

Online Learning at iSchools – Review of Current Offerings

Julia Kampov-Polevoi, Javed Mostafa
Laboratory for Applied Informatics Research
University of North Carolina
100 Manning Hall, CB #3360
Chapel Hill, NC 27599

jkampov@email.unc.edu, jm@unc.edu

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth in the knowledge and information sector of economy in the recent decades has led to a shift from the traditional educational paradigm to the concept of lifelong learning. Wide acceptance of this concept in the US can be illustrated by the fact that overwhelming majority of state governors ranked encouraging lifelong learning as the top educational issue [1]. According to the most recent government report [2], there has been a steady increase in student enrollment in post-secondary educational institutions and the trend is expected to continue over the next decade with most significant growth in the 25-34 age group (near 30%) and almost as much growth in the over 35 age group as among 18-24 year olds with the number of graduate and professional students increasing 18% and 20% respectively. In other words, it is expected that people will be seeking more advanced education or new professional skills and at later stages of their lives. It is reasonable to expect a proportionate increase in the demand for degrees in the field of Information Science.

Higher education infrastructure cannot handle such growth in demand without exploring alternatives to traditional classroom learning. One of the ways to meet the projected demand in graduate/professional education is to develop or extend online education offerings. By expanding temporal and spatial boundaries of educational institutions, online learning not only allows the educational institutions to grow beyond the physical limits of their campuses, but also increases accessibility of education to students that, for various reasons, cannot take part in traditional educational programs. In fact, there has been a steady increase in student demand for online learning opportunities that provide the flexible, time-efficient, and relevant to workplace education they desire. According to most recent nationwide survey [3], the number of students taking at least one online course in a semester has been increasing steadily and is projected to continue to grow with online enrollment currently comprising nearly 20% of total student enrollment. Not, surprisingly, majority of post-secondary educational institutions consider online learning important to their overall strategy [3] with two thirds having online offerings ranging from select courses to fully-online degree programs. Yet, one third of institutions have no online offerings.

How do information science programs fit into the online learning landscape? Our study will attempt to answer this question by exploring the current status of online education in IS. Specifically, we plan to review existing programs in terms of their business models, technological platforms and delivery format as well as assess barriers to establishing or expanding online programs. The goal is to understand what opportunities and

challenges affect building online education capacity for the IS programs. This poster reports the preliminary findings from a pilot study focused on the 19 US based members of iSchool Caucus and aimed at pilot-testing our methodology.

2. METHODS

The study uses a three-stage approach: (1) analysis of content of the programs' websites, (2) email survey of programs' administrators, and (3) in-depth telephone interviews of a small sample of administrators. The goal is to gain a better understanding of online learning in the IS environment by gradually progressing from informal search to more detailed and structured inquiry.

For the pilot, we started by browsing the websites of the US iSchools, looking for any information about online offerings, which we expected to find in the sections labeled as "academics", "programs", "courses" and "schedules" (in the latter we looked for "web", "online" or similar indication for course location/delivery). This intensive browsing was augmented with thorough keyword searches. Keywords, such as "online course(s)", "web-based", "distance learning", "distance education", "online degree", were used to search the web site of each iSchool as well as the site of its parent university. Despite the differences in web site structures, the amount and granularity of information provided, we were able to obtain similar information for all programs enabling us to do the initial comparison and providing the basis for development of the survey questions. Additionally, we were interested in the format and technology platform(s) used to deliver online courses. This information, when not explicitly stated as part of the description of available online options, was obtained by expanding browsing and search to technical support areas of the web sites of each school and its parent university. While this approach may fail to capture all the different technologies used for online education, it allows us to determine the main delivery platform(s), which was deemed sufficient for the current stage of the pilot.

3. PRELIMINARY RESULTS

3.1 Online Learning Offerings

The majority of US iSchools (14 of 19) offer some online learning options. Nine schools offer complete online degrees. Of the other five schools, four offer limited number of online courses with availability changing every semester and one has a substantial number of online courses and is in the process of developing a fully-online degree. Surprisingly, using methods described above, we were unable to find any information about online credit course or degree offerings for five of the schools in the sample. Still, compared to national averages, US iSchools

appear to be more engaged in online learning: 48% vs. 35% offer online degrees and 74% vs. 66% have some online learning options.

Preliminary analysis of the details of online options offered by fourteen iSchools reveals several patterns. First, the schools offering full degrees or having plans to offer such degrees in the near future are affiliated with universities that have strong online branches and offer a number of online degrees from different fields of study. Second, the fully-online degrees offered by iSchools tend to be career-oriented professional degrees at the Master's level or advanced practice post-Masters' certificates that are geared towards working professionals in need of additional education to meet new career challenges or those seeking to prepare for a new career in the information related field.

The prevalence of Library Science related online degrees prompted us to conduct a survey of web sites of all US based ALA accredited schools (majority of iSchools being also in this group) using the same methodology as described in section 2. The comparison revealed that the patterns of online engagement for ALA schools/programs is very similar to national averages, but the ALA schools that are also members of the iSchool Caucus lead with 54% offering full degrees and 85% having some online learning options.

3.2 Delivery Platform and Format

The vast majority of iSchools offering online courses use some commercial or open-source Course Management System (CMS) to deliver course materials. Blackboard is the most popular system used by eight schools. Other CMS used include Moodle, Sakai, eCollege and ANGEL Learning. Web-conferencing software seems to be gaining popularity, but only one school uses such technology as the main online platform. Mixing different technologies within the same program appears to be uncommon. The delivery formats of online courses ranges from fully-online to hybrid (requiring some face-to-face meetings). Individual courses tend to be fully-online, but degree programs often have a mandatory short-term (4-10 days) residency requirement at the beginning of the program or semester.

Survey of ALA accredited programs produced largely similar results, including dominance of CMS, particularly Blackboard, as the delivery platform. However, there are more programs in this group that use a mix of technologies and there is a wider utilization of broadcast and videoconferencing.

4. DISCUSSION AND FUTURE PLANS

From the preliminary analysis, it would seem that the presence and nature of online offerings at an iSchool largely depends on

the level of online learning engagement of the parent institution. It is much easier to offer an online degree as part of an existing "university online", and it may be not feasible for an individual school to acquire and support the technology needed for online course delivery. But what about schools that offer some online courses and are affiliated with universities that have contracts with vendors of online learning platforms? Indeed, roughly equal number of iSchools uses Blackboard or Moodle to deliver either select online courses or full degrees. What prevents the programs offering select courses from growing their online capacity when they have access to the same technology as the peer programs offering full online degrees? What barriers exist to these iSchools becoming leaders in online learning at their respective universities? Most of the degree programs available online are professional practice oriented. Perhaps programs with strong academic research emphasis have lesser interest in developing online capacity. We plan to explore all these dimensions further through our survey and interviews.

Other factors we plan to explore in the next stage of the pilot project include: business models, program histories, strategic plans and resistance to engaging in online education. We want to take a closer look at some successful online IS programs and see what lessons can be learned from them. This work will lay the foundation for a broader study, including international institutions, that is currently in the planning stage.

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