



English 209 Final Research Paper

# The Rise of Online Education: Exploring the Phenomenon

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## Summary

A relatively new chapter in the history of education, online learning has become an integral part of contemporary American higher education. An increasing number of institutions are incorporating online courses and degrees into their curricula. As a whole, online programs give parent institutions a competitive edge in an endless sea of colleges and universities. Web-based learning offers benefits which traditional learning does not, including flexibility, accessibility, and increased interaction with instructors and fellow students.

Although the University of Hawai'i system currently offers some online courses and other distance learning opportunities, it does not provide students with the option to earn a degree entirely online. The UH system should strive to create degree programs that can be learned completely online. This would allow the University to cater to a wider student base, making it more attractive to prospective students. Furthermore, UH Hilo should create more online courses to give its students a wider range of options.

## Introduction

### *What Is Online Learning?*

The Sloan Consortium, an organization that reports annually on the condition of online learning in the United States, published its sixth yearly report in November 2008. This study divides institutional course delivery into four types: traditional, web-facilitated, blended or hybrid, and online.

➤ *Traditional (face-to-face)*. In traditional courses, content is delivered verbally or in writing. No course content is administered online.

➤ *Web-facilitated*. These courses are delivered primarily face-to-face, but instructors may use

Internet-based technology for enhancement. For example, web-facilitated courses may incorporate the posting of assignments and syllabi on web pages. A course is considered to be web-facilitated if one to 29 percent of its content is delivered online.

➤ *Blended (hybrid)*. Blended courses combine traditional and online delivery methods. If 30 to 79 percent of course content is delivered through the web, the course is said to be blended.

➤ *Online*. In these courses, most or all of the content (80 percent or more) is administered through the Internet. These courses usually do not involve face-to-face meetings (*Allen and Seaman*).

### *History of Online Education*

Online learning first emerged over a decade ago in the form of corporate training courses. In the mid-1990s, software developers created programs such as WebCT, Mallard, and Pioneer to make course information more accessible to students. However, the technology of the time proved insufficient and often hampered instructional efforts. As technology improved, higher learning institutions began to feature web-based learning in their curricula, eventually developing complete online courses and degree programs (*AIU*). Fifteen percent of the colleges and universities now offering online learning launched their first Internet-based courses before 1999. One in five institutions offering online learning began doing so this past year (*Allen and Seaman*).

### *Online Learning is on the Rise*

Most higher education institutions have already integrated online learning into their curricula. Statistics from 2003 showed that over 75 percent of colleges and universities offered online learning. Recent studies indicate that this number has increased to roughly 86 percent (*CBS News*). Many have developed comprehensive degree programs that can be earned entirely online. During the fall 2007 term, nearly four million students were enrolled in at least one online course, a substantial increase from the previous year's enrollment. These students account for over 20 percent of the total student population in the United States. Experts predict that the online student population will continue to grow for at least another year (*Allen and Seaman*).

## Research Methods

Because of the contemporary nature of the subject, much of my sources were web-based. I explored the websites of a few thriving online campuses, seeking to learn about their background, degree programs and courses, and student enrollment. Finally, I conducted an e-mail interview with Dr. April Komenaka-Scazzola, the Interim Dean of UH Hilo's College of Continuing Education and Community Service.

## Results

### *The Increasing Prevalence of Online Education*

The online student population has grown exponentially in the past few years. The growth rate of national online enrollment surpasses that of total student enrollment. The most recent study conducted by The Sloan Consortium shows that more than 3.9 million students were enrolled in one or more online courses during the fall 2007 term. This represents a 12 percent increase from the previous year's enrollment. By comparison, the growth rate of the nation's total student population is a mere 1.2 percent. Online students constitute 21.9 percent of total student enrollment in the United States (*Allen and Seaman*).

More than 80 percent of online students are enrolled at the undergraduate level, while 14 percent are in graduate programs. The remainder of the online student population consists of students enrolled in other types of for-credit courses. Studies show that an institution's relative size is, as a whole, directly related to the number of online students it accommodates. Thus, students enrolled at associate's institutions account for over one-half of the total online population, a phenomenon that has remained fairly consistent for the past several years (*Allen and Seaman*).

