

Online, Campus, or Blended Learning

What Do Consumers Prefer and Why?

Paul Epstein

With the explosive growth of online learning, including the recent entry of not-for-profit institutions, a difficult challenge emerges for educators: directing the growth productively by finding the right balance of online and classroom learning. Offering a blend of both kinds of programs will achieve higher enrollment and more fulfilling educational experiences.

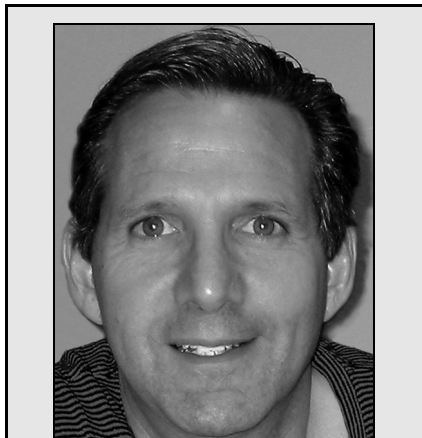
Results from a recent survey released by High Voltage Interactive reflect a positive trend for the online education industry. In December 2005, nearly 1,000 adults were

polled on a variety of points regarding their education. While female and male respondents were approximately equal, most of the responses and those with the highest quality came from adults between the ages of 25-64. A staggering 74% of those polled indicated they would be interested in taking classes online. This is outstanding news for postsecondary educators seeking to expand their online enrollment.

While online education is increasingly appealing to students, classroom meetings also remain important. Forty-three percent of respondents with a stated preference for online classes indicated that they preferred to supplement their learning with weekly classroom meetings. Surprisingly, only 20% of all respondents prefer to exclusively participate in a campus-based program; the remaining 38% would prefer an exclusive online education. These results suggest that distance educators should blend online and campus-based programs to suit potential students.

Traditional, campus-based not-for-profit institutions seem to have an advantage because they have well-developed, proven, in-classroom curricula. By offering some of their materials and lessons online, they can appeal to the majority group identified in the survey that prefers a blended learning environment.

When participants were asked to state why they preferred online learning opportunities, the most common responses were



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“working at one’s own pace” (especially men) and “working on one’s own time” (especially women). Next in priority was “having no commute to class”—a particularly important factor to the youngest respondents. These priorities should not be ignored.

While most respondents have high school diplomas or higher, it’s interesting to note that 38% of the respondents have only completed high school. Since this was the largest group of respondents, it’s apparent that there is an interested pool of potential applicants for further education even at the associate’s or bachelor’s degree levels—both traditionally dominated by on-campus schools. Furthermore, today’s fast-paced world of career development necessitates offering postsecondary degrees that fit students’ extremely busy schedules. Online education fills this need, as shown by the survey results.

However, while time management seems to be a high priority for many people, the continuing value of face-to-face education cannot be ignored. The most common reasons given by respondents for preferring a physical classroom setting were “credibility in the workplace as a key concern to online degree programs,” followed by an “enjoyment of face-to-face interaction with students and teachers.” These results indicate a need to expand public acceptance of online degrees, but they also show that personal interaction in the educational setting cannot be overlooked.

Online instruction allows students a number of ways to deal with time management and work with others. A synchronous method requires students to be online at the same time as other students in their class, while an asynchronous method enables students to work any time they want without having to attend class at the same time as their peers. The self-study method, in which there is no instructor involvement, allows students to access and interact with course material on their

own. The High Voltage survey showed that of those respondents preferring online instruction alone, 59% prefer the asynchronous method. This indicates the value of working with an instructor, while still valuing the ability to work according to one’s own time constraints, rather than on a set schedule.

Online asynchronous coursework can provide an answer to many problems. By increasing the number of these programs, more people might be able to receive their postsecondary degrees at a time when it might be otherwise impossible. Work and family demands make it difficult to fit specific class meeting times into an already tight schedule. The ability to work on one’s own time and at one’s own pace, as allowed by online education, opens the educational door for many people. As more online courses are offered, enrollment rates will also increase.

The growing prevalence and acceptance of online degrees is reflected in the answers provided by those who opted for a completely on-campus program. In the survey, this group was asked how they might be convinced to consider online education. Fortunately for distance educators, “I could not be convinced” ranked very low for both genders. Accreditation continues to be a critical issue in online education, since “knowing the value of the degree” ranked highest for both sets of respondents. Distance educators must continue their work to increase recognition of the legitimacy of their programs.

The ability to forge relationships with other students also ranked high among students who prefer campus-based studies. Relationship building, even virtually, is preferred in both groups. Males ranked “sharing knowledge with others” very highly overall, while the results for the female group are not quite as decisive. This means that distance educators seeking to expand enrollment should pursue methods for reaching students who are not yet interested in taking online courses. Within

the marketplace, these students' priorities can be more deeply explored to create better online programs that address the specific needs.

For schools pursuing diversification of their program offerings, it is interesting to note that the highest ranked area of study was business (50% of respondents). Education and human resources were the second most popular programs, followed by accounting. Respondents were least interested in online studies in fashion, architecture and information security. Some of the most surprising statistics show there is

great demand for studying alternative medicine, human resources, and culinary arts programs online.

As the prevalence of online learning grows, new opportunities arise for private and not-for-profit institutions. Technology allows schools to reach a broader student base and to offer their programs according to students' preferences and time constraints. The results of this survey can serve as a starting point in discovering the most appropriate ways to guide the growth of an invaluable method of teaching.

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