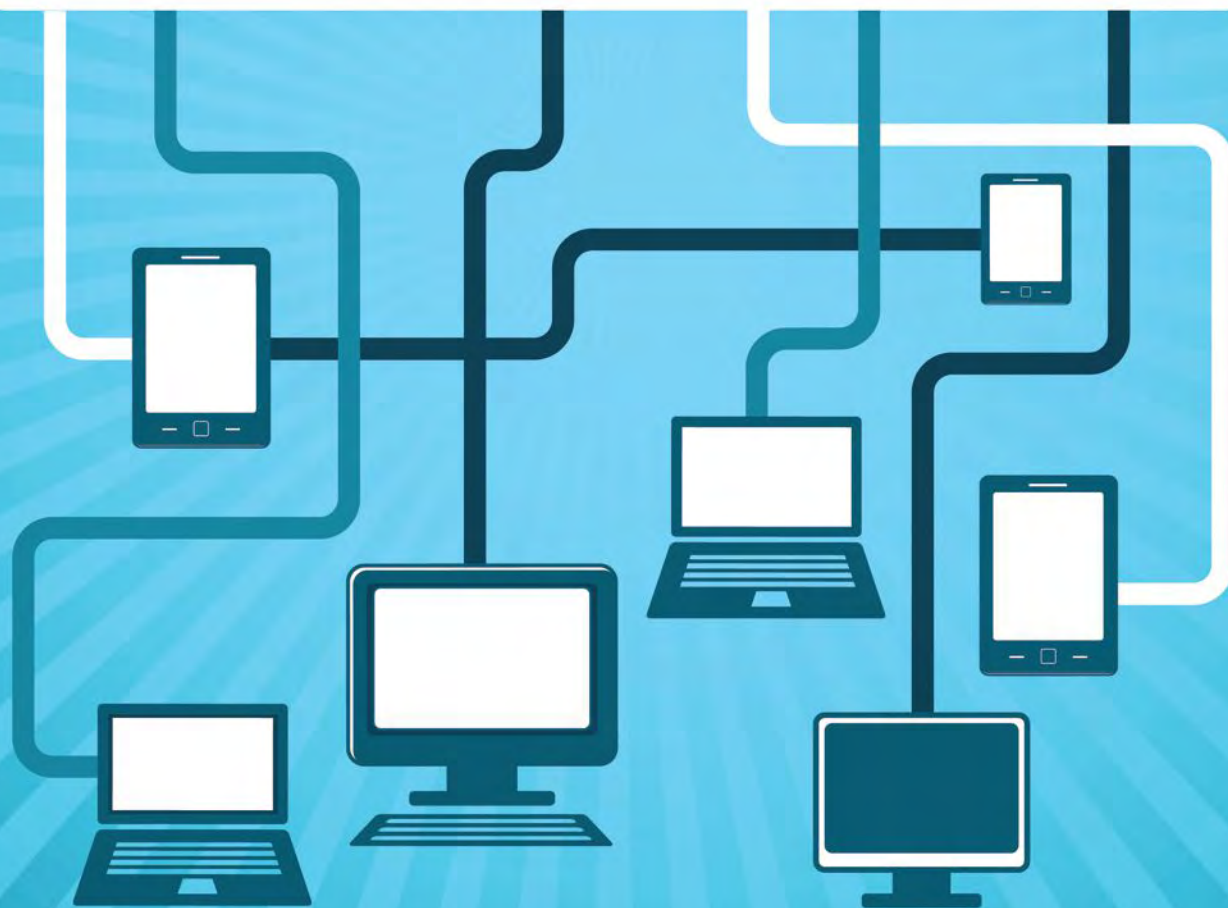


THE ONLINE FRONTIER

More colleges are exploring Web-based teaching to better serve diverse student populations.

BY INGRID STURGIS



In President Barack Obama's most recent State of the Union address, technology figured significantly as part of his plan to increase the number of college graduates and reduce the cost of education.

With concern that the United States is losing its competitive edge because it is not producing enough graduates and minority students are reportedly falling further behind in academic achievement, the president has pledged to increase the proportion of Americans graduating from college from 40 percent to 60 percent by 2020. He proposes to do it partly by encouraging schools

to modernize and adopt improved technology to teach, measure and administer coursework.

One part of that plan includes distance learning, or online education, an area where growth is outstripping brick-and-mortar enrollments.

Online learning, where 80 percent of a course is delivered online, is especially at-

tractive to minority students because it offers them options not available at many public colleges. Many Black and Hispanic students are shut out, according to the California-based Campaign for College Opportunity, because they are not able to meet the requirements for admission to the state's four-year colleges. In addition, rollbacks on affirmative action at some public universi-

ties have resulted in a shrinking number of Blacks, Hispanics and Native Americans attending public universities.

The number of students enrolled in at least one fully online college course has expanded to more than 6 million in 2010, an increase of 560,000 students over the previous year, according to a Babson Survey Research Group and a College Board study. Online institutions have reported enormous growth in the past few years, although that has slowed with many of them under scrutiny over student completion rates and employment opportunities, as well as high rates of student-loan debts and defaults.

