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Top: Elisabeth Larson, a homeschooled student, is also enrolled in an online school, Minnesota Connections Academy. Above: Billy Jenkins graduated from BlueSky, a Minnesota-based charter K-12 school that offers exclusively online courses.

In California, a middle school student recovering from a long-term illness checks a class Web site for homework assignments. In Illinois, a busy professional collaborates on a project with colleagues scattered throughout America, earning credits for a master's degree in business administration.

Individually, neither of these innovations in education is revolutionary or even new; the Internet, after all, is more than 10 years old. Collectively, however, online instruction is rapidly achieving a critical mass that is transforming education in the United States from the elementary grades to the university level.

Online growth

Almost 3.5 million, or 20 percent, of all college students took one or more online courses during the 2006-2007 academic year—an increase of almost 10 percent over the previous year, according to Sloan Consortium, a foundation-supported organization in Newburyport, Massachusetts working to improve online education.

“The 9.7 percent growth rate for online enrollments far exceeds the 1.5 percent growth of the overall higher-education student population,” says Sloan in its most recent annual report, *Online Nation*.

Roughly half of all online students are enrolled in two-year—or associate-degree—programs at America's many community colleges, where the most popular courses are in business, education, engineering, nursing, public health and library science.

One mark of online education's explo-

sive growth: the largest private university in the United States today is the online University of Phoenix in Arizona, with an enrollment of more than 397,700 students in the 2008-2009 academic year.

The University of Maryland's separate University College has over 177,000 online students; other public and private schools with substantial online enrollments are Baker College in Michigan, Central Texas College, Walden University and Capella University in Minnesota.

Lifelong learning

A number of factors are driving the expansion of online education in the United States and around the world, chief among them the growing demand for specialized knowledge in today's complex, information-based society.

Not only is knowledge expanding, experts point out, but current information can become obsolete quickly—especially in fields like biotechnology and computer science.

The dilemma for many professionals is that, although their education cannot stop with a college or professional degree anymore, few can afford to return to school full time. Their best solution, the United States Distance Learning Association points out, may well be flexible, targeted online courses that can be integrated into their family and work schedules.

Advances in digital technology, moreover, allow for much greater interaction with instructors and other students—including multimedia

applications and real-time conversations—for anyone with a reliable broadband connection to the Internet.

Open classrooms

The online education movement also is opening the classroom doors of many of America's top universities to the general public. Online visitors cannot earn college credits, but institutions from the University of California at Berkeley to Yale University in Connecticut are offering full course materials—lectures, notes, readings and class syllabi—for anyone with the time and inclination, according to *The Washington Post*.

The most ambitious online offering comes from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), which has posted a remarkable 1,900 classes online.

“MIT is trying to redefine the role of the institution in the digital age,” says Stephen Carson, external relations director of MIT's online initiative. MIT reports that 31 million people have accessed the school's course offerings, of which half describe themselves as self-learners.

Quality and accreditation

The proliferation of Internet-based programs has raised questions of how to maintain and measure educational standards. Online courses may be recognized locally, but few have yet been accredited by nationally

recognized professional associations, according to the professional journal *Educause Quarterly*.

The Sloan Consortium has launched an ambitious initiative to establish nationwide standards accrediting online and other kinds of technology-based education.

Following Hurricane Katrina's devastation of New Orleans, for example, Sloan established a temporary “virtual” university within a week that offered displaced students 1,300 free courses from over 150 educational institutions.

Virtual high schools

Online education is playing an increasingly important role in many of America's high schools as well. The El Paso school district in Texas is using digital video conferences to link students and teachers in over 75 locations.

More commonly, however, online education can link schools with students unable to attend classes in person. Among those enrolled at Orange Lutheran High School Online in Orange County, California, is a student living on an isolated ranch in Nebraska, another recovering from a kidney transplant, and an athlete who travels frequently with his ice hockey team.

“We try to meet the needs of many people in many different ways,” says school director Patty Young.

Another program, called simply

For more information:

The Sloan Consortium

<http://www.sloan-c.org/>

University of Phoenix

<http://www.phoenix.edu/>

Free online course materials at MIT

<http://ocw.mit.edu/OcwWeb/web/home/home/index.htm>

Why Distance Education is Better for the Environment

<http://www.distance-education.org/Articles/Going-Green-Why-Distance-Education-is-Better-for-the-Environment-46.html>

Virtual High School, offers online courses to supplement conventional classroom instruction in partnership with more than 550 high schools across the United States, and in 52 other countries.

As one education expert says, “Students are moving in and out of face-to-face and online encounters with such rapidity that it doesn't make sense to make sharp distinctions between the two anymore.”

For Susan Patrick, president of the North American Council for Online Learning, the critical issue is not whether education is delivered electronically or in person, but making education accessible to every student everywhere.

“And we can make that true with online learning,” she says.



Howard Cincotta is a special correspondent for *America.gov*

Opening Doors to Knowledge

By HOWARD CINCOTTA

From elementary schools to universities, online courses are changing the face of American education.