### *What Makes Online Education Attractive?*

➤ *An economy in recession.* Economic recession often leads to an increase in student enrollment. According to AOL consultant and CBS *Early Show* contributor Regina Lewis, the diminishing economy is one of the main reasons behind the increasing popularity of online education. College graduates generally earn more than those without a degree, and unemployment rates are higher for the latter group. Because "education clearly pays," the diminished job market causes people to advance their education in the hope that they'll be able to acquire higher-paying jobs when they re-enter the job market (*CBS News*).

Academic leaders believe that the economy's current state will lead to an increase in overall student enrollment. Furthermore, they predict that specific aspects of the receding economy will result in a

greater demand for online learning. Many experts agree that the rising cost of fuel will prompt students to select online courses over traditional ones (*Allen and Seaman*).

➤ *Flexibility.* Web-based learning allows students to "attend" courses at their convenience. They can participate in courses at anytime and from any location with Internet access. Thus, parents can tend to their children, working students can pursue their education without sacrificing their incomes, and frequent travelers can participate in courses from any location in the world with web access. Moreover, students can enroll in courses offered by institutions in other countries (*Coleman*).

➤ *Availability and accessibility.* Online learning is now more widely available than ever. Approximately 86 percent of colleges and universities currently offer online learning in one form or another (*CBS News*). Furthermore, online students have access to course materials 24 hours a day, seven days a week, which allows them to revisit lectures and discussions as often as they prefer (*Coleman*). Because online courses are so widely available and so easily accessible, an increasing number of students are hopping onto the online education bandwagon.

➤ *Increased student-student and student-instructor interaction.* Most students find online participation less intimidating than in-the-classroom participation. "Anonymity provides students [with] a level playing field undisturbed by bias caused by seating arrangement, gender, race, [or] age," writes Stephanie Coleman, a World Wide Learn contributing writer. She adds, "this increases student interaction and the diversity of opinion, because everyone gets a say, not just the most talkative" (*Coleman*).

Dr. April Komenaka-Scazzola, Interim Dean of UH Hilo's College of Continuing Education and Community Service, agrees that the online environment facilitates student interaction. She says, "[students] enjoy the online written discussions—students who are shy about talking in class feel comfortable expressing themselves on the written discussion boards, which they can contribute to 24/7 at their convenience" (*Komenaka-Scazzola*).

Likewise, students are more willing to interact with their instructors in an online setting. Many students prefer online learning because they are more inclined to communicate with instructors through the Internet rather than in person (*UNC*).

➤ *Quality.* As a whole, online degrees are held in the same regard as traditional degrees. "As long as the college or university is known and respected, the degree is regarded in the same light, whether

completed online or in the classroom,” says *Early Show* contributor Lewis. Studies show that the achievements of traditional learners and distance learners are comparable, as both show similar test and course scores (*CBS News*). Many students feel that online courses are more academically challenging than traditional ones, and a great percentage of employers and academic leaders seem to agree. In fact, roughly 60 percent of employers consider online learning to be either equal to or superior to on-campus learning, while 62 percent of academic leaders feel that online instruction is of equal or higher quality than traditional instruction (*UMass*).

### *Comparing a Few Successful Online Campuses*

Many thriving online colleges and universities have emerged in recent years. Exploring the websites of a few of these institutions provided me with insight as to what makes an online campus successful. The online institutions I researched include the University of Phoenix, a pioneer in the field of online education which has become especially well-known because of its advertising efforts; the Oregon State University Extended Campus, the distance learning division of the prominent Willamette-Valley based research university; and the Pennsylvania State University World Campus, the newest of Penn State’s 25 campuses.

➤ *University of Phoenix.* Founded in 1976, the University of Phoenix is comprised of nearly 200 locations, making it the largest private higher learning institution in North America. Designed to “[serve] the unrecognized needs of working students,” the University provides students with the option of earning their degree either online or in person. Its current online offerings include 18 associate’s degrees, 34 bachelor’s degrees, 38 graduate degrees, and 9 doctorate degrees (*UP*).

The University of Phoenix is regionally accredited by the Higher Learning Commission and is a designated constituent of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. A number of its degree programs are accredited by organizations such as the Association of Collegiate Business Schools and Programs, the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education, and the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (*UP*).

➤ *Oregon State University Extended Campus.* With regional accreditation from the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, Oregon State University has become one of the nation’s most prominent research institutions. Through its online campus, termed the OSU Extended Campus, it offers

undergraduate degrees in Environmental Sciences, General Agriculture, Liberal Studies, and Natural Resources. Furthermore, the Extended Campus offers 11 minors in areas such as psychology, anthropology, business and entrepreneurship, and chemistry. Extended Campus students may also enroll in graduate degree programs, which encompass both web-based and off-campus learning, or workforce and noncredit courses (*OSU*).