The Sloan Consortium reports that about one-third of the country's 4,500 universities offer online degrees, as do 10 percent of the 105 historically Black colleges, according to the White House Initiative on historically Black institutions.

"Online learning and blended learning are just going to continue to grow," said Dr. Janet Poley, president and CEO of the American Distance Education Consortium. "The use of the technology is just going to increase."

For-profit institutions have nimbly exploited this disparity by focusing on low-income and minority students eligible for financial aid in brick-and-mortar settings and increasingly online. Ads for online universities have proliferated online, on television, as well as on bus and subway billboards. Proponents of online learning say its technological advancements could offer creative educational solutions for minority students and provide greater access to advanced education for underrepresented minorities.

Squeezing into college

According to Pew research, high unemployment during the recent recession has fueled an increase in the number of minority students enrolling in college, many of them nontraditional students. College enrollment has increased for majority students as well during the recession.

In addition, state cutbacks in education mean that community colleges — the first

place many minority students start their college careers — may have fewer openings and more competition for required courses. Budget cuts may prevent community colleges from expanding hours to accommodate nontraditional students.



During President Obama's State of the Union address he discussed using technology to increase the number of college graduates. Vice President Biden (left) and House Speaker John Boehner listened as Obama spoke.

to a computer and access to broadband to study online. Open enrollment has always been a hallmark of distance learning, which once consisted of correspondence courses that attracted nontraditional students, including nonworking mothers, working adults or people in the military. Today, many online schools do not require SATs or other entrance exams. Students need only a high school diploma or GED to be admitted.

The University System of Maryland has required students to take 12 credits in nontraditional experiences to foster online learning since 2005. The University of Maryland University College is one of the largest online universities with 92,000 students around the world. Black students make up 35 percent of its stateside student body, and 33 percent of students who took at least one online class were African-American. According to the university, it enrolls more African-American students than any of the four individual Maryland HBCUs.

Elizabeth Mulherrin, assistant dean of undergraduate initiatives, said the school offers online scholarships for minority students to help bring them online, along with other strategies to help ensure their success in college. "We offer very substantial support," she said.

Online education at UMUC started to take off in 1999 as the school sought to accommodate adult students — its bread and

butter. Mulherrin said students, many of whom are in the military, often enroll with four to five transcripts from other schools.

At the University of Phoenix, the largest of the for-profits, minority students make up nearly 50 percent of its 380,000 student body. The school did not provide a breakdown of how many of these students take online courses.

Getting in the game

Minority-serving institutions are beginning to consider online learning to preserve their market because many of their students are turning to online schools. Dr. Roy Beasley, director of Howard-Online, said HBCUs are beginning to consider more nontraditional students. Beasley has been tracking HBCU trends in online education for a number of years at the website Digital Learning Lab (www.dll.org). Of the HBCUs, he said Hampton University has demonstrated a strong commitment to nontraditional students and a strong commitment to online as a selective, private school with three satellite campuses. Launched 10 years ago, Hampton University Online has about 400 students and was

"HBCUs are very nervous about going online."

— Tom Joyner Jr., HBCUsOnline

the first HBCU to offer a variety of online degrees.

Howard University plans to develop online education that targets nontraditional students, Beasley said. In the fall, Howard launched an online executive master's in business administration.

Education Online Services Corp. and HBCUsOnline also have made a push to bring HBCUs online. HBCUsOnline focuses on historically Black colleges and universities and is headed by Tom Joyner Jr., a Howard alumnus. The program serves as a third-party provider for Florida A&M University, Tennessee State University and Texas Southern University. Like Education Online Services, it helps HBCUs gain online students by marketing their programs. Joyner says many HBCUs are wary of the dangers of online education.

"With HBCUs being hit economically, politically and socially, HBCUs are very nervous about going online," he said. "They are nervous about not having instant success."

Poley said HBCUs had a reason to be concerned, as online learning was not less expensive than face-to-face instruction.

Even if a portion of students study off campus, infrastructure investments still need to be met, from heating buildings to technology upgrades, along with security upgrades, equipment and mobile connections. She also said faculty training required a lot of spending on the front end.

For Hispanic-serving institutions, Poley said the No. 1 challenge was the language barrier in higher education. She said institutions

must focus on new immigrants. She singled out Monterrey Institute for Technology and Higher Education (Monterrey Tech) in Mexico, which offers online courses and degree programs that are being taken by Mexican-American and other students at



Dr. Alan Drimmer

satellite campuses in the United States. Latino access to the Internet is a major concern in online education

For Native Americans on reservations, the challenges of online education are greatest because broadband connections are spotty. Poley said lack of Internet access, money and time limitations combine to prevent many Native Americans from participating in online education.

“For many of our Native Americans on reservations,” she said, “the Internet does not go to their homes.”

Of the nearly three dozen tribal land-grant colleges, many are a great distance from students who live in remote, rural

environments on sprawling reservations. Many Native Americans have to move to attend college, she said.

