

## Colleges Debate the Wisdom of Having On-Campus Students Enroll in On-Line Classes: Mulling the surprising popularity of distance education for the not-so-distant

By LISA GUERNSEY DENVER

When the University of Colorado at Denver dove into distance education two years ago, officials expected to tap into a new market: a reportedly vast population of time-strapped adult learners who live too far away to come to the campus but would pay good money to get an education on line. It hasn't worked out that way.

What university administrators here found instead was that a surprisingly large proportion of students who were already enrolled in regular classes were eager to ease their schedules by taking courses on line. The number of such students has been growing every semester: This spring, the distance-education program enrolled a total of 609 students, of whom more than 500 are also taking regular courses in the campus's classrooms. 'We met a need'

"Obviously, we met a need," says Marvin D. Loflin, dean of the college of liberal arts and sciences on the Denver campus. The phenomenon isn't unique to Denver's "CU Online" program. Other universities, particularly those with large populations of commuter students, are seeing the same thing. In Oklahoma, Rogers University at Claremore now offers 66 distance-education courses, and two-thirds of students enrolled in them are taking courses on campus, too. In the State University of New York's on-line program, SUNY Learning Network, as many as 80 per cent of the registrants are full-or part-time students on a SUNY campus. At Arizona State University, which has offered distance education through correspondence courses, television programs, or other media since 1935, only 3 per cent of distance-education students live in another state.

Some institutions that offer on-line courses are finding that students are not only local but also younger than expected. At Seton Hall University, which has just started to experiment with Internet-based courses, officials say 30 to 40 per cent of those who have enrolled in the courses appear to be traditional-age students -- in their teens or early 20s -- who live on or near the campus.

Why would people elect to take courses via videotape or over the Internet when classrooms are just a few minutes away? The overwhelming reason -- cited by students around the United States and Canada -- is convenience. On-line courses appear to be especially popular because they generally let students log in at any time of the day or night to send e-mail messages, add their thoughts to continuing discussions, take quizzes, or read a professor's lecture notes.

Some colleges are now including distance courses in their regular course catalogues, offering them at no extra cost to full-and part-time students. Supporters of such a move argue that if on-campus students didn't have the option of taking on-line courses, many might never finish their degrees. "As universities put so many resources into on-line education, are we going to take away from our efforts in the traditional classroom?" But giving students such options raises thorny issues: Academic departments are trying to figure out how to balance teaching loads for professors who teach on line and in class. Provosts and department chairmen face decisions about how to pay for both on-line and on-campus education at the same time.

Meanwhile, critics say students who choose on-line courses over in-person interaction aren't getting the education they're paying for. Some question whether universities should be in the on-line-education business in the first place.

### Managing time

The appeal of the distance-education courses to local students doesn't surprise Lori Wallace, a senior instructional designer at the University of Manitoba, who has tracked the demographics of distance-education students in Canada for more than a decade. At her institution, she found three years ago that 65 per cent of distance-education students were 26 years old or younger, and that 66 per cent were taking concurrent courses on the campus.

Back in 1984, only 30 per cent of distance learners fit those profiles. And Ms. Wallace suspects that more-recent data, which she is now collecting, will mirror her 1995 statistics. She will present the latest figures next month in an on-line forum sponsored by the Canadian Association for Distance Education.

That experience has led Ms. Thompson to "step back" and evaluate how she taught the on-line course, she says. She has a \$25,000 grant from Seton Hall to develop more on-line courses, and she is excited about developing an on-line master's-degree program in counseling preparation. But she worries about the implications of on-campus students' electing to take distance-education courses.

"What happens to traditional teaching? As universities put so many resources into on-line education, are we going to take away from our efforts in the traditional classroom? That's troubling."

She is hardly alone in asking such questions, which are coming up more and more often in deans' offices and departmental conference rooms. Is on-line education starting to compete with teaching in classrooms? Should it be allowed to? Some proponents of Internet-based courses, including the developers of the new Western Governors University and other "virtual" institutions, have argued that distance-education programs aren't aimed at colleges' traditional market of young people, but rather are meant to serve disciplined adult learners.

