

The Online Learning Boom

Tailoring college to the needs of working adults

By Gene I. Maeroff

WHAT OBSERVERS TEND TO OVERLOOK as online courses deepen their inroads at institutions of higher learning is that the content of, and audience for, these offerings remains largely specialized. Chances of signing up students for online learning are perhaps greatest in job-related fields in which courses tend to be more about training than about theory. It follows that students are found most readily among adults looking to upgrade or revamp their careers.

Requirements by states and professional organizations that people engage in continuing education help boost enrollments. The constituencies for the courses often include working men and women with positions that make it difficult for them to meet campus residency requirements and sometimes even to break away from work to attend courses. Thus, online courses have the appeal of giving students the chance, among other things, to overcome obstacles of time and place.

These students, in turn, are an attractive group for higher education. Unlike students of traditional age, they have money and are not as dependent on loans or grants. Anthony F. Digiovanni, formerly chief executive officer of the University of Phoenix Online, maintained that what gave his institution a kick start in e-learning was that the online component simply targeted the same audience that the university pursued in its campus-based courses: mid-career professionals.

Cornell University organized its for-profit arm, eCornell, along similar lines. It began by mounting courses for working professionals in human resources management, hospitality management and continuing medical education. These

online courses have been created with the help of Cornell's School of Industrial and Labor Relations and the School of Hotel Administration, along with the Hospital for Special Surgery, an affiliate of Cornell's Weill Medical College.

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all sorts seem to lend themselves to online instruction. The 16 institutions that make up the Wisconsin Technical College System, part of the statewide University of Wisconsin, joined forces in late 2001, for instance, to establish a collaborative online presence, etechcollege.com.

This venture represented a first step in lending coherence

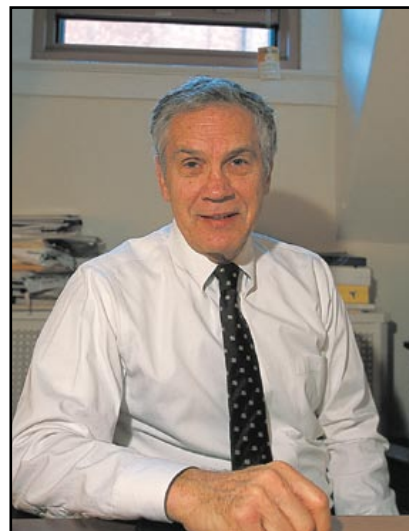
to what had been a collection of disparate online offerings. The 16 colleges continue to determine their individual fates in e-learning, but now, in addition to their separate home pages, they have benefit of a single portal at which potential students can find all of the system's online courses. "Our presidents expect us to coordinate this so eventually there aren't 16 versions of the same course," said Jeff Larson, who was charged with pulling together the project for the system. This is the beginning, some in the system hope, of higher standards and more quality control in the online courses.

Not scheduled to change is the orientation of the courses toward adults looking to change jobs, retrain, or earn certificates essential to getting and retaining their positions. For instance, there are certificates in clinical coding for specialists who analyze health records and assign diagnosis codes, for office workers who use Microsoft software, for wastewater operators, business managers, legal assistants and information management specialists. There are associate's degrees in microcomputer programming, emergency dispatch, and developing websites.

Policymakers sometimes regard education as the engine that drives economic development. Some people in Michigan had the novel notion of harnessing that engine to the Internet. It all began in the mid-1990s as an idea that appealed to the University of Michigan, Michigan State University and the Automotive Research Center. The goal was to use online courses to accelerate workforce development. Governor John Engler embraced the approach and helped persuade the Big Three automakers to commit themselves to buy \$5 million each of professional development from what was dubbed the Michigan Virtual Automotive College.

By 1998, the idea had snowballed into the creation of Michigan Virtual University (MVU), a private, nonprofit, market-driven entity that contracted for the delivery of programs and services by Michigan's colleges and universities and by private training providers. Michigan Virtual Automotive College was absorbed into MVU as part of the Michigan Manufacturing Training Network. In all, MVU by 2002 carried out three missions, all linked to its original aim of economic development—operating Michigan Virtual High School, providing online career guidance, and offering corporate learning services.

MVU was not authorized to grant degrees, which



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students earned through the educational institutions that offered the courses. The courses were not only for workers in manufacturing and information technology; hundreds of schoolteachers throughout the state took professional development courses online via MVU. A feature available to educators was a program to help them learn to develop their own online courses. MVU's online career guidance was used by employers and by individuals seeking jobs and internships, as well as by high school students trying to plan careers and choose colleges and universities.

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Michigan Virtual High School, like the online university, brokered courses for students whose brick-and-mortar high schools did not have such courses or whose regular schedules could not accommodate certain classroom courses.

Elsewhere, the emphasis on economic development by Kentucky Virtual University (KVU) provides another example of using online courses for nonprofessional education. In 2002, KVU directed the largest portion of its students to the institutions of the Kentucky Community and Technical

system. The virtual university itself offers no courses, instead facilitating enrollments and providing various support services to students who found their way into online programs through its auspices.

Both for-profit providers and traditional institutions of higher education have recognized that one of the best chances for early acceptance of online courses resides in enticing people who most need the courses for instrumental purposes. Some of the shrewdest, profit-oriented education entrepreneurs have, in the best tradition of commerce, coalesced around these career-oriented, professional-based courses tied most tightly to the needs of employers.