“It’s difficult to get from where they are living to where they have Internet access,” Poley said.

To counter this problem, some reservations have created meeting places for students to gather even if they are not taking the same courses.

Meeting individual needs

Transformational change may be coming to wired minority students as a result of technological developments in online learning. Hybrid courses, adaptive learning techniques, assessment analytics and open-learning initiatives may make one-size-fits-all classes a thing of the past. As technology improves, institutions will be better able to assess student educational needs and provide prescriptive techniques to improve classroom success.

Technology Opens Online Access to Visually Impaired

For the 11 percent of working adults living with a severe visual impairment, an estimate from a 2003 Microsoft study, the technological advances that allow other students to log on to a computer, e-book reader or smartphone to access courses are often a hindrance.

Technology companies are developing software and hardware that allow those with visual limitations to access the same tech tools as everyone else.

Chris Danielsen, a spokesperson for the National Federation of the Blind, or NFB, said that he was grateful there were more tools than ever before but that there was still work to be done. Technological needs may vary for those whose visual impairments may range from low vision to blindness to colorblindness.

“It depends on what a student can use,” Danielsen said. “What is essential is that the entity makes sure they will work with students to make sure they have what they need.”

The issue of accessibility was placed on the radar screen in 2010, when President Barack Obama signed into law the 21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act, updating the Communications Act and establishing guidelines to ensure that people living with disabilities have access to the latest digital technologies.

Teachers who develop online courses have come to understand that those with visual limitations may not use the computer the same way as someone without such limitations. For example, they may not use a mouse but instead use the tab key to navigate a site. They may not “see” images, photos and graphics unless the images are accompanied by descriptions that can be translated by screen readers. A screen reader, which converts text to audible speech or through use of Braille devices, can also be bogged down by too many navigational menus or additional items embedded in a Web page. In addition, websites that use design elements such as frames to organize content can make it more difficult to navigate a page, and colors may not convey meaning to those who are blind.

At the University of Phoenix, which has about 200 students

with visual disabilities, its online classroom (eCampus) can be accessed with screen readers, magnification programs, and other access technology, according to spokesman Richard Castellano.

The most widely used course-delivery system, Blackboard, has taken the lead in ensuring accessibility. In fact, the NFB presented awards to Blackboard and Apple for their innovations in accessible technologies. The organization said the latest version, Blackboard 9, was the most accessible education application that it had tested. CourseSites.com, Blackboard’s free cloud-based learning management solution, provides instructors access to the company’s latest and greatest technology.

- Blackboard’s adaptive technology incorporates improved page design and navigation tools that allow those with limited vision to move more easily throughout the content. Improved keyboard functions allow users to customize the interface to reorder content groupings, as well as to make “help” functions more readily available. Blackboard works with a variety of screen readers that convert text to synthesized speech and an activity window that catalogs each session, including text from PowerPoint slides.

- The most widely used screen readers are JAWS from Freedom Scientific and Window-Eyes from GW Micro.

- Microsoft Windows offers a basic reader called Narrator.

- WebAnywhere is a browser-based screen reader interface in which a user types in a website URL and it audibly outputs the words.

- WordPress, one of the most widely used blogging platforms, has also been cited as a tool that incorporates best-practice standards for creating accessible blogs and websites. WordPress also offers guidelines about how to create content that is accessible to those with visual impairments.

Danielsen said more innovation was needed to develop better tools to display graphics, charts and symbols needed for science and math. The price of these technologies, however, must come down to make them more affordable.

Bryan Cook, director of the Center for Policy Analysis, Division of Programs and Research at the American Council on Education, said he has started to see universities tailor-make curriculum in some programs but not yet on an institution-wide basis.

Colleges also are viewing students more as consumers and recognizing that it is better to offer an education that is modified to a student's schedule or modified to pedagogy. For example, Pearson, the textbook publisher, has invested in the Knewton Adaptive Learning Platform that uses algorithms tailor-made a course of study for each student. Knewton can identify a student's strengths, weaknesses and unique learning style.

For-profit schools have been able to use similar technology for remediation. Dr. Alan Drimmer, provost and senior vice president for academic affairs at the University of Phoenix, said the school has acquired a diagnostic company, Carnegie Learning, which originally made software to help students with high school math. Its "descriptive diagnostics" have been adapted to help teachers learn more about student strengths and weaknesses in other subjects.

These new developments don't come cheap, and could raise tuition and student fees, said Cook. "The question is not the will but how to make an astute investment in technology when something more efficient will soon come along," he said.

With students becoming more tech-savvy, these opportunities may actually create greater access to a less-expensive education. For students of diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds, this could be a gamechanger.

Despite all the technological developments and growth in online education, some educators caution that everything is not best for everybody.

"So much of the promotion of online education is about convenience," said Cook of ACE. "It sounds great, but not everyone learns that way."

He said many younger students are already distracted with texting and tweeting and responding on Facebook. "Once you have distracted students," he said, "learning doesn't occur." ■

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