

Accredited Online Colleges on the Rise

The Internet is revolutionizing higher education: accredited online colleges are growing in size, traditional colleges are adopting online programs, and all trends indicate that distance learning is not only here to stay, but that it will make an unprecedented impact on the educational systems currently in place today. What kind of change will online college courses provoke in the paradigms of students, professors, and educational institutions in the coming years? Let's take a look.

Rising Number of Enrollment for Accredited Online Colleges

In 2010 enrollment for accredited online college courses rose by 10%, which far exceeds the less than one percent growth in the overall student enrollment in higher education institutions generally. In the fall term of 2010 alone, 6.1 million students took at least one course online, an increase of 560,000 students — or 9.2% — over the previous year. These students accounted for 31.3% of total student enrollment in postsecondary education for the term.

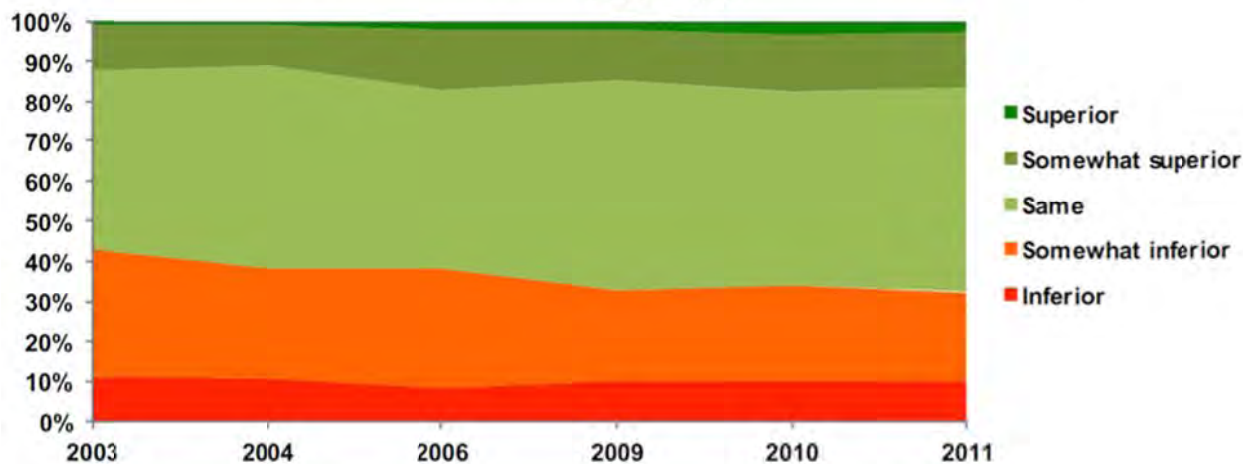
The proportion is even higher amongst older students. With an average U.S. unemployment rate of 9.64% for 2010, many working adults are returning to school for additional education to both increase job security and future career opportunities. As many of these individuals already have work and family commitments, the flexibility of online programs provides an opportunity not available through traditional college programs. Consequently, surveys indicate that 42% of students who are thirty or older are taking entire programs through distance education.

These numbers are continuing to grow. Experts predict that the number of students enrolling in online courses may reach 14 million by 2014 as more become available.

Attitudes Towards Online Learning

Online learning has become such a prominent topic in the academic community because there's a growing sentiment that the personalized learning environment offered by online courses may be more effective than the traditional classroom experience. Recent research conducted by the Babson Survey Research Group indicates that 67% of chief academic officers reported learning outcomes for virtual environments, compared with in-classroom experiences, were "the same," "somewhat superior," and "superior." This is a notable increase from the 57% reported in 2003.

LEARNING OUTCOMES IN ONLINE EDUCATION COMPARED TO FACE-TO-FACE: 2003 - 2011



Source: <http://www.onlinelearningsurvey.com/reports/goingthedistance.pdf>

Although an increasing proportion of chief academic officers believe that online learning is “as good as” face-to-face instruction, the adoption of online learning among faculty has been more mixed. According to research conducted by Babson Survey Research Group, “even institutions that have the most positive attitudes toward online learning, and have implemented the most comprehensive online programs, often report that not all their faculty fully accepts online instruction.”

Certain faculty members such as Dr. Clayton Christensen, professor at Harvard University, have been instrumental in educating others on the benefits of online learning. He advocates that the “rise of online learning carries with it an unprecedented opportunity to transform the schooling system into a student-centric one that can affordably customize for different student needs by allowing all students to learn at their appropriate pace and path, thereby allowing each student to realize his or her fullest potential.”

