Area’s traditional colleges expand online offerings

Idea pioneered by for-profit companies now present on most campuses

By: Rochester Business Journal Staff  Todd Etshman  November 29, 2017

For-profit colleges recognized the need for online degree programs a long time ago, and to some extent, they’re still a source of competition for traditional colleges today.

But traditional colleges have now had plenty of time to look at the success of online degree programs and the result is they’re now offering their own while continually examining the feasibility of offering more.

"The irony is that for-profit online institutions had the foresight 20 to 25 years ago to realize where the world is going," says Eileen Daniel, vice provost at the College at Brockport. "They started online education, programs and courses. We were slower to catch on and move in that direction. We were clinging to traditional classroom pedagogy."

For people who were working or unable to come to campus for face-to-face course learning, there weren’t a lot of options 25 years ago. But that has changed in a big way for schools like Brockport, which today offers 14 degree programs online. It’s what students wanted and it’s what administrators thought they needed.

Degree programs vary from innovative offerings such as video game design to traditional MBAs.

"We’ve come a long way from sending students VHS tapes for learning via television," says Therese Hannigan, director of RIT Online. Today, Rochester Institute of Technology offers 36 online credit-bearing programs and over 550 online courses.

In a virtual world connected by computers and phones, the choice to study online, rather than at a certain place at a certain time, is becoming more common, says Hannigan.

Despite their foresight, for-profit colleges in general have not had the same growth or success as their competition in recent years. In New York, for-profit colleges are facing intense scrutiny by the state Attorney General’s Office, which has shown it will investigate any grandiose claims schools makes in advertising.

For-profit schools that can’t keep up with up-to-date workplace training may find accreditation hard to obtain.

Traditional area colleges don’t just decide to offer online programs without a rigorous examination of how to effectively offer them and get them accredited. Today, they typically offer those accredited courses and programs at a lower price than their for-profit school competition.

As Daniel explains, students today have the opportunity to go to a SUNY school, pay SUNY tuition rates and get the same high quality educational experience online with the convenience and flexibility online training offers as opposed to paying more money to go to an online school with a questionable reputation.

"I think students weigh that and are moving to SUNY and other traditional schools that are offering courses in a non-traditional manner," Daniel says.

"Now that traditional colleges and universities have expanded their academic inventory to include online programs, there are students in the market who would prefer the name associated with the brand at these institutions," says Jose Perales, vice president of enrollment management at St. John Fisher College.

Pricing for online courses at traditional colleges is primarily the same as face-to-face classroom courses with the exception of RIT, where online program tuition can be between 36 to 43 percent less than the standard tuition cost depending on the program and type of degree. Area colleges apply the same quality control to their online offerings.
as they do to classroom-taught courses.

“Online learning at RIT is really an extension of our heritage, reputation and strengths as a university. The cornerstone of our online value proposition is that online learners benefit from the same expert and credentialed faculty, research opportunities, exceptional education experience and the prestigious degree that on-campus students enjoy and value,” Hannigan says. “Accrediting agencies want to ensure that the learning outcome is the same regardless of the modality,” Fisher’s Perales explains. The outcome of what the school is providing the student must be the same in online education as it is in a face-to-face setting.

UR’s Fredericksen suggests the quality and effectiveness of learning are not tied to the mode of instruction.

Not only do students want the flexibility of online education; faculty members want it too. They don’t have to do it alone, says Perales.

Instructional technologists or designers help professors move a course online. They work with instructors to help set it up, determine what tools, technology and support services they’ll need and ensure that there is as much student-teacher interaction as there is in a classroom setting.

The instructional designers are crucial for schools trying to keep up with the fast-growing online environment and to ensure online success for teachers used to traditional instruction. “By utilizing innovative design and teaching methods, almost any subject matter can be taught successfully online,” RIT’s Hannigan says. “I predict that we’ll be seeing more and more online courses and programs formerly deemed not appropriate for an online delivery mode in the coming years,” she says.

St. John Fisher currently offers only two online degree programs, a master of science degree in library media and an RN to bachelor of science nursing degree, but Perales says the school is looking to offer more in the near future, particularly where the market has demonstrated a need. As UR’s Frederickson explained, there is a misperception that online education is an isolating experience for students, but area colleges have gone to great lengths to ensure that is not the case.

Online students access interactive programs such as Blackboard Collaborate for video conferencing and other instructional aids. “Smarthinking” is an online tutoring program that gives online students the tools they need to succeed.

“Students have to be able to use it. Some students may have been using it already in high school or college,” Daniel says. It may be a little more challenging for older students to pick up, but it doesn’t take long and help is available. Online tech support is also available to students whenever they need it. Discussion boards allow discussions to last longer and include more contributors. Interaction with faculty is available online or in person.

In addition to online degree programs, area colleges offer hybrid courses and degrees that use a blend of online and classroom instruction.

Online students may still want to familiarize themselves with Rochester’s impressive college campuses and enrich their experience by being on campus, but for students in the ever-expanding online programs, the classroom has moved to wherever they want it to be.

Todd Etshman is a Rochester-area freelance writer.

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