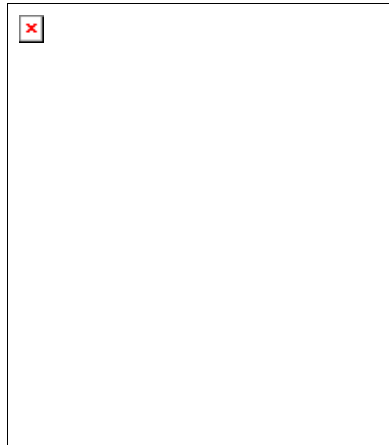


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Virtually Educated

As area colleges offer ever more courses online, what kind of education do students really get?



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by **Melissa Nicefaro**

There's a notion among some students - yes, even those who are adults - that taking college courses online represents some kind of easy way out.

The notion is not true, according to some area college professors. The ideal student who takes an online college course is organized, even regimented, and responsible. He or she cannot be a procrastinator and these courses are not for everybody.

Clara Munson, chairperson of the accelerated MBA program at Albertus Magnus College in New Haven, teaches online and in the classroom. For online courses Albertus uses a program called Campus Cruiser that consists of online message boards, file sharing and space for journals. Munson uses a lot of PowerPoint slides for her courses, online and in the classroom, though she is considering video streaming through the shared files.

"About three years ago, there was an incentive for professors to offer 'blended' classes," Munson explains. "There is still a bit of a student perception that with a blended class, they only have to go for half of the time, but they are held accountable."

Munson says she has noticed that online classes seem to attract a higher caliber of student.

"Instead of the student who will come into class, never feeling well, and for two hours they're lying on the desk," she says, "the nature of the online class seems to bring those who have a strong desire to learn."

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Since AMC's accelerated degree program is tailored to the working adult, required courses lend themselves particularly well to an online learning environment.

More than 80 percent of the accelerated-degree courses are either online or blended. The school year is broken into five eight-week modules, or blocks of time, and the weekly classroom commitment is typically twice for two hours and 20 minutes.

"The blended class meets once a week in person and once a week online," Munson explains. "That has become extremely popular. This means the working adult who has to travel to meetings has one less commitment to be somewhere. The student can post the assignment online at any time before the next class."

Economics and finance professor Jim Thorson taught one online public finance course at Southern Connecticut State University. He says that at SCSU, business courses tend to be taught more often in the classroom as opposed to online. Thorson says he prefers to teach his students in person.

"I like being in the classroom with students because it makes it much easier to communicate," he says. "When one student has a question, the instructor answers the question and every other student has the benefit of that answer, where there are some 'transaction costs' in online courses."

Munson has a different approach. She'll ask her students to read a chapter from the textbook, and then answer a reflective question.

"Each student will post a 300- to 350-word response," Munson explains. "Another student has to respond to something another student has said and respond to the question. Some people do two or three, but they have to respond to at least one other student. This helps the students see the perspectives."

She believes that online courses are in particular doing a great service to the art of writing.

"What we've found is that sometimes there's a student in the classroom who is very quiet, doesn't participate much, and just sits there and you wonder what's happening, even though they're doing very well on tests. These students, when they write on the message boards, their writing is phenomenal. This is giving them an idea to express ideas that they don't in the classroom," she says.

"As a nation, we're falling down on our writing skills," Munson observes. "So for a lot of people this is an opportunity for them to continue developing through writing." She takes points off for use of trendy verbiage - such as "U" for "you" - in weekly feedback.

"I don't think you can let that go," she says. "It's horrible to think that at a college level, students still use the wrong 'there,' 'their,' or 'they're.'"

That would likely drive David Sloan, a professor of English and education at the University of New Haven, to distraction.

Sloan was one of the first four teachers in Connecticut to offer an online course 15 years ago.

"I remember sitting in a darkened room around 1994, listening to a presentation from Web Mentor, which later became Blackboard," he recalls. "My eyes got big and round, my jaw dropped open and I thought, 'My God - I'm looking at the future!'"

He is currently teaching six online courses to students enrolled in the business, criminal justice and engineering programs.

UNH continues to use Blackboard for its online offerings.

The Internet has presented a very convenient method of delivery for education, Sloan says.

"The lecture goes into the box and students can go to them any week they want to," he says. "If they know they have mid-term exams coming, they can do a week's work early. One of the wonderful things about online is that all of my stuff is always there and students can access it at any time. They can go back at any time and clarify something that they may not have had the opportunity to do if they were sitting in the classroom taking notes."

He communicates with students mostly via e-mail and the Blackboard message boards. He also is considering video streaming.

"All of the work in an online course is student-directed," Sloan notes. "In that sense, students are getting a lot more from me online than they are in class, but what they're missing is seeing me jump around. I have to figure out how best to use video streaming."

He has recorded 19 60-second bits for the Applied Linguistics class, each touching on a point that he thinks is better made with his voice, pronunciation and inflection than it is with words on a page.

"Online courses do not replace some of the aspects of classroom teaching, particularly for undergraduates looking for the conventional college campus experience," he says. "Online is convenient, but what most students are paying for is the chance to physically attend a college. They're paying for help maintaining their structure and deadlines."

Certainly, online courses are not for everyone.

"Online courses are for people who are organized," asserts Sloan. "Those who are disorganized have some trouble and it's terrible for procrastinators. My courses are built around discussions. If you have to discuss every week and then take a quiz every week, it shows up pretty quickly if you're not on top of your work."

Thorson agrees.

"The online course is quite convenient for the student, since they can take the course virtually anywhere at any time," he says. "In my opinion, it takes a lot less work to get students to the

classroom and teach them. When I first came to Southern 16 years ago, the sense was that if we went online, we were substituting capital for labor. After we've taught online courses for a number of years, we realized we weren't substituting capital for labor -we're using the same labor even more."

The theory was that online courses typically have a smaller class size than traditional campus courses.

The bugs are still being worked out and not all subject are suitable for an online learning environment, no matter how interactive the instructor makes it.

Munson describes an experiment in taking a managerial accounting class online that ended disastrously. Now at Albertus Magnus most of the accounting courses are not offered in blended format.

"There is an apprehension about math and the online aspect added a level of anxiety," she recalls. "It just didn't work."

It's a matter of finding what works and running with it. Munson learned the truth to that when she offered an online course on human resources issues and witnessed how nicely that particular topic lent itself to the online environment.

At Albertus Magnus, business instructors who are part of the accelerated degree program have done the majority of online teaching.

The University of New Haven offers online courses in virtually every subject.

Sloan sums it up: "It's about true minds working together. There's no visual disruption, no looking over at the other person, trying to figure them out. It's all thinking, straight to communication."