How Online Learning is Transforming Higher Education

Ten years ago, online learning began to change higher education in America. Previous technological innovations, such as educational television, had failed to fulfill the promise of reaching broad populations of students. Online education has grown steadily over the last decade and gained widespread acceptance. Nearly 3.2 million students enrolled in at least one online course in Fall 2006. To put that population in a broader context, nearly 20 percent of all U.S. higher education students were taking at least one online course that semester. In Fall 2002, by contrast, 1.6 million students enrolled in at least one online course, and the percentage of students in the U.S. higher education system taking an online course was 11 percent. So, a market that barely existed only a decade ago doubled its base of students between 2002 and 2006, and continues to attract new and returning students. The impact of millions of students studying online is profound for society and educators. Students who would not have been able to attend traditional colleges can now pursue an academic degree or professional certificate online, while still holding a job and supporting their families. At Saint Leo University we have found that the adoption of academically rigorous online educational programs can reshape the university itself. We have amended our business model to meet the needs of this growing population. We also have found the demands of creating academically rigorous online courses create a long-term, positive influence on professors’ teaching styles and methods, and in turn, yield improved learning outcomes for students. The combined impact of these influences is truly transformative for higher education in America.

Still, not all colleges and universities will experience these benefits and advancements. The market has become so competitive—even cluttered—with educational providers of varying quality that new entrants will face steep challenges.

The rapid development of the online market thus far prompts us to reflect on how new teaching and learning paradigms have so far reshaped education, and consider what that will mean for the near future.

Observers will likely find it difficult, at first, to understand the important differences between the players in this competitive online market. We find it useful to think of the higher education landscape this way: as a market with three kinds of competing institutions. There are the "bricks," the "clicks," and lastly, the "bricks and clicks."
“Bricks” are highly traditional colleges and universities that offer very few or no online alternatives. They tend to be small, mostly private institutions that must charge higher tuition than the public institutions (state universities and colleges) funded by taxpayer dollars. Many of these smaller institutions maintain a traditional residential campus and many are not significant players in the market for online students. Their faculty members may be skeptical about the quality of online programs and courses.

“Clicks” tend to be private, for-profit institutions offering instruction almost solely online and many may have no traditional campuses or classrooms. “Clicks” advertise and market aggressively, frequently on a national basis. The University of Phoenix is one example that comes quickly to mind for most people.

“Clicks and bricks” are those schools that maintain full college campuses for traditional-age college students (from 18 to 23 years old), and also probably operate extensive weekend and evening programs for working adults. Many of these are public institutions, but Saint Leo is one of the privately funded universities fitting this description. We adopted online programs early on, and were able to create a national base of students by marketing these courses and programs over the Web.

Yet our “bricks” have remained hugely important in the development of our “clicks.” One of the recurring themes we found, and continue to find, on surveys asking new students why they chose Saint Leo over other institutions was that they wanted to know they were enrolling in a “real” college or university. Then we started finding new online students through referrals from alumni, family members, colleagues at work, and our students in the armed forces.

Students who attain a bachelor’s degree through Saint Leo University’s Center for Online Learning sometimes return for an online master’s degree program. That has turned out to be a natural progression not just for adult working students, but also for the institution. Graduate degree programs entail fewer courses than the four-year degree and so are easier to develop. The students constitute a defined niche of committed learners, and so are also easier to identify, reach, and manage. Our fall enrollments in master’s degree programs increased by more than seven-fold from 200 students in 1998 to 1,474 in 2007.

Relating those figures by themselves, however, does not begin to describe what a university has to do to make the transformation to “bricks and clicks” from “bricks” only. It is far more involved than e-mailing prospects, uploading a syllabus to a server, and then waiting for students to register. Such an approach would not have met our standards, nor the technological expectations of the market as it evolved. We started even before home Internet access was common, but we now compete in a market where computer users expect to be presented with high-quality graphics, sound, and even video elements.

We have had to redevelop our business procedures, technological capabilities, and our teaching practices to serve this market well—and we must be willing to make more adaptations as needed. One example is in our approach to student recruitment and enrollment, done with the help of a carefully selected industry partner. We find it important to respond to
online inquiries within 30 minutes—because another institution will respond if we do not. And students have only a limited window of time to research their educational options. Yet it also takes time, up to three months, to convert that prospect to an enrolled student. Along the way, they need remote counseling available 24/7 on financial aid, or they simply may not be able to enroll. It takes time and careful management to create this “clicks” system, and it must be diligently monitored. Another part of the “clicks” infrastructure is more apparent to technologically savvy observers. We continue to invest in robust and high-speed Internet connections, and we have upgraded to dedicated lines for streaming video over the Internet to boost overall network quality. At Saint Leo University, we make regular use of video teaching technology, both to include students in remote locations into live traditional classes, and as a taped or live element that is included on some online instruction.