Students can choose from more than 400 online courses in roughly 60 subject areas. All Extended Campus courses follow the same quarter schedule as campus-based courses, and all are taught by on-campus faculty. Furthermore, all courses—both online and campus-based—involve comparable reading, research, and test requirements. There is no difference between diplomas received by Extended Campus graduates and those received by on-campus graduates (*OSU*).

The OSU Extended Campus is entirely self-sustaining; all costs are covered by the tuition and fees paid by students. For this reason, E-Campus students pay a higher tuition than campus-based students. However, tuition rates are the same for resident, non-resident, and international students. Enrollment has shown a steady increase for the past several years; in the 2007-2008 school year, a school record of 131 students graduated from the growing online campus (*OSU*).

➤ *Pennsylvania State University World Campus.* Pennsylvania State University established its 25th campus, the web-based World Campus, in 1998. The Penn State World Campus has since developed into a thriving virtual environment and now offers distance learning opportunities to students all over the world. Each of the fifty United States is represented among the student population. In addition, World Campus students can be found in 55 countries on 6 different continents (*Penn State*).

The most current statistics featured on the World Campus website indicate that there are nearly 7,500 students enrolled, a 19 percent increase from the previous school year. World Campus offers 16 undergraduate certificates, 15 undergraduate degrees, 11 graduate degrees, and 17 graduate certificates. Students may choose from more than 500 courses in 60 programs of study (*Penn State*).

Courses are taught by campus-based faculty, and the degree of quality and academic challenge are the same for both online and on-campus courses. Pennsylvania State University President Graham B. Spanier says that you, as a World Campus student, “will have an opportunity to do homework with

others in your class, to join discussions led by a faculty member, to delve into the resources of one of the nation's top research universities—all at your fingertips in your home or office" (*Penn State*).

### Conclusions and Recommendations

Online learning has become irreversibly integrated into modern higher education. As colleges and universities constantly seek ways to gain ground in the higher learning frontier, it is likely that Internet-based education will only continue to expand in depth and breadth. Institutions offering online instruction have a competitive edge over comparable institutions lacking online curricula; thus, an increasing number of colleges and universities will seek to incorporate online degree programs into their school's educational offerings. Schools that have already established successful web-based degree programs, such as the University of Phoenix, Oregon State University, and Pennsylvania State University, are ahead of the pack.

The University of Hawai'i at Hilo is in a stage of relative infancy when it comes to online education. "UH Hilo is behind other campuses in the system, including most community colleges, in the number and variety of distance learning courses and distance learning programs [it offers]," says Komenaka-Scazzola. A perusal of the University of Hawai'i's distance learning website, which provides a complete listing of distance learning courses offered through all schools in the system, confirms this statement. The system as a whole offers a wide array of online courses, but those administered through UH Hilo are relatively limited. Thus, UH Hilo should create more web-based courses to cater to a larger student base. Komenaka-Scazzola agrees, hoping that online instruction will be further incorporated into the school's curricula. "The University should be investing more resources in reaching out to citizens across the state: we have excellent faculty and

programs that we can contribute to the UH system-wide effort to improve access to education for the state," she comments (*Komenaka-Scazzola*).

Although the University of Hawai'i system offers online courses and other distance learning opportunities, it does not provide students with the option to earn a degree entirely online. This proves problematic for degree-seeking students who require flexible school schedules, like those who are employed or those who have children. The University system should expand its curricula to accommodate these students. Creating online degree programs would be the perfect solution, allowing students to earn their degrees on their own schedules.

Furthermore, the student response to online instruction has been encouraging. Komenaka-Scazzola reports that "classes always fill, and student comments on the discussion board and in emails are extremely positive. Students like being able to access materials, including lectures, 24/7 and to get back their essays promptly online and not having to drive to school, find parking, [or] leave their kids at home. There is a high demand for online courses...many students like the online format and find it a good way to learn" (*Komenaka-Scazzola*).

