

E-schooling grows, but what about the teachers?

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Because of the Internet, distance learning in higher education has come a long way since correspondence courses were sent through the mail. And technology like Web streaming has made online learning more like a real classroom experience.

As colleges increase their Web-based offerings, demand is growing for online teachers. That is bringing new job opportunities - but also raising some concerns about the quality of the instructors and the lack of an academic atmosphere.

"The number of online teachers needed has increased because enrollment has increased," said Jeff Seaman, survey director for the Sloan Consortium, a nonprofit group that studies trends in online learning. Nearly 3.5 million students were taking online courses in the autumn of 2006, the most recent data available, Seaman said. That was up nearly 10 percent from the previous year.

Today, Seaman said, more than two-thirds of U.S. higher-education institutions have some form of online offerings.

Tom Ermolovich, an adjunct management professor at Northeastern University in Boston, gives lectures using streaming video that students can view online. "I think the videos make the online experience more interesting for the online student, who may feel isolated," he said.

Robert Vernon, a professor at the Indiana University School of Social Work, holds seminars with his students in Second Life, the virtual world where computer-simulated people, called avatars, interact.

Many colleges look for online teachers who have at least a master's degree, but they do not always need teaching experience.

Terry Baron, a former marketing executive who teaches a 10-week online course on industrial psychology at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, New York, maintains virtual office hours once a week; students post messages on a Web bulletin board. "I run it all from home and don't have an office at Marist," she said.

Baron said she never dreamed she would be able to teach at a college. "When I first started doing this I wasn't sure how I'd do, but now I have fallen in love with teaching," she said.

In general, teachers and students of Internet classes are rarely online at the same time. The professors create their lessons and post them online, and students have access to the information whenever they wish.

"I can be anywhere," said Peter Bemski, an online professor in the MBA program at Regis University, based in Denver. "I started a class sitting at my desk at Regis. Then I went to Brazil for two weeks, then a workshop in Chicago, and continued teaching my class. I don't miss a beat."

But that kind of flexibility can come at a price. Most professors agree that one disadvantage of online learning is a loss of real-time interaction with students.

Stephen Ruth, professor of public policy and technology management at George Mason University, outside Washington, said that while online classes could be very effective, they were "not on par, in my opinion, with traditional classes at top-tier universities." That is because the quality of the instructors at these universities is higher and "the general ambiance of the class provides a better experience," he said.

Some in academia also say that online learning has created a second tier of instructors who work hard but are paid less than traditional professors.

While some colleges report paying teachers up to \$4,000 a course, that is not the norm. "A great number of teachers who do distance learning tend to be part-timers, and they typically get paid \$1,000 to \$1,500 to teach a course," Ruth said. "A full-time professor gets maybe 10 times more to teach a course."

Spencer Anderson, an adjunct professor of art at North Lake College in Irving, Texas, earns \$1,875 for a 16-week online course, does not have an office and receives no benefits.

The biggest growth in online teaching has been at two-year colleges, Seaman, of the Sloan Consortium, said. And while all institutions of higher learning have shown growth, public colleges are at the forefront, he said.

There are some big for-profit players as well, including the University of Phoenix. Phoenix has about 12,500 online faculty members, said Hector Leal, associate director of academic affairs for the school. Many of those are part time and are expected to have full-time jobs in their fields. Teachers are paid \$1,000 to \$2,000 a course.

Merrily Stover, a full-time online professor of anthropology for the University of Maryland University College in Adelphi, said online teaching suited her needs. She was working for the college in 2002, when she decided to relocate to California. But she was able to keep her teaching job by working online from home.

"E-learning made it possible for me to stay connected with my university and continue teaching," she said.

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