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How Colleges Can Make the Most of Growing Online Enrollment

Schools can use externally built or homegrown platforms to deliver a more robust – and remote – learning experience.

by **Erin Brereton**

Erin Brereton has written about technology, business and other topics for more than 50 magazines, newspapers and online publications.

More than **6 million** students took at least one online course in 2015, according to the latest Digital Learning Compass [report](#).

With on-campus course enrollment on the decline and online enrollment increasing, colleges can use the latest in tech to **boost student learning opportunities and reap financial benefits**.

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Real-Time Data Boosts Learning Outcomes for Many Types of Students

Institutions are increasingly realizing that online courses can be an **effective way to attract student populations ranging from undergrads living at home for the summer to adults seeking a graduate degree**, says Jill Buban, senior director of research and innovation at the Online Learning Consortium.

"Online learning is being recognized as an extremely good pedagogical form of learning," Buban says. "Faculty can provide coursework from a learning management system and measure and track student learning and program outcomes."

The real-time data that some LMS platforms provide can help faculty see **patterns**, such as how many students answer introductory-level questions incorrectly, to determine what extra resources are needed.

Digital Tools Promote Collaboration Among Students and Instructors

Content can also be delivered in a variety of ways. Schools can use their **platform to share it synchronously or via a recorded lecture**.

Some offer blended learning programs, featuring a mix of online and in-person instruction. [Research](#) also indicates that chief academic officers view blended learning more favorably than exclusively online courses.

Educators are also using emerging technology to make learning more interactive.

"There are some interesting artificial intelligence and game design courseware offerings – training capabilities for criminal justice students looking at a crime scene and answering questions, or nursing students detecting what's wrong with a patient," Buban says.

Some schools are taking additional steps to help faculty members use online learning tools. For example, California State University Channel Islands offers a two-week professional development course – online – for instructors.

Half of CSUCI's course **focuses on the technical skills needed to use the school's learning management system and other design tools that support online curriculum**.

The rest of the course centers on using these tools to personalize the online learning experience.

This a crucial element for distance learning to be effective, says Jill Leafstedt, executive director of the university's Teaching & Learning Innovations team.

"If you're going to be successful in an online environment, it has to be about putting people first, not tools," Leafstedt says. "The platform and courseware are important – but we will lose a huge portion of students if we don't keep the human connection."

Most universities Buban works with pair instructional designers with faculty members to build a customized experience for their students.

"It goes back to the institutional goals and purpose of the program," she says. "Do they want to start a unit around online learning? Do they have expertise internally? The decision is really unique to the institution."

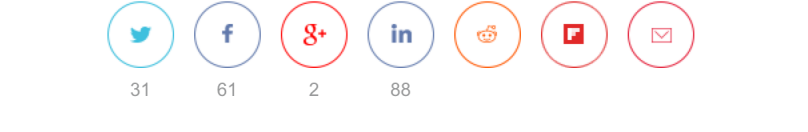
Managing the Costs and Benefits of Online Curriculum

To build online courses, some schools contract with a vendor to create and host the curriculum.

This can be expensive, but it may allow courses to be released in less than a year, instead of the two or three it could take if developed internally, says Veronica Diaz, director of online programs for higher education technology association [EDUCAUSE](#).

In addition to saving time, **using more online courses can save universities money**.

Institutions can offer online courses to more people without paying for additional classroom space and may, Diaz says, save on personnel costs.



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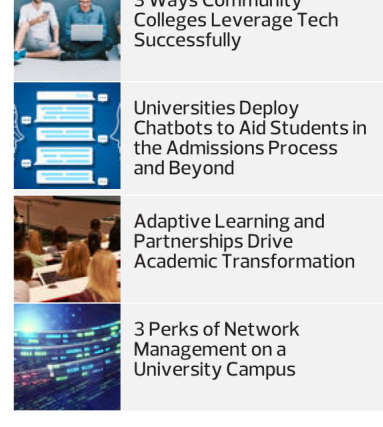
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