



Wednesday, January 27, 2010

## Study: Online Education Continues Its Meteoric Growth

By *Jeff Greer*

Posted January 26, 2010

Online college education is expanding—rapidly. More than 4.6 million college students were taking at least one online course at the start of the 2008-2009 school year. That's more than 1 in 4 college students, and it's a 17 percent increase from 2007.

Turns out it's the economy, stupid.

Two major factors for the soaring numbers in the 2008-2009 school year are the sour economy and the possibility of an H1N1 flu virus outbreak, according to the seventh annual Sloan Survey of Online Learning report, titled "Learning on Demand: Online Education in the United States in 2009." But, the survey's authors say, there is a lot more work to be done, and there's huge potential for online education to expand, especially at larger schools.

[\[See our Online Education listings.\]](#)

"For the past several years, all of the growth—90-plus percent—is coming from existing traditional schools that are growing their current offerings," says Jeff Seaman, one of the study's authors and codirector of the Babson Survey Research Group at [Babson College](#). Seaman's coauthor, Elaine Allen, who is also a codirector of the Babson Survey Research Group, added that community colleges, for-profit schools, and master's programs have seen significant growth in online offerings.

With a higher demand for college-educated workers, colleges are more popular than ever. The higher-education population grew 1.2 percent between 2007 and 2009. And with public institutions dealing with dwindling budgets and laid-off workers trying to expand their skills, online education seems a natural, inexpensive fit. The study found that 50 percent of institutions with online education programs have seen their institutional budgets decrease, compared to 25 percent that have seen their budgets increase.

"What we hear now is that the issues that are related to [online education's challenges] have nothing to do with online itself," Seaman says. "Things like budget constraints—issues that apply to institutions as a whole."

The swine flu prompted many schools to develop contingency plans for pandemics on campus. The survey found that two thirds of schools have formal plans in place to deal with an outbreak. Substituting online courses for face-to-face classes is a component of 67 percent of those plans, the survey says. Allen says that only 2 percent of the schools surveyed had a disruption in classes caused by H1N1. She added, however, that such incidents as a recent outbreak of norovirus at Babson and the impact of Hurricane Katrina on Gulf Coast schools forced the utilization of contingency plans that involved online courses.

"When you have an online plan in place, classes go on as usual," Allen says.

Despite all the data that show significant growth and interest in online education, there are still some faculty members who balk at teaching on the Web. The study found that the acceptance of online ed by faculty has remained constant since the first survey was published in 2002. Fewer than one third of chief academic officers—meaning provosts, deans, and the like—believe their faculty accepts the value and legitimacy of online education, the report says.

However, a [study](#) published last year by the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities—Sloan Commission on Online Learning indicated that faculty might not be so opposed to online ed. The study found that one third of public university professors had taught online courses and that more than half had recommended that students take such courses. Schools like [Stanford University](#) and the [College of Charleston](#) have a major presence on websites such as YouTube EDU.

"The biggest challenge for institutions is that, when 1 student in 4 is taking classes online, you must step up and begin to think strategically about this," says Frank Mayadas, a special adviser for the project from the Alfred Sloan Foundation. "The survey shows that the idea hasn't quite sunk in. ... Not enough [institutions] have thought strategically [about online education]. ... Many have, but there's still a gap between the reality of online learning and the strategic thinking across the board."

*Searching for a college? Get our [complete rankings](#) of America's Best Colleges.*

**Tags:** [colleges](#) | [online education](#) | [economy](#) | [education](#)

Copyright © 2010 U.S.News & World Report LP All rights reserved.