

The Future of Online Learning and Community Colleges
ITC Journal Editorial
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Please note: for futurologists, the timeframe for informed prognostications is generally ten to fifteen years out. For the purposes of this essay, I am projecting to 2030-2035. Also, the essay is based in large part on the longitudinal data from the fifteen years of the ITC Annual National eLearning Survey of Community Colleges.

Online learning has a relatively short history. Launched as the ‘latest and greatest’ modality of Distance Learning in the 1990s, online learning has been a phenomenon in the years since. In twenty short years, online learning has been recognized as matching – or exceeding - the equivalency of the traditional classroom, has introduced new standards of access, convenience and flexibility in higher education, and has become a significant source of enrollment for community colleges. Whereas online learning remains something of a sideshow at universities, it has been embraced and mainstreamed on community college campuses.

As an essay for the first issue of the new *Journal of the Instruction Technology Council*, I thought it would be appropriate to explore the current trajectory for online learning, and what the impact of online learning will be on the future of the American community college movement.

The Future of Online Learning

As you can imagine, the future for online learning is strong. This technology-based learning environment is the perfect fit for the 21st Century – and the highly transformative economy we are now part of. Online learning is a “hand in glove” fit for most learners as even our nontraditional learners increasingly be digital natives (incredibly comfortable and adaptive with the evolving nature of technology). Based on enrollment projections and a transformative economy, the need and demand for online learning will continue to increase. Major driving factors include:

1. Technology-driven economic transformation – we already know that what we are currently teaching in our degree programs is dated/obsolete by the time a student graduates from college. And the short-life of technology evolution continues to contract. This reality will make number 2 (below) inevitable
2. The need for life-long re-learning – a student graduating from high school in 2019 will have at least seven distinct careers (could be more); each career change will necessitate retraining and retooling to have the skills and abilities needed for the next career.
3. The need for flexibility, convenience and access. The rapidly transforming economy will increase the need for a learning modality that is adaptive. Online learning is the best option to underwrite the ever-evolving economy.
4. Increasing student demand. Just as we have experienced on our campuses to date, student demand will remain strong for increasing the courses, certificates and degrees available online

The Future of Community Colleges

Clayton Christiansen has already forecast that up to half of all universities will be financially bankrupt by 2023. His argument is based on his analysis that the traditional university model is no longer sustainable. Sadly, this prediction is seemingly coming true. The number of institutions of higher learning in the US has declined by 10% in the past 5 years; and it forecast to continue to decline another 10% in the next 5 years. These are institutions that are closing or merging; an even greater number are in financial distress.

Community colleges are not immune from the Christiansen prediction. Most community colleges do not have the physical plant, high research-related costs or severe inefficiency of space utilization that universities have, BUT they are still locked in an agrarian calendar and a mystique about the inherent superiority of the traditional classroom. Community Colleges will weather the coming changes better than universities will, for the following reasons:

1. Community colleges are viewed as “cutting edge” training centers for the evolving economic transformations of the 21st Century
2. Community colleges are fully on board with online learning – the average community college now has 20-25% of their overall enrollment online.
3. Community colleges are far more likely to collaborate and synergize courses, certificates, and degrees needed for the new economy

Community colleges do face a few key challenges; and those institutions that fail to adapt will risk closure due to irrelevance. Challenges include:

1. A declining need for the physical campus. Success stories like WGU, demonstrate the immense savings from reducing or eliminating the physical campus
2. An increasing need for online courses, certificates and degrees. Based on trends, the typical community college needs to plan for a 75% online class/25% traditional class ratio (which effectively flips the current ratio). Certain programs will continue to work best in a more traditional setting, but they will be limited. Most programs can/will thrive virtually
3. An increasing need for enlightened campus leadership. Most campuses are currently stuck in a rut – leadership does not have the experience or exposure to understand fully how the economy is changing nor how that will impact what community colleges do.
4. The need to start informed strategic planning now so as to “catch the wave” that is coming. Failure to do this will likely seal the fate of some institution as increased higher education competition in the 21st Century will undermine traditional student enrollment pipelines. And remember, the traditional 18-24 age group that always has been the bread and butter of colleges, is already in decline and will decline more rapidly in the years to come. Our entire campus bureaucracy (as well as student recruitment) is anchored to the wrong institutional future (see #5 below)

5. A critical need to focus on the active adult learner. This is defined anyone 25+ years that has already taken college credits (and been successful). This will be the dominant source of enrollments for campuses going forward. It is essential to find ways to capture ALL credits that have been earned and to find ways to facilitate pathways to completion for the working adult. Campuses need to become far more adult-learner friendly – and supportive – as well

The future of higher education is bright – but it will be dominated by unprecedented change in all aspects of what we do. Accreditation expectations will change. The students we teach will change. How we teach students will/must change. Unfortunately, the modern institution is highly bureaucratic, and like an aircraft carrier, very hard to change course quickly. And yet campuses must learn to do exactly that – change course. Become more responsive, more relevant and more adaptive.

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