But what if the two markets aren't so distinct?

At SUNY, for example, 80 per cent of all students are also holding down jobs. The so-called traditional student is becoming rarer, says Michael Ameigh, a communications professor on the Oswego campus, who teaches on line. "That has implications for our entire campus."

So far, say distance-education coordinators at Arizona State, Washington State, and SUNY, professors in departments that offer on-line courses have not had to choose between teaching on line or teaching in a classroom. Those who offer to teach via the Internet say they do so because they want to -- and many of them receive paid leave or stipends to develop the courses.

But some officials are looking ahead to a time when departments will be facing tough decisions. To offer students on-line courses without jeopardizing in-person courses, departments are likely to need more faculty members, because professors who teach on line point out that distance education is more time-consuming than traditional teaching. Finding the money

At Rogers University at Claremore, the assistant provost, David Schramme is already planning to ask the Oklahoma Board of Regents for more money so that Rogers can offer more on-line courses without cutting back on classroom sessions. And what if he doesn't get the funds? "I don't know," he says, sighing. "The problem is, I think that our on-campus programs are important as well."

Here at Denver, according to John Bernhard, vice-chancellor for administration and finance, the university will charge students extra for on-line courses next fall, in an effort to recoup some of the costs of technical support, course development, and instructors' salaries. And "CU Online" coordinators say they are still planning to advertise aggressively to truly distant learners, in hopes of bringing in more tuition money. Dean Loflin, of the liberal-arts college here, is thinking about hiring what he refers to as "teaching associates" -- perhaps Ph.D.-holding instructors - - to help professors teach large numbers of on-line students. He also envisions "capitalizing on the power of computers to let professors have more time teaching." Computers, he says, might generate automatic answers to students' most common questions, so that professors don't have to write the same e-mail messages every semester.

"I'm prepared to make over the whole infrastructure of higher education" to offer students both options, Mr. Loflin says, adding that whatever upheaval results will be worth it. "We're awash in this stuff. I don't think an urban campus in this day and age can say, 'We're not going to do it.'"

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**Riverside Community College District**

**MEMORANDUM**

March 31, 1998

To: Salvatore Rotella, President RCC  
From: Don Perrin, Dean, Learning Technologies  
Subject: **Interim Report – Connectivity between RCC Campuses**

The telecommunications area continues very volatile and will be in flux for some time. I have pursued several active leads for wide-band telecommunication connections for fax, phone, data, video and Internet. I believe we have sufficient information to proceed with Charter Cable and TCI. I am seeking more data on market prices and partnerships to support these negotiations. Also, I am also looking at a combination plan that utilizes a number of public and private organizations, some as partners, and some as vendors.

There are five intertwined issues:

- A. Broad band connectivity between campuses (Intranet)
- B. Video connections between campuses (one-way and two-way)
- C. Single head-end to all cable companies for telecourses
- D. Broad band connectivity to external resources (Internet)
- E. Cost/benefits of telephone companies vs. cable companies

The networks installed at the Norco and Moreno Valley campuses will support A, B and C when a corresponding network is installed on the City Campus. Items D and E can make a substantial difference to overall cost and quality of service.

**A. Broad Band Connectivity between Campuses (Intranet)**

This means having enough capacity to support all telecommunication needs – phone, fax; and data; library services, online courses and Internet; telecourses, video from satellite and cable; videos from tape library, and two-way video conferencing.

Within six months RCC must to double the capacity of the telecommunication link between campuses to meet the Internet/Intranet requirements. David Bell has included a DS3 connection in his budget for 1998-99 to accomplish this. The bonus is that the new connection will also support video. The networks at Norco and Moreno Valley and the proposed network for the City Campus are equipped to handle phone, data and video. This will produce a powerful Intranet that combines all telecommunication services.

**B. Video connection between campuses**

At this time the only video connection is for two-way interactive video. This requires expensive ISDN lines. There is sufficient capacity in the DS3 connection to handle two-way video and several one-way video channels in addition to the added Intranet/Internet load.

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