Taking an online class is no longer a novelty on college campuses, no longer the sole domain of long-distance learners sitting in their living rooms in between jobs and kids.

More college students than ever before are demanding it as an option when they register for classes - even traditional students who live on campus. Many are mixing online and conventional classes for convenience or as a way to avoid getting locked out of an overbooked course.

At Purdue University, 35 percent of the 8,200 students who took an online class last year lived on the West Lafayette campus. There's been a similar uptick at Indiana University, which is developing a strategic plan to include online learning in the traditional campus offerings in Bloomington.

"There is definitely a student demand, and at most major universities, you find demand is your own students," said Bobby Schnabel, the dean of informatics at IU.

Students love the flexibility of an online class. Colleges love earning the tuition dollars without having to build new classrooms. And professors are starting to come around to the reality of an online world.

But not everyone is on board.

Some liberal arts professors have raised concerns about the quality of education and integrity when teacher and student are not in the same room.

"Online education has been a hot topic at our annual conference on higher education," said Robin Burns, a spokeswoman for the American Association of University Professors.

National surveys suggest that while online enrollments have skyrocketed in recent years, the interest shown by professors has remained the same. Some professors have embraced the new technology, some have asked for more training, and others simply want nothing to do with it.

"The problem with distance learning is that we know we are trying to teach, but we don't know if they are trying to learn," said sociology Professor Allen Martin of the University of Texas-Tyler, an outspoken critic of online education.

"The dropout rate is enormous, and there is an enormous amount of cheating that goes on. It just doesn't work very well."

A huge demand

These are issues being pondered on campuses across the nation that are grappling with record-breaking demands for online classes.

More than 4.6 million students took at least one online class two years ago, a 17 percent increase from the previous year, according to the most recent survey by the Sloan Consortium, which monitors online education.

Online enrollment grew from barely 10 percent of total enrollment in 2002 to 25 percent in 2008. It's a trend that is not likely to be reversed.

At Ivy Tech Community College, where more than half the students are adults, many with jobs and children, online enrollment has doubled in two years to nearly 80,000, the most of any Indiana college or university.

The growth has been so strong that officials announced plans recently to drop the "distance education" moniker for a new name - Ivy Tech Online - to better reflect the online growth.

Ivy Tech President Tom Snyder sees huge potential in setting up a system that will offer more

than 350 online classes and 12 degree programs that can be completed online -- degrees such as accounting, business administration, computer information systems and paralegal studies, a smorgasbord of classes for Hoosier students and, potentially, those from out of state (at twice the tuition rate per credit hour).

"We already have experienced dramatic enrollment growth," Snyder said. "This is all about how to deliver that education without bricks and mortar.

"It would add additional revenue for the school and give us a growth opportunity at a very low cost."

Online interest is also evident in the state's newest higher education institution, Western Governors University of Indiana, where 1,000 Hoosiers have enrolled in a curriculum made up entirely of online classes. Students, who are typically in their mid-30s and have full-time jobs, work at their own pace and can graduate in three years or less with a bachelor's degree in information technology, business, health professions or education.

Ivy Tech is one of 10 community colleges across the nation that have signed on to help launch a Web portal to compete with private, for-profit colleges for online learners. The effort is being organized by the American Association of Community Colleges, according to a report published in Inside Higher Ed.

A student's view

Klinton Streeter, a 25-year-old police officer working on a criminal justice degree at Ivy Tech, has mixed four online classes with a handful of others during his first two years.

"I did my work at home, in my home office, and it worked for me since I do work full time," said Streeter, who lives in Indianapolis and declined to identify his employer. "Online is good when my schedule is tough, but I actually prefer being in a classroom."

Ivy Tech began offering online courses in 1999, with 1,865 students enrolled statewide. The three Ivy Tech Online programs with the most students enrolled are general studies, human services and criminal justice.

Not every class qualifies for an online presence. Students still need to do labs or hands-on training for technical education. And remedial math courses are not offered online.

At Purdue last month, officials announced plans to expand the university's distance-learning program to make it possible for at least 10,000 enrollments, 60 percent of which they hope will be filled by students on campus with the help of a new distance-learning center where students will take exams.

Purdue also hopes to attract new off-campus tuition dollars by boosting its online degree programs. Such programs are expected to provide a new revenue stream for the university.

"As budgets grow tighter, it's essential that we look to other sources of revenue," said Mark Pagano, dean of continuing education and conferences.

What professors think

Lorie Davis, a psychology professor at Ivy Tech, does much of her grading at home. On her computer.

For the past three years, she has taught a couple of online classes each semester. Weekly writing assignments for the 20 students per class are due by Sunday night, and she does her grading on Wednesdays.

Flexibility runs both ways.

"I love the flexibility just like the students do," said Davis, a Mississippi State University grad who is working on her Ph.D.

Davis is a supporter of online classes and rejects notions that students don't learn as much as they could in a traditional classroom.

"I find I get more out of the students because they actually have to write," she said. "In the classroom, you typically get four or five students who are very verbal, and they can dominate the conversation. But with online, everyone has to do their part."

Others are not so sure about online education.

A 2009 study by the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities and the Sloan National Commission on Online Learning found concerns raised through surveys of nearly 11,000 faculty members across the country.

Although they are often open to teaching online courses, they do not think they get enough support on campus. Developing and teaching an online course, they say, is more taxing and time-consuming than what they are used to, according to the study.

Although younger professors seem to have an easier time, they tended to agree it was more time-consuming. Nearly 70 percent of all professors said the extra effort was a crucial barrier to teaching online, the study said.

At Purdue, Pagano said he is developing training and support programs alongside ways to provide incentives to professors to teach online. Asked how many of Purdue's 2,500-plus faculty members teach online, Pagano said "dozens, but less than 100."

"The interest has been varied," he said. "There are definitely courses that lend themselves to online, but we also have a large number of blended courses where faculty members are experimenting with putting portions of their work online."

Technically, an online course is usually identified as having 80 percent of the work done online, with the rest being lab work or other hands-on training, and exams.

At IU, Schnabel was expected to present a strategic plan for online education to university trustees last week. He said that although he has not heard of any outspoken critics on campus, he knows most professors share concerns of quality.

"They want online education to be part of the basic academic framework of the campus," Schnabel said, "to have the same quality standards - just with a different mode of delivery."

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Source: indystar.com