Here is where we come to the important adaptations in teaching methods. We are a Catholic teaching university; we hire faculty who, first and foremost, want to teach. Our coursework meets the rigorous quality standards of our regional accrediting authority. We offer small classes so that our students can receive personalized attention as they pursue their academic goals and grow as individuals. As Saint Leo progressed toward the online world, we faced questions from our colleagues about how we could ensure that our online courses would succeed in delivering the learning outcomes Saint Leo is known for. And naturally enough, this question came from student prospects as well. Online courses are perhaps more closely scrutinized than any other type of course.

Because of these questions, we have pushed ourselves in online curriculum development, with positive and far-reaching results. We have routinely heard for some time now from students that our online courses are more rigorous than classroom-based courses. They feel that it is impossible to “hide” in an online class. The forum is too participative for someone to sit without comment, as they might be able to in certain lecture sessions. Our classes include lecture elements, but students also are typically required to participate in online discussions and group exchanges. Teachers say they, too, sometimes feel more on-call when teaching an online course, because they may be receiving e-mail questions from students seven days a week, rather than during set “office hours.” Some students also say they feel the work load is heavier, possibly because our semester scheduling is so tight that they have to dive right into reading assignments and papers to keep pace throughout the course.

Of course, academically rich online courses do not just spring up automatically. Instructors have to design online courses keeping in mind the special circumstances of being separated from students by time or space. (In some instances, institutions can offer online courses developed elsewhere, just as professors order textbooks written by other authors and experts in the field.) At Saint Leo, our teachers work with specialists in our instructional technology department to develop online courses, with certain parameters in mind. They have to consider how much content to introduce before breaking into a group activity or online discussion, and how they will carry that interaction over into the next module. They are prompted to consider whether they will ask students to make observations to advance a particular lesson, or require them to engage in deductive reasoning, and, just as important, to deliberate on which technique will be most effective. They are counseled on the different ways students learn and are expected to reflect that understanding in the instructional design. Faculty should be able to tell students—in advance—what knowledge and skills they will acquire in the course, and be able to demonstrate that their students, in fact, reached those milestones. Faculty within the field of education receive formal training in instructional design, but that has not necessarily been the case for college faculty in other academic realms. The migration of teaching to the online world has demanded this from faculty. In fact, members of our faculty and instructional technology department have recently finished producing 96 undergraduate-level online courses. On this scale, the experience becomes
transformative for the university, deepening and broadening our core teaching competencies. Faculty members also sometimes develop techniques while designing an online course that they decide to add to their classroom-based presentation. At the same time, newer faculty coming up through the ranks are routinely incorporating online elements or designing online courses. This is a time of enrichment and creativity in college course design, and the innovations we develop today will enhance our capabilities for the future.

We cannot and do not suggest that all institutions in the online market put the same level of expertise and care into their online course development. In fact, we think that in this now maturing online educational market, our teaching quality differentiates us from competitors. This isn’t necessarily an easy attribute to advertise using mass media. But ironically, it is transmitted from student to future student—a co-worker, a family member, a fellow armed forces member—by word of mouth, or perhaps more accurately, by e-mail from computer to computer. That is not the broadest market, but it includes the students who are most committed to receiving an education, those who want to become more well-rounded individuals and lifelong learners, in addition to becoming better positioned to advance in the job market. Those are the students we most enjoy teaching, whether we are teaching online or at our main campus or at a regional education center.

There is no question that Saint Leo University is financially stronger and academically more agile for having become a “bricks and clicks” institution, and that transformation serves our students. We must raise a note of caution, however, for educators, policy makers, and prospective students to heed. The world of online education is not a level playing field in the regulatory sense. Multiple bodies have sprung up to “accredit” member institutions with lesser programs, and to blur the academic distinctions between universities. This, in turn, creates a danger that students attracted by the flexibility of an online program may find out too late that they have invested time and money in weak academic programs.

We at Saint Leo simply cannot serve all the adult learners who want and deserve a quality education. Nor can we take on the role of regulating institutions that are competitors with us. Yet, by relating our experience in building and in continuing to improve a student-centered, academically sound online program, with the help of our legislators, alumni, and friends, we can perform another valuable educational service. Saint Leo University’s story can help the public see how one of our nation’s leaders in online education meets the needs of its students. We hope all students will scrutinize the educational market and accept no less in terms of quality from any institution than we and our fellow leaders proudly provide.

End notes

1Saint Leo University administrators interviewed for this paper: Gary Bracken, vice president of Enrollment, Susan Colaric, Ph.D. director of Instructional Technology, Les Lloyd, associate vice president of University Technology Services, and Michael Rogich, Ph.D., director of the Center for Online Learning.

2Sloan Consortium, Online Nation: Five Years of Growth in Online Learning, 2007.