

Mon, Nov 17, 2008

Study: Online enrollment jumps 13 percent

Higher-education officials see online courses blossom as economy tumbles

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eSchool News

<http://www.eschoolnews.com/news/top-news/index.cfm?i=56046>

A new study shows that online education is gaining traction.

Enrollment in online college courses in the United States outpaced overall growth in higher education last year, and officials predict a sustained increase in online enrollment as the economy slumps and good jobs become scarcer, according to report published this month.

"Staying the Course: Online Education in the United States, 2008," published by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, says 22 percent of American college students took at least one web-based class in the fall 2007 semester, or 3.94 million students. That marked an increase of 12.9 percent from the fall 2006 semester. During the same period, overall higher-education enrollment increased by only 1.2 percent, according to the report, which surveyed officials from more than 2,500 colleges and universities.

The jump in online enrollment from 2006 to 2007 is just part of a steady increase in web-based classes this decade. In fall 2002—the Sloan Foundation report's first year—1.6 million students were taking at least one online class, meaning 9 percent of college students were taking online classes. That number eclipsed 2 million in 2004 and topped 3 million in 2005.

Jeff Seaman, co-author of the Sloan report, said some in higher education have expected the increase in online enrollment to level off in recent years, but students' interest in web-based learning has yet to peak.

"Every year, we think it will level out, and it hasn't done so quite yet," Seaman said. "At some point, the demand is going to be met and [enrollment numbers] will meet some sort of steady state."

Suspicion of online college degrees remains, Seaman said, but almost exclusively at institutions that have not developed an online program. Seaman said that in the past six years, online education has grown from a curiosity to an accepted way to earn a college degree.

"Six years ago, the questions were, 'What is this stuff?' And then, it was, '[Online learning] can't be

any good, can it?' ... Now the most common question is, 'How do I tell people how to find the right online program?'" he said. "The perception has changed considerably."

College and university decision makers say they expect increased overall enrollment as financial markets continue to struggle. People who are underemployed or unemployed often look to bolster their resumes with a degree that will make them more attractive to employers when the country breaks from its economic malaise, Seaman said.

"People are finding that this is the time I can get an education to get the next best job," he said.

"People want to be in a good position when the economy picks up again."

Because online classes are more convenient than traditional courses, which often require adult learners to commute, Seaman said officials are expecting web-based course enrollment to continue to outpace the overall numbers.

The annual report also examined what concentrations and majors are affected the most by online education. Engineering is the only discipline where the proportion of online students dips dramatically, according to the report. Associate's degree institutions have a "wide lead" in online penetration in the fields of psychology, liberal arts, and social sciences.

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