universities in a chapter—"Dematerializing the Paradigm"—that discusses the rise of car-sharing companies like Flexcar (now merged with Zipcar), the emergence of Internet blogs as a source of news and information, and the popularity of microbrewed beer.

And while it may be true that microbrews and Zipcars, at least, are still very much niche products, Mr. Zogby says they are signs of transcendent change—just like the distance-education courses that are being offered by more and more institutions across the country. "When you add up all the niche products, it's a market unto itself," he says.

In the book, Mr. Zogby also highlights the emerging influence of the First Globals, whom his book calls "the most outward-looking and accepting generation in American history." First Globals, he says, are more socially tolerant and internationally aware.

It is these First Globals, he writes, who are shaping what he says is nothing short of a "fundamental reorientation of the American character away from wanton consumption and toward a new global citizenry in an age of limited resources."

Higher education, he said in the interview, needs to take notice and adapt. These days, he said, students are much more likely to have experienced other cultures firsthand, either as tourists or because they have immigrated from someplace else. Whether college for them is a traditional complex of buildings or an interactive online message board, said Mr. Zogby, "there is a different student on campus."