The cost of online expansion would be relatively low compared to that of physical expansion, and this cost would be offset by the tuition and fees that online students would pay. Oregon State University's Extended Campus is completely self-financing, which proves that tuition and fee revenue can adequately cover any incurred costs. Creating online degree programs might even increase the University's funds over time, as more students would equal more revenue. As a whole, establishing Internet-based degree programs would benefit the University of Hawai'i in the long run, making it a more modern, prominent, and well-rounded institution.

### WORKS CITED

Allen, I. Elaine, and Jeff Seaman. *Staying the Course: Online Education in the United States*, 2008. The Sloan Consortium. Needham: Sloan-C, 2008. 20 Nov. 2008.  
[http://www.sloanc.org/publications/survey/pdf/staying\\_the\\_course.pdf](http://www.sloanc.org/publications/survey/pdf/staying_the_course.pdf)

The Sloan Consortium, an institution whose main focus is the assimilation of online education into higher learning systems, conducts a yearly study on the condition of online education in the United States. This publication features the results of the group's sixth annual study, which was performed in collaboration with the Babson Survey Research group and The College Board.

American InterContinental University (AIU). "History of Online Education." 2008. 18 Nov. 2008. <http://www.aiuonline.edu/online-education/online-education-history.aspx>

Established in 1970, American InterContinental University is a higher learning institution offering both traditional and online education. Accredited by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, AIU offers associate's, bachelor's, and master's degrees. The institution's website features comprehensive information about its background, degree programs, admissions, tuition and financial aid, and resources.

CBS News. "Earning a Degree Online." 27 Aug. 2003. 18 Nov. 2008. <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/08/26/earlyshow/contributors/reginalewis/main570268.shtml>

In 2003, AOL consultant Regina Lewis visited CBS' *Early Show* to discuss the increasing popularity of online education, as well as the benefits that are associated with web-based learning. This article, accessed through the CBS News website, provides the highlights of her televised discussion.

Coleman, Stephanie. "Why Do Students Like Online Learning?" World Wide Learn. 18 Nov. 2008. <http://www.worldwidelearn.com/education-articles/benefits-of-online-learning.htm>

World Wide Learn is an online educational directory, allowing the individuals who access it to search for the online degree programs and schools that best fit their goals and needs. Users can search the directory by school, degree type, or program subject.

Komenaka-Scazzola, April. "Re: Research Paper for Ms. Damas' ENG 209 Class." E-mail to L. Kubo. 24 Nov. 2008.

Dr. Komenaka-Scazzola, the Interim Dean of UH Hilo's College of Continuing Education and Community Service, is familiar with the University's condition and undertakings. This e-mail is her informed response to several questions regarding UH Hilo's online curricula and its goals and plans for furthering its online course offerings.

Oregon State University (OSU). OSU Extended Campus. 17 Nov. 2008. <http://ecampus.oregonstate.edu/>

Oregon State University's Extended Campus is the University's virtual campus. This website serves as the hub of all student activity, providing information about the school's background, online degree programs, admissions, and course schedule. Furthermore, this website provides links to numerous resources for Extended Campus students and faculty.

Pennsylvania State University (Penn State). Penn State Online. 17 Nov. 2008. <http://www.worldcampus.psu.edu/>

Pennsylvania State University delivers online courses through its virtual World Campus. This website allows current and prospective students to explore its degree offerings and course catalog. It also provides extensive information about the World Campus and features links to student services and resources.

University of Massachusetts (UMass). "Online Learning." 2008. 18 Nov. 2008. <http://www.umassonline.net/OnlineLearning.html>

The University of Massachusetts, which was founded in 1863, features several campuses as well as online degree programs. UMassOnline provides information about the University's web-based degree programs and admissions, as well as information about the benefits and prevalence of online education.

University of North Carolina (UNC). "How Are On-Campus Education and Online Education Different?" 2007. 18 Nov. 2008. <http://online.northcarolina.edu/document.php?id=47>

The University of North Carolina offers a wide array of online programs and courses at the associate's, bachelor's, and master's levels of study. Its website features information about its 16 campuses, as well as a complete list of degree programs and courses.

University of Phoenix (UP). University of Phoenix: Thinking Ahead. 2008. 26 Nov. 2008. <http://www.phoenix.edu/>

The largest private higher education institution in North America, the University of Phoenix has become one of the most well-known names in the field of online education. It is now comprised of nearly 200 locations and offers degree programs, both in-person and online, at all levels of study. Its website provides a complete listing of its degrees and locations, as well as information about the University's background.