Further Reading:

[Going the Distance: Online Education in the United States, 2011](#) – A summary of the research conducted by Babson Survey Research Group on the state of online learning

[Online Learning Trends in Private-Sector Colleges and Universities](#) – Findings on surveys conducted at private sector higher education institutions by the Babson Survey Research Group

[The Digital Revolution and Higher Learning](#) – A report on college presidents’ and the general public’s assessments of the value of online college courses, based on findings from a pair of Pew Research Center surveys

[Contexts of Postsecondary Education](#) – The chapter on postsecondary education from *The Condition of Education 2011* released by the National Center for Education Statistics

Online Learning Offers Customization and Accessibility

Just how significant is personalization in education? Education scholar Benjamin Bloom conducted research in 1984 which demonstrated that students given one-on-one attention reliably performed two standard deviations better than their peers who stay in a regular classroom, the difference between an “average student” and one in the 98th percentile. However, in 1984, the idea of providing personal attention to each individual student was unthinkable

simply due to the staggering costs involved. But now with online learning, customizing education for every student is no longer beyond the scope of possibility.

Online learning will enable not only the pace, but also the delivery of the course to be tailored to each individual student in ways that traditional face-to-face education cannot accommodate for. Students have unique learning styles and interests, and increased customization can make the learning process more engaging and effective. One student may learn calculus derivatives faster by walking through numerous example problems; another may prefer to have it explained more visually; and still another student still might better grasp the concept if it is taught within the context of physics.

Christensen also emphasizes the significance of how customizing the context of the subjects being taught can break down the “departments that characterize higher education.” He expressed in an interview that “We graduate students with the belief that every field is a different one and the day after they graduate they realize oh my god, I can’t use any of these things independently. Online education gives us a clean slate so we can teach calculus in the context of chemistry, music in the context of history, and so on.”

Online learning has also made it possible for many non-traditional students to continue pursuing their education even as they juggle multiple priorities. As more working adults return to school to complete bachelor’s degrees or to obtain masters to advance their career or improve job security, there is an increasing need for courses that offer flexible scheduling. Rhona Peat, who is currently completing her MBA degree remotely, believes that distance learning “gives you the ability to fit studying around other things. I think that becomes much more important for those with families – being able to choose when to study rather than having to attend weekend and evening lectures is very useful.” While traditional MBA degrees may sometimes require students to leave their jobs and, in some situations, displace entire families to move closer to campus, distance learning has made it possible for individuals to pursue their degrees with minimal impact to their lifestyles.

Further Reading:

[Clayton Christensen: Why online education is ready for disruption, now.](#) – Interview with Dr. Clayton Christensen on how the Internet is changing the way the world learns.

[The Customization of Online Education in a Thirty-One Flavors World](#) – A study discussing three different online learning formats developed for different types of courses and students.

[Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning: A Meta-Analysis and Review of Online Learning Studies](#) – A study conducted by Center for Technology in Learning to compare the academic performance of students in online classes to those in face-to-face classes.

[A Custom Education for Every Child: The Promise of Online Learning and Education Savings Accounts](#) – An academic paper evaluating the benefits of online learning, focusing primarily on the Arizona school system as their example.

Online Learning is Reshaping Education

Online learning has affected not only postsecondary education, but has been breaking ground in K-12 learning as well. In 2009 more than 3 million students in primary and secondary education participated in some type of online learning. In 2010, 27 states offered statewide virtual schools that allow students to take a class online, and 24 states offered the option for students to attend the virtual school full-time. Using a hybrid system that combines the classroom with instructions provided by online education platforms, such as Khan Academy, some teachers have already begun adopting new approaches to education that have shown increased engagement and remarkable academic improvement in students by allowing individuals in the same class to learn and advance at different paces based on each individual’s needs.

But as online learning begins to take on a more significant role in student learning, what does that mean for teachers? Harvard Business School had in recent years stopped teaching accounting, and instead has their students take a course online taught by Professor Norman Nemrow from BYU. Professor Sebastian Thrun offers his “Introduction to Artificial Intelligence” course online free of charge, and MIT Professor Walter Lewin’s “Intro to Physics” course has been taken by over 5 million people. As instructions from the best and brightest in different fields become more readily available online, some educators are finding their role changing as they spend less time lecturing in front of the classroom and focusing instead on providing the detailed personalized help that only a live teacher can offer. Such a change, welcomed by some and resented by others, may indeed disrupt the teaching profession for all levels of education.

