The Current State of e-Learning in Higher Education in the U.S.: An Observational Study*

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Abstract

If you visit any college campus in the U.S., you will find computers are everywhere. They are in every library, classroom, office and dorm room. Most college campuses have been wired for the last 10 years or more and many now have wireless connections in certain designated areas on campus. The U.S. has always been at the forefront of developing and implementing new technologies.   This paper focuses on how e-Learning is progressing at three institutions of higher learning in a small community in Illinois and compares them to national trends in online learning.

Introduction: What is e-Learning?

In broad terms, e-Learning refers to anything that is delivered, enabled or mediated by electronic technology for the explicit purpose of learning. This includes online/distance learning, web-based learning and computer based training (face-to-face), and blended/hybrid learning (face-to-face and

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online).

Advantages and Disadvantages of e-Learning

As many instructors and institutions race to create e-Learning pro-
grams and courses, there is a need to be aware of what the possibilities and
limitations of online teaching and learning are. While technology will
never completely eliminate the need for face-to-face instruction, it is impor-
tant to broaden our view of education to accommodate student needs and to
see how we can, where possible, bring learning and teaching out of the
confines of the classroom.

After doing a review of the literature on e-Learning and drawing from
my own experiences both as a teacher of blended/hybrid courses and as a
learner in online courses, I have made a list of what I consider to be more
of the common advantages and disadvantages of e-Learning.

Advantages of e-Learning:
- Convenience and flexibility. Students can study at their own pace
  whenever they want and wherever they want. Course work can be
  scheduled around one's personal (and professional) life.
- Travel time and expenses are eliminated.   There is no need to drive to
  a campus or classroom.
- Accommodates different learning styles through a variety of activities
  and through the use of interactive media, such as audio and video.
- Individualized instruction and support is available through assessment
  and student/teacher interaction online via e-mail, message boards or
  chat.
- Allows for collaborative learning which helps students feel less isolated.

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- Provides timely feedback from the instructor.
- Allows teacher to easily track student involvement and progress.
- Course content can be easily updated by the instructor.

Disadvantages of e-Learning:
- Up-front costs. This could be for both learner and institution. For a learner these costs are the price of a computer and Internet connection. For the institution it is a budgeting issue.
- Lack of self-discipline. This is where the advantage for setting one's own pace may be a disadvantage for some people. Those with time management problems and procrastinators will have problems with online education.
- Technology issues. Sometimes the technology just doesn't work when you want it to. Slow Internet connections and older computers can make for a very negative online experience.
- Technology attitudes. Despite the fact that computers and the Internet have been around for quite awhile and have become more affordable with each passing year, many people still experience technophobia. This is not due to generational differences. Technophobia affects people in all age groups and genders.
- A hands-on course or lab work is difficult to simulate online.
- Isolation and lack of social interaction. This all depends, of course, on how the course is set up. If it includes group work and perhaps asynchronous chats or video conferencing, then there would be some interaction among students and between students and the instructor.
- Asynchronous communication is difficult or impossible because of time differences. This is only true with courses that are open to anyone, anywhere. I have experienced this myself in a few online courses

where I was the only participant in Asia and everyone else was in Europe.

The National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC), in cooperation with the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation (NASULGC-Sloan National Commission on Online Learning study), conducted a survey of presidents and chancellors to better understand their views and experiences relative to online learning. They found that 66.7 percent of the respondents said that online education was critical to the long-term strategy of their institution. More specifically, respondents linked online learning to student access and recruitment. "Increasing student access" was listed as the number one priority by 71.4 percent of respondents, followed by 61.8 percent that linked it to "growing professional and continuing education," and finally 57.1 percent that felt online learning was important for "attracting students from outside the traditional service area."

As far as the disadvantages to e-Learning are concerned, 40.8 percent of respondents in the same study said that "online courses cost more to develop" than traditional courses. "Greater faculty time and effort are required" was cited by 35.5 percent, and only 22.4 percent felt there was "a lack of acceptance of online instruction by faculty."

According to Allen and Seaman (2007) educators cited the most important barrier as "the need for more discipline on the part of online students." The second most important barrier was "faculty acceptance of online instruction." They noted that "those institutions most engaged in online (education) do not believe it is a concern for their own campus, but do see it as a barrier to more wide-spread adoption of online education." Also noted as a concern are the "higher costs for online development and

delivery" adding that this is true for institutions that are planning online offerings, but not for those who already have online courses.

An Overview of the Three Institutions (ISU, IWU and HCC)

From April 2008 to March 2009 I had the opportunity to do my sabbatical at Illinois State University in Normal, Illinois. Normal is part of the Twin Cities of Bloomington/Normal. Illinois Wesleyan University, which is private, is located in Bloomington and Heartland Community College is located in Normal. The educational opportunities are quite diverse, thus making this area an interesting microcosm in the study of e-Learning in higher education in the U.S. At least, this was my assumption going in. My primary objective was to see how e-Learning was being conducted at ISU, and then to also do the same at IWU and HCC.

Illinois State University

Illinois State University was founded in 1857 and its charter was drawn up by then lawyer, Abraham Lincoln. It has a total enrollment of just over 20,000 (about 18,000 undergraduate and 2,500 graduate students) spread throughout six colleges: The College of Applied Science and Technology, The College of Arts and Sciences, The College of Business, The College of Education, The College of Fine Arts, and The Mennonite College of Nursing.

e-Learning at Illinois State University

Many institutions of higher learning began experimenting with some

form of e-Learning from the late 1990s and early 2000s. ISU began exper-
imenting with e-Learning around the year 2000, and it has since become an
integral part of the educational system and policy. ISU established a
Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology (CTLT) which has been
running in its present form since 2005, and they have held an annual
university-wide Teaching and Learning Symposium since 2000. You can
see their Mission Statement at: http://www.ctlt.ilstu.edu/about/statements.
php. More will be reported about faculty development by CTLT at
another time.