Not surprisingly, courses in the humanities and the social sciences are not featured in most online programs. Philosophy, literature and art history, for example, have a much smaller online following than management, finance and marketing. Working students, whether they attend classes in person or online, usually want courses that will advance them in the workplace, not in the marketplace of ideas.

In shunning traditional-age college students, the University of Phoenix fashioned itself as a place for adult learners. This focus has been the force behind the growth of the University of Phoenix Online. The university aimed a corporate training effort at Fortune 1,000 companies, promoting online courses in such fields as business management, international business, e-business, information technology, project management and marketing.

Phoenix operates on the basis that online students with full-time jobs who enroll in such programs want more education to advance their careers, not to learn Shakespeare or to study ancient Greek civilization. The institution figures that business travel and constraints on time enhance the attraction of online learning for adults who want to learn at hours and places convenient to them. Phoenix assumes

that such students do not want to study abstract theories, that they seek to learn theory only to the extent that they can wed knowledge to practice. Phoenix therefore hires mostly practitioners as instructors, people who are part of the work-a-day world and who teach on the side. Such a policy is undoubtedly cheaper, too, than employing a full-time traditional faculty.

Various colleges and universities have carefully structured approaches to appeal to this same student market. The University of Baltimore, an older institution with a traditional history, went online as a survival mechanism, when its former practices no longer paid dividends. The web was a life preserver for the University of Baltimore, an urban commuter institution where enrollments dwindled in the 1990s.

The university's first online program was a master of business administration degree, offered as a companion to a campus-based program accredited by the American Association of Collegiate Schools of Business. The numbers tell the story. In the fall of 1999, the total M.B.A. enrollment was 538, with 522 in the regular classroom-based program and 16 in the new online program. By the fall of 2001, enrollment in the campus M.B.A. program had fallen to 365 but the online M.B.A. program had grown to 141 students, producing a total M.B.A. enrollment of 506 students and stabilizing the program.

By going online, the University of Baltimore no longer had to rely on the willingness of students to commute to its urban locale. This change could be seen in the fact that by 2001, the online M.B.A. program drew 52 percent of its students from outside Maryland, while the on-campus program got only 27 percent of its students from outside the state. The experience at the University of Baltimore demonstrates how commuter institutions might use e-learning to change their enrollment profile without having to spend money to accommodate on-campus students.

Purveyors of online learning see elementary and secondary schoolteachers as one of their biggest potential markets. The numbers are huge. About one of every ten undergraduates prepares to teach, and public and private elementary and secondary schools employ some 3.5 million teachers. Not only do these positions turn over with regularity, but there are also shortages of candidates in some subject areas and in certain geographic locations.

The demand for post-baccalaureate professional development by educators already working in schools is inexhaustible. State regulations and collective bargaining contracts mandate that teachers engage in continuing education, so-called in-service learning.

Schools and colleges of education are pondering how

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to pitch online courses to this vast market. Leading teacher-training institutions could end up competing fiercely through e-learning for enrollments from across the country. The best-known institutions now have the opportunity to attach their well-known names, what the business world calls “branding,” to courses that they can offer in all parts of the United States and even abroad. Graduate schools of education at Harvard, Stanford, Berkeley,

Columbia University’s Teachers College and other prestigious institutions might eventually associate their names with widespread online continuing education for teachers.

For-profit providers recognized such possibilities long before the traditional institutions, and they now compete with them for the enrollments of such students. A white paper prepared for the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) in 2001 estimated that more than 650 for-profit degree-granting institutions, and more than 2,000 virtual companies and universities, offered education courses.

Mounting interest among teacher educators looking to assure places for their institutions in the evolving market for professional development and graduate study prompted AACTE to hold a special, day-long institute, “Exploring the Education Industry,” prior to its annual meeting in 2002. Teacher educators from more than 70 institutions went to New York City the day before the annual sessions to attend this institute. It was a program of the sort that would have been unthinkable just a few years earlier, when business was anathema to educators, who still behaved as if they owned exclusive rights to the future of teacher education. “The old model may be ending,” said Allen Glenn of the University of Washington in his opening remarks. “We’re now in a neutral zone, and we’re not sure where it’s going.”

Online learning very likely could subsist almost entirely on a diet of occupationally related courses. Accountants, teachers, health personnel, business and commercial workers, computer specialists—both in undergraduate and continuing education—could provide a wealth of ready and willing cyber learners. Jack M. Wilson, chief executive officer of UmassOnline, a part of the University of Massachusetts, went so far in 2002 as to predict in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that online programs will displace most professional graduate programs in business, computer science, engineering, nursing and education.

Critics of cyber education say it is just as well that the humanities and the liberal arts have not found succor in e-learning. They regard the web as a wrong and possibly perverted place to study Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, the Platonic dialogues, the Federalist Papers or the technique

of Rembrandt. Students can pursue such subjects, in their opinion, only in person.

Such a perfunctory dismissal of e-learning smacks of snobbery. Students in classrooms across the country flock to majors in business, communications, healthcare services and other applied fields that they think will lead to the surest employment. Colleges and universities often sustain enrollments in the liberal arts only by compelling students to take these courses to satisfy degree requirements.

It remains to be seen just how extensive online learning will become. In some ways, it amounts to a stripped-down version of education, devoid of some of the basic amenities that Americans take for granted as part of colleges and universities. Moreover, online courses are still regarded with suspicion, generally lacking the respectability of classroom-based courses. But the growth spurt of job-related online learning demonstrates the imperative for traditional institutions to respond to the demand by working adults for education more closely tailored to their needs. ♦

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