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Students flock to online courses

Kentucky pupils are part of the national online learning trend

By Chris Kenning
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Jennifer O'Connell has taken all of her business courses online through Jefferson Community and Technical College, pursuing a degree while juggling a job and three kids.

University of Louisville senior Barton Dejarnatt, meanwhile, mixes online courses with traditional classes, allowing him to earn his engineering degree more quickly.

Mirroring a national trend, online courses are exploding in popularity across Kentucky, grabbing an expanding share of students' college educations, according to a Council on Postsecondary Education report.

Roughly one in three students now takes at least one online course each year, the report found, and nearly one in 10 take all their courses online.

Online credit hours in Kentucky jumped from 222,916 in 2005 to 792,081 in 2010, with community colleges accounting for much of that growth. Online courses now comprise 26 percent of all community and technical college credit hours taken, up from 10 percent in 2005.

But they're also a growing presence at four-year universities. Since 2005 the share of Kentucky universities' online credit hours has nearly tripled, reaching 17 percent last year.

Private universities have also seen a rise, with Spalding University going from no online courses to 50 in little more than a year, and Bellarmine University working to expand its online and distance learning.

"It's just explosive," said Allen Lind, vice president of technology and e-learning at the Council on Postsecondary Education, arguing that online



Barton Dejarnatt, who is working on an engineering degree, does some classwork using his laptop. COURIER JOURNAL/DAVID R. LUTMAN

learning is reshaping the college landscape.

The rising profile of online coursework is also placing new demands on college leaders to train faculty, maintain academic quality and ensure students are doing their own work.

But it's a boon to students like O'Connell, a 36-year-old Louisville business administration student who has taken writing, math, marketing, biology and business law classes online toward an associate degree.

After cooking dinner for her three children at her Fishersville-area home O'Connell spends evenings on her computer watching video lectures, taking online tests, participating in student chat-room discussions and reading online texts.

"There was no way I was going to be able to attend college if it wasn't for online," she said.

"You have to stay organized, but it's every bit the same quality. When I transfer to a four-year college, I'm going to look for one with good online offerings."

Rising national interest

Nationally, the number of online college classes has increased for nine straight years.

A 2011 survey by the Babson

Survey Research Group of more than 2,500 colleges and universities found that more than 6 million students were taking at least one online course, up 10 percent from the previous year. In September, Indiana University announced it would invest \$8 million in a major expansion of its online courses and degrees.

Meanwhile, a new form of mostly free and no-credit classes — known as "massive open online courses" — recently offered by top-tier schools such as Harvard and MIT have gotten so much attention that the New York Times recently dubbed them the "educational happening of the moment."

While the reputations of such courses are improving, some still question whether they are a sufficient substitute for face-to-face, instructor-led learning. They worry about the trade-off between personal instruction and convenience — and the ability to ensure students are doing their own work.

Officials said they don't know of specific problems. While some classes require students to take proctored tests at a physical location or use a webcam for tests others rely solely on computer sign-in names and

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passwords.

"The biggest concern is cheating and identification. Is the person taking the course the person signed up for the course?" said U of L Associate Provost Gale Rhodes. "Then again, in a 400-student lecture class, you could ask the same question."

Shereen Ball, who is working toward a bachelor's degree in workforce development at U of L, is taking her first online course and misses "the interaction with other students, and the ability to speak directly with the professor instead of having to email."

Some professors are still reluctant, but many of the initially skeptical have been won over.

"I really didn't think online classes could compare to face-to-face classes," said JCTC associate communications professor Donna Elkins.

"But I've become a believer. We're seeing more and more students mixing online and traditional classes."

Kentucky Virtual Campus

Kentucky created its Virtual Campus around 2000 with a small number of courses from colleges and universities. The state has since spent tens of millions of dollars on technology and faculty training as classes and degrees have expanded into nursing, education, criminal justice, engineering and other areas, Lind said.

While Kentucky community colleges charge the same for online classes as for traditional ones, some institutions such as U of L, charge a premium on top of tuition partly because of the

cost of software and training, Rhodes said.

In 2009, the Kentucky Community and Technical College System added "Learn on Demand" classes, which allow students to progress at their own pace, in contrast to traditional term-oriented online classes.

At U of L, online course sections now number 581, up from 218 in 2005. Last year about one in five of U of L's 21,000 students took an online course, Rhodes said.

The numbers include both older students and younger ones "who would just as soon take a course in their pajamas in their dorm than go to class," she said.

And the numbers are expected to grow, which some expect also will create a wider array of degrees in rural parts of the state, where online credit hour rates are already the highest, while also cutting the time it takes traditional students to graduate.

"I could never imagine it could replace face-to-face education," Rhodes said.

"But I think what we'll see is a move toward more hybrid learning."

Adapting to online

U of L engineering professor Tim Hardin said he's in his fifth semester of teaching online engineering classes. Each semester more students are asking for online courses, he said.

He assigns readings and designs PowerPoint slides that he records his voice over. He gets homework submitted online. He leads blog discussions and records tutorials when students are struggling. He's even taking free online courses to see how to teach them well.

"You can't just record what you do in class and put it up for people to watch. I tried that, it didn't work too well. You have to develop a new set of teaching skills," he said.