



Used to be that online college classes and distance learning were the sole domain of those who had to juggle family and career WHILE going to school. But now online classes are showing up on college campuses just as much as co-eds. Why would that be? Don't students physically go to college just so they can attend class and look the instructor square in the eye?

Thanks to technology, and a slumping economy that trickles all the way down to kindergarten, the answer is both *yes* and *no*. Colleges and universities offer (and in some cases require) their on-campus students to occasionally take part of their course load online not because they want to, but because they *have* to. According to the Sloan Consortium Survey of Online Learning as of 2008 4.6 million students had taken at least one college-level course online, which was up 17% from the previous year. This shows a trend that goes beyond simply wanting the convenience of attending class in your pajamas—it signals a sea change in the way we go to college.

And what are the incentives behind these changes? They're more permanent than you think. Before you completely dismiss online classes as non-serious education take a look at these four reasons online classes are now a fact of life on just about every college campus.

1. Budget Cuts

It's no secret that both state and federal budget cuts have affected all levels of education. A little known fact is that colleges can't run on tuition alone. They rely heavily on government-funded subsidies such as financial aid, grants, and a share of the federal education fund. If a school's budget is cut the first to go (unfortunately) are teachers and staff, which are a school biggest expense.

Online classes, however, allow a school to reduce staff, but at the same time accommodate the current enrollment by combining multiple classes into one. Yes, you may have some overworked teachers, but at least colleges don't have to cut classes (or worse yet, shut down), which means students can get the courses they need to graduate.

2. Class Size

An age-old problem (even before the budget cuts) for students that attend large universities has always been class size. Traditionally, it seems like there are never enough of the lower division classes or the highly specialized upper division classes to go around without making class size huge (sometimes 1,000 students or more are crammed into arena-type lecture halls). It's not uncommon for students to be put on waiting lists, which extends their time in college, thus costing them more money than they anticipated.

By utilizing online classes, however, a college can accommodate more students without increasing its teaching staff. For example, at the University of Iowa 10% of its undergraduates take at least one course online each semester. Once again, the teachers get the short end of that stick, but at least a college can keep its existing staff AND accommodate its student body.

3. Tuition Costs

One of the ways colleges have been dealing with the education budget cuts is to increase tuition while offering fewer classes. (What kind of deal is that?) But by providing online classes some schools have been able to keep their tuition hikes to a minimum, while using increased enrollment to keep the existing staff in place—and sometimes even having enough left over to hire new staff as needed.

4. Parking and Gas Costs

Once the economic meltdown hit in 2008 college enrollment rose steadily. People were going back to school to earn new degrees so they could become competitive in multiple job markets. Since many of these new students were older they had no desire to live on campus, and thus a parking shortage (even bigger than the traditional one) was born. Plus, with the cost of gas going through the roof, a long commute to class could cost as much as tuition itself.

To offset these challenges, colleges started offering some coursework online so that students enrolled in on-campus degree programs could take one or more of their classes at home. By staggering the days students take their classes online, colleges are better able to accommodate the parking situation on the days students have to commute to campus.

Because the Internet now provides the ultimate stage, technology makes it even easier for schools to offer classes not just to hundreds, but also to thousands of students all at once. It's definitely a new age of college attendance that is embraced by some and condemned by others. So if you've already taken college classes online, consider yourself on the cutting edge of higher learning—and pat yourself on the back for being such a pioneer.

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