

# Long-Distance Learning

Online education is evolving for the better

By Haley Shapley

As technology transforms nearly every aspect of our lives, education has been no exception. Although universities have traditionally been slow to change their way of operating, online classes have been picking up steam. The latest statistics show 5.8 million students taking at least one distance learning course, according to the research report "Online Report Card: Tracking Online Education in the United States."

## Harnessing the potential

Once just copycats of in-person classes, online courses are now finding ways to really leverage their platform. For example, education technology company 2U Inc. partners with colleges to create online programs and courses that allow faculty to look at how students are mastering certain concepts and which checkpoints they've completed — where they're at with taking quizzes, interacting with videos, participating in discussion groups, etc.

"Through our analytics, the professor can see who has done what, so they come in armed with much better information than they could feasibly have in a physical class," says Susan Cates, chief operating officer at 2U.

On the plus side, online classes are usually less expensive, both for universities and for

students. Even if the cost per credit hour is comparable to a traditional class, there are no expenses for commuting, and the flexibility is greater for those with jobs and other commitments. Taking a class online can also enhance virtual communication, a vital skill to have in this era of email.

## Compare and contrast


Despite the advances in online education, many still wonder if these classes are as beneficial as in-person ones. There is some evidence that online learning can be more challenging, particularly for students who are least prepared for college, according to public policy think tank the Brookings Institution. Of the academic leaders surveyed by the Babson Survey Research Group in 2015, about 71 percent rated online education as the same or superior to face-to-face instruction — a sizable increase from the 57.2 percent who felt the same in 2003, but still not close to equal.

However, distance learning also opens up opportunities for people who may not be able to attend classes in person. And Cates says they've yet to find a discipline that can't be taught effectively in an online environment, from business to social work





to nursing to speech pathology to data science. The key is to find a high-quality course that works for you.

"Online education is as varied and as nuanced as face-to-face education is," Cates says. "There's plenty of bad stuff out there and there are some exceptional learning experiences online. As a prospective student, understanding the specifics for the way that program is designed and supported and how it fits your learning style is really important." 

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