

5/25/2015 @ 12:44PM



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Online Learning: What Next?

On-line learning today provides a quality alternative to on-the-ground courses. It offers students greater flexibility as to time and place as most courses are offered asynchronously, meaning students can take them at any time of the day or night. Most chief academic officers at colleges and universities were very skeptical of online learning when it was in its infancy, today, according to a recent survey

[www.onlinelearningsurvey.com/report/2014SurveyInfo.pdf], more than 70% of them now believe it is critical to their long-term strategy. The Chief Academic Officers find that the outcomes from distance education courses are equal to or better than those of traditional, on the ground, courses.

More than 5 million students or 25% of all college and university students are enrolled in distance education courses according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Eleven percent of students are enrolled exclusively in distance education courses while 14% are enrolled in some traditional and some distance education courses. Enrollments in online courses have been growing much faster in recent years at public and private institutions than at for-profit institutions which were the early adopters of this type of course delivery.

Almost all schools with enrollments of 5,000 students or more offer distance education/online learning courses and 80% of those with enrollments of fewer than 5,000 students offer distance education. At the smaller schools, these may be entirely on-line courses or a part of a traditional course. This data comes from the recently completed 2014 Survey of Online Learning conducted by the Babson Survey Research Group and co-sponsored by the Online Learning Consortium (OLC), Pearson and Tyton Partners.

Many institutions are adding distance education courses and programs to their portfolio of offerings to diversify their revenue streams. For others on-line programs are becoming profit centers. Many traditional schools partner with a third party to do many parts of their on-line offerings including marketing the courses and hosting them on their servers for a share of the course revenue. For some institutions, the addition of on-line programs has provided significant revenue with little or no financial risk.

MOOCs (massive open online courses) have not replaced either on-the-ground or on-line courses that charge tuition as some initially speculated when they were first introduced. Only 8% of higher education institutions currently offer MOOCs. MOOCs offer access to a wide

variety of courses from some of the best faculty and institutions in the country; many institutions which don't offer MOOCs are incorporating them into their curriculum as they are free. Some MOOCs are now adding charges for students who want certification of successful completion of the course.

On-line learning also provides traditional brick and mortar institutions with the ability expand their curriculum. It allows easy access to their students to new majors and more courses from other institutions during the traditional academic year. This takes the burden off of institutions for providing as broad an array of courses as they needed to in the past and provides an opportunity for institutions to run their academic programs more economically. In addition, many traditional schools are offering more on-line courses so that students who wish to study abroad for a term can still get required courses from their home campus as well as during the summer when these students return home.

All will agree that the experience of taking a course on-line versus in a classroom is different and both types should continue to be offered. I predict that the day will soon come when we will not distinguish courses by their teaching modality and employers and others will not ask whether the program was on-line or in person. On-line courses will continue to expand access to education to those without the time or money to attend a traditional on-the-ground class as well as to those who prefer this modality.