

# Trends in Online Education:

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While thinking about what to discuss in this my first article, I took what is the typical first step these days. I conducted a Google search. I intended to focus on nursing and health care education. I was certain I would find an interesting topic to explore and discuss and that would be that. Unfortunately, I didn't get that far. After typing in nursing education and clicking the search button, I was struck by the fact that 6 of the 10 sponsored links were for online nursing programs. I went a step further and search for "online learning nursing education". In just 0.42 seconds, our friends at Google returned to me a list of 5.4 million results. This made me wonder about online education and the impact it is having on higher education generally.



My research brought me to a publication of the Babson Survey Research Group and the Sloan Consortium, both of which are housed at Babson College in Massachusetts. This report titled *Staying the Course: Online Education in the United States*, utilizes survey research to gain some perspective about the "nature and extent of online education". Some of the questions they seek to answer include; How many students are learning online and what trends can be gleaned? Are there some disciplines that are better suited for this type of learning than others? Do economic conditions impact online learning? Has online learning become part of the long term strategic planning at institutions of higher education?

To try to answer these questions, the authors surveyed all active, degree-granting institutions of higher education in the United States that are open to the public. With an impressive response rate and trend data from the previous five consecutive years, the inferences in the report are quite strong.

The focus of the report is online courses, defined as "those courses where at least 80% of the content is delivered online" where there is little or no faculty interaction. The authors state that close to 4 million students took at least one online course in 2007, a two fold increase in just five years. Further, as expected based on the student numbers, online enrollments as a percentage of total enrollment increased at a similarly impressive rate jumping from 9.6% in Fall 2002, to 21.9% in the Fall of 2007. During this same period, enrollments in higher education as a whole grew by only 1.2 percent.

While expanded utilization is found in all levels of education, the overwhelming majority of online learning is being conducted at the associate degree and undergraduate degree level. This usage cuts across all disciplines, with business, liberal arts and health professions programs leading the way with a +30% penetration rate for online education. Factors noted that impact this rate include size of institution and program, faculty and administrative acceptance of the value and legitimacy of online education as well as current economic conditions. For many students the value of learning online lies with reduced access costs. Online education not only removes travel related costs associated with traditional classroom settings, but also, and probably more importantly removes the opportunity cost of additional education and training for working students.

Additional evidence of the growing importance of online education is the extent to which institutions have included these types of course offerings as part of their long term strategic planning. Nearly 60% of those surveyed indicate that online education is a critical component of their long term strategic plan. Schools have come to understand that purely online institutions have become competition for prospective students and that online offerings also allow for expanding the student market geographically.

At the end of the day, the findings of this report are not necessarily surprising, but provide evidence that confirms the important role of online education today. The authors have clearly made the case that enrollments have steadily increased; legitimacy and acceptance by faculty and higher education administrations is on the rise which in turn has lead to a more prominent position in the product mix for schools. While no one believes delivering courses online will completely replace the traditional classroom delivery any time soon, I think it is clear that delivering content online is an accepted tool to reduce barriers and increase access to educational opportunities.

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