Online University vs Traditional University: opportunities and peculiarities

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Traditional universities that offer courses in physical classrooms and online universities have the same goal: provide students with an educational experience that enables them to grow in their chosen field and eventually take a degree. But although their purpose is the same, both possess significant differences in the approach they take, setting them distinctly apart [2]. Online learning (or e-learning) definitely has its upside, especially for those students who cannot afford the time or costs associated with attending a standard brick-and-mortar university.

One of the definitions of e-learning is the following one: 'E-learning is the delivery of content via all electronic media, including the Internet, intranets, extranets, satellite, broadcast, video, interactive TV and CD-ROM. E-learning encompasses all learning undertaken, whether formal or informal, through electronic delivery' [1, p. 104].

Advantages of Online Learning

- ✓ No pre-defined class schedule
- ✓ No commute to campus
- ✓ Lower tuition
- ✓ Fewer fees (parking, activity, etc.)
- ✓ Ability to engage online with classmates around the country (and the world)

Disadvantages of Online Learning

- ✓ Direct contact with instructors and classmates, providing learning through immediate feedback
- ✓ Physical textbooks and supplemental materials that are believed to be more beneficial when consuming large amounts of content
- ✓ Student participation readily encouraged (and often accounts for a portion of the final grade)
- ✓ Potential for networking and social interaction with other classmates (some of whom you may end up working with one day) [2].

E-learning is emerging as an important component of higher education because it provides opportunities for those who are unable to attend the university and are unable to completely put their jobs aside to be on-campus students. It also helps to generate ideas, encourage class sharing and allows more time for discussion [1, p. 105].

Like any investment, higher education requires considerable background and planning to select the university that will best meet student's specific needs. Similar to buying a new computer, different universities vary wildly in the value they offer with respect to their online courses. So when trying to determine which one is right for the student, it is important to know that the main difference between the two is in the curriculum and how it is presented [2]. In fact, this is often cited as the primary difference between online universities and courses offered in traditional classrooms, in R. May's opinion. And depending on the university, the difference can be vast. Coursework that is offered online attempts to use a formal education process through which the students and instructor interact via the web even though they are not in the same place. This means that all lectures, exams, quizzes are completed online, with course materials delivered via websites, electronic textbooks and streaming lectures, typically provided in an on-demand format. More so than any other consideration, this structure represents the biggest difference between the two styles of learning, specifically because it may have less of a lasting impact on some students due to the limitations of the electronic medium.

It's been reported that many people require interpersonal interaction to learn effectively and when that connection is removed, as it is through online universities, it alters both the learning experience and potential for retention of the material. This system of curriculum distribution is very different from that provided through the traditional college classroom. At a brick-and-mortar university many courses require physical presence of a student, enforcing an attendance policy that can often significantly impact student's grade. While attending class, students are also required to listen and take notes during the lecture

and are often tested on the material as it's presented in class – some of which is not found in the companion reading material. As a result, instructors must provide more detailed feedback to ensure the information has been presented clearly, as the student does not have the luxury of reviewing a streaming video feed or re-browsing a web page.

Despite the advantages e-learning offers, there are also criticisms leveled on it. Some scholars [1, p. 105] point out that the quality of learning in an e-learning environment is sometimes sacrificed since there is a high security risk in the system; uniqueness and personal identity is lost due to the existence of the computer between the student and the trainer in the learning relationship; the possibility of copyright infringements increases; and social contacts and direct communication with professors and colleagues are eliminated.

In addition, many universities and colleges are rushing to market with online courses in an attempt to capture this rapidly-growing segment, and are providing versions of their courses that – though technically still providing the same information – do not fulfill the requirements for accreditation. This lack of accreditation often means credits earned may not transfer or be applicable to a degree [2]. Thus, when signing up for an online university, students have to make sure the curriculum is accredited and transferable or applicable to their end goal.

References

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