The adoption of online learning as a substantial part of a student’s learning experience can also inspire institutional changes. Phoenix University, whose online program has the largest enrollment of any university, spends approximately \$200 million each year on improving their teaching methodologies. Traditionally, improvement in teaching has been largely an individual responsibility placed on the faculty, who do so through systems of feedback and evaluation. If more face-to-face instruction is replaced by online lectures, the responsibility may fall on the institution to acquire and develop material and tools to provide the highest quality content and best educational platforms available. This type of change would undoubtedly entail modifications in an institution’s personnel, infrastructure, and spending.

Further Reading:

[Assessing Learning in Online Education: The Role of Technology in Improving Student Outcomes](#) – A paper published by the National Institute of Learning Outcomes Assessment, examining the role of technology in improving teaching and learning.

[How Online Innovators Are Disrupting Education](#) – A blog entry from the Harvard Business Review on the impact of online learning on education and relevant concerns.

[How Khan Academy Is Changing the Rules of Education](#) – An article on how one online learning academy is transforming classrooms.

[How Online Learning Is Revolutionizing K12 Education And Benefiting Students](#) – An academic paper defining online learning and outlining its benefits.

Increases in the Number of Accredited Online Programs

Presently, in addition to the new programs that are being introduced by accredited online colleges each year, an increasing number of well-established higher education institutions have also begun offering their own online programs.

Columbia University currently offers online programs through the Columbia Video Network (CVN) with Master of Science (MS) and Professional Degrees (PD) available for various engineering disciplines. The University of California, Berkeley, created its first online degree program this year. Students in 2012 will be able to earn a master’s degree in public health in two and a half years by doing 85% of their coursework online.

Furthermore, there are various other high-profile universities such as Harvard and Cornell that currently do not offer a complete online degree program, but do offer various courses and certificate programs online. However, online degrees from these schools may not be far off the horizon, as research indicates that 65.5% of higher education institutions are now incorporating online learning as a critical part of their long-term strategy. In the coming years, the impact of online learning on the present education system will grow as accredited online colleges and traditional universities continue to roll out more online programs to accommodate the rising numbers in online enrollment.

The Future of Online Colleges

And just how high will the number of online enrollment rise? In 2004, the number of undergraduate students enrolled in at least one distance learning course was 2.96 million, or roughly 15.5% of the total number of students enrolled in college courses. In 2008, that number rose to 4.28 million, roughly 20.4%. As of fall of 2010, there are now 6.14 million students enrolled, constituting 31.3% of the student body. If the number indeed rises to 14 million by 2014 as experts suggest, more than half of all college students will then be enrolled in at least one online class.

And while the question of whether or not virtual learning schools are suitable for primary and secondary school students, accredited online colleges have been gaining increasing acceptance by educators as well as employers. A 2010 survey conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management found that 87% of 449 randomly selected HR professionals viewed online degrees more favorably than they did five years ago, and 79% said that they had hired a job applicant with an online degree over the past year. In the present recession, as more professionals seek to further their education to improve job security and prospects, and as more prestigious higher education institutions begin offering degrees online, online learning will become an even more integral part of the worldwide education system.

Will online learning shift the present education system from the custodial, teacher-based format to one that is student-centric? The grand promise of online learning is that it will one day deliver to every student personalized content, tailored to each individual's learning style and contextualized to the individual's interests, at a pace determined by the individual's proficiency and according to the individual's availability. Online learning promises to make education more engaging, more accessible, and more effective, so that anyone can learn from anywhere at anytime and master the material better than if they were to attend a brick-and-mortar institution.

Whether such a grand promise can be delivered is surely a topic that will be laboriously tested and debated over the next few years. However, what is certain is that ever since the arrival of the Internet, more academic information continues to become more readily accessible to more people at a lower cost, and that pattern is not about to change.

More professors will offer their courses online. More education institutes will offer degrees online. Even while people debate over whether distance education is better or worse than traditional classroom education, more and more people are using the Internet to teach and to learn. For this reason, accredited online colleges and courses are here to stay. What is taught will inevitably become free (if it is not free already). How it will be taught will make all the difference.

Over the last 15 years, the Internet has revolutionized countless industries including retail, music, publishing, and communication. In a similar way, it will continue to revolutionize how we view education.

Additional Resources:

[More employers value online degrees](#) – An article describing the shift in employers' perceptions of online degrees over the recent years.

[The University of Wherever](#) – An article on Stanford professor Sebastian Thrun's experiment to offer his courses for free online, and the implication that such developments may have on top-rated college and universities.

[How Distance Education Has Changed Teaching and the Role of the Instructor](#) – An academic paper discussing the role of the instructor in an online environment

[The Future of Higher Education: How Technology Will Shape Learning](#) – A report from the Economist discussing the role of online education in today's classrooms