According to an internal study by the Taskforce on Distance Learning
at ISU (http://www.detaskforce.ilstu.edu/), the percentage of online courses
offered (including summer sessions) rose from 1 percent to 3 percent from
2004 to 2008. By program that is from less than 50 in 2004 to just under 200
in 2008 for undergraduate courses and from single digits in 2004 to about 50
in 2008 for graduate courses. When they compared the regular academic
year with the summer session, they found that in 2004 there were about 50
academic year courses as opposed to about 20 summer session courses
online, but by 2008 there were nearly 100 courses online during the academic
year compared to just under 150 online courses offered during the summer
session.

By college, the College of Education had the most online courses in 2008
at about 100, followed by the College of Applied Science and Technology
and the College of Arts and Sciences at around 50 each, the Mennonite
College of Nursing at between 25 and 30 courses, and the College of
Business at less than 10 courses. However, as a percentage, the Mennonite
College of Nursing was highest with about 35 percent of its courses online
compared to the second place College of Education which had about 10
percent on its courses online. All of the other colleges were under 5

percent.

We can see that all of the six colleges that make up ISU employ e-Learning to some degree, and it is safe to say that each college will most likely increase the number of courses offered for some time into the foreseeable future.

Heartland Community College

Heartland Community College is a two-year college and is the youngest and fastest growing higher education institution in Illinois. Heartland was founded in 1990 in Normal Illinois and held its first classes in a shopping mall. Because of their tremendous growth, they opened a new and permanent campus in 2000. They also have campuses in Pontiac and Lincoln, Illinois. Heartland offers training in more than 40 career fields. In fiscal year 2009 there was an enrollment of 9,646 credit students (average age 26), and 8,000 non-credit students (average age 39).

Heartland has an open admission policy and is more affordable than private or public universities. Many students these days are choosing to attend community colleges because of the affordability and open admissions policies. Many students who do well at community colleges often transfer to a four-year college.

e-Learning at Heartland Community College

In order to compete with other colleges and universities, community colleges have offered online courses since the mid 1990s. Heartland has pursued online learning since the early 2000s. Public and Private Universities have dormitories for their students whereas community colleges do

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not. They count on students to commute to classes. That is one reason why most community colleges, including Heartland, have put more into developing an online presence--so that students don't always have to be on campus to study.

In the spring semester of 2010, Heartland offered about 70 online courses and about 50 hybrid (blended) courses with about the same number in the fall semester of 2009. In the summer session of 2009 there were about the same number of online courses as in the fall semester of 2009 and the spring semester of 2010, but there were only about 10 hybrid courses.

Illinois Wesleyan University

Illinois Wesleyan University was founded in 1850 in Bloomington, Illinois. It is a small, highly selective private university with a student population of just over 2,000. IWU was at one time considered one of the most wired private universities in the U.S.

Therefore, I was somewhat surprised to learn that IWU did not have any online learning at all in their curriculum. There are several reasons given for this. One is, as stated above, they are highly selective in who they let in to their university. Another reason is their small student population. And since most students live on campus, they are what can be called a "captive student body." But probably the main reason that IWU has not pursued online learning is that they have no distance program, which has been the engine of change at many other institutions.

However, even without a distance program one might think they would offer some blended courses. The fact that they don't shows that small, elite, private universities feel no need to do so. There is no pressure, either from the top or the bottom, to spend money on a course management

system. And they are not alone among small, private schools. As long as there is no pressure to compete for students, there will be no need or desire to implement online learning at such institutions.

How ISU, IWU and HCC Compare Nationally

According to a 2008 report on online education in the United States by the Sloan Consortium, over 3.9 million students (mostly undergraduate) were taking at least one online course during the fall of 2007, which was a 12 percent increase from 2006. The report found that the growth rate for online enrollments was 12.9 percent, which is higher than the 1.2 percent increase in the overall student population. The report also showed that over 20 percent of students took at least one online course in 2007.

Additionally, the report states that there were 16,611,710 students enrolled in higher education institutions in 2002, and that 1,602,970 of those were taking at least one online course for a total of 9.6 percent of total enrollment. When compared with the most recent findings from 2007, there were 17,975,830 students enrolled nationally with 3,938,111 taking at least one online course, which accounted for 21.9 percent of total enrollments.

Findings

It is apparent that online education is growing unabated in the U.S. The number of institutions offering online courses is increasing yearly in double digits along with the number of courses at institutions that already offer them. The Sloan Consortium findings would seem to reflect what was observed at the institutions of higher learning in Bloomington/Normal,

Illinois, The larger public institution (ISU), the associate institution (Heartland) and the small private institution (IWU) all fall into the pattern shown in the Sloan Consortium report.

At present, there are more associate institutions that offer online courses as a percentage even though they were found to have entered the market later, along with public institutions and very large institutions. According to Allen and Seaman (2007) "Two-year associate's institutions have the highest growth rates and account for over one-half of all online enrollments for the last five years." Allen and Seaman (2006) also report that "Institutions that are the least likely to have online courses or programs are the small, private, four-year institutions." This continued to be the pattern in 2009.

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