

Online Learning as a Critical Component of Long Term Institutional Strategy Perspectives among Ontario College and University Presidents

Do you see online learning as a critical component of the long term strategy of your institution?

Is it your sense that faculty acceptance of online learning is on the increase or decrease?

What training do faculty members receive for teaching online? Is any of it mandatory?

What, from your perspective, are the most critical challenges for your institution that online learning is helping to address?

Partnerships: How important are partnerships to your online learning initiatives? Which institutions are your natural partners in pursuing online learning?

Is there any particular external help you seek for your online offerings? What is the principal value that an external agency could provide for you?

We put these six questions to a group of five of Ontario's 20 university presidents and seven of the 24 college presidents as well as leaders at of some of the key stakeholder groups within the province's post-secondary education sector. In selecting the colleges and universities we took into consideration institutional size, geographic location and mandate.

What We Heard

Here is what we heard from this sample of Ontario college and university presidents.

Overall interest in online learning

While interest varies significantly across the sector, there is widespread agreement that online learning is playing an increasingly important role in Ontario's colleges and universities. Notwithstanding the outliers in both directions (those for whom online learning is critical to their strategic planning and those for whom it is not a current priority), most presidents acknowledge the increasing importance of online learning whether or not it is in the forefront of their thinking or strongly represented in their individual institutions.

Predominance of "blended" or "hybrid" learning

When it comes to online learning, presidents of both colleges and universities are understandably preoccupied with the experiences of their primary student population, full-time students between the ages of about 18-24. From this perspective, most presidential interest is in what the interviewees call "blended" or "hybrid" learning whereby a course is delivered primarily by face-to-face instruction with specific components offered online. Most courses, and the few programs, delivered exclusively online are intended for part-time students (with

part-time instructors) in continuing education divisions¹.

Most blended learning has evolved naturally from the ever-escalating developments in information and communications technologies rather than from any concerted institutional planning. Students and, to an increasing extent, younger faculty, bring expectations for - and comfort with - new technologies that are transforming the way people gather, interpret and apply knowledge. Powerful and ubiquitous Internet resources such as shared virtual spaces (e.g., wikis, Google Docs), Wikipedia and YouTube, and social media such as blogs, Twitter, and Facebook are being used to enhance face-to-face teaching in many different ways. It is relatively easy for faculty members to augment their classroom teaching with online resources that illustrate, build upon and enhance understanding of concepts presented in the classroom.

The increasing availability of open educational resources (where copyright concerns have been addressed) allows college and university teachers to benefit from the best course materials available online from anywhere in the world. In many cases, the online portion of the course is significant enough to allow the instructor to spend more class time working with individual students who have already downloaded and reviewed course materials from the instructor and/or the Internet. Lectures and seminars are still important but are increasingly being augmented or even replaced by online learning.

A variation on the theme is high-end videoconferencing, such as that used with the satellite programs at some colleges and universities, where the quality of the technology emulates a classroom even though the students and instructor may be separated by hundreds of kilometres.

College President: "Hybrid learning allows us to take the components of a course that best lend themselves to online learning. Typically, this might be one-third of a course, freeing up students to work more on their own time and allowing faculty to spend more time with individual students."²

University President: "Most of our online students are in our continuing education division which is run on a purely business and market-driven model. On the "day" side, there is plenty of online teaching but it is on a blended model, with components of most courses taking advantage of new technologies."

College President: "We're looking forward to an assessment of a pilot project in Business whereby 30 courses have been made hybrid and are now being assessed for their impact on learning. I suspect the outcome will be very positive."

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1. Ironically, more and more full-time "day" students are taking fully online courses because more and more students are working while going to school and the flexibility of this mode of delivery is very attractive to them. This issue is taken up later in this paper.
 2. Quotes are not verbatim as the interviews were informal and not recorded but they are accurate representations of what was said.

College President: "We have very successful programs whereby Aboriginal students come to our campus for intensive face-to-face classes for a couple of weeks and then return to their remote communities to continue their studies through video-conferencing and strong local support. Given their propensity to learn better in groups, as is the case for so many of us, this works much more effectively than expecting remote students to learn on their own through online learning at home."

Role of online learning in institutional strategic plans

Online learning is an important component of most institutional strategic plans, although it is usually under the broader rubric of "enhancing teaching and learning" rather than a specific topic on its own. Most objectives are set out in general terms, with only a few institutions having specific (numerical) metrics for online course preparation or student participation by specified dates.

College President: "Online learning is not a conscious part of our main strategy. We are keen to continue the strong trend to hybrid courses but have not set any goals at this point... We listen carefully to employers who increasingly demand 'soft' skills that are much better developed in the classroom than they are online – the social skills. That is why the hybrid or blended learning approach works so well."

College President: "Our goal is to make blended learning part of every program in the college over a three-year period."

University President: "We're in the middle of a strategic planning process in which online education will play an important role. However, we are starting from a position fairly far behind a number of other institutions so we have a long way to go."

College President: "We want all programs to commit to blended learning with at least one hour a week in 25% of the courses by the end of next year."

College President: "One thing that is clear is that online learning doesn't work well for poorly motivated students."

University President: "We offer lots of hybrid courses but are now planning for a major initiative in full course online learning. It's the wave of the future."

College President: "20% of courses in each program are now hybrid and we have a new target of 25%. 84% of our students are 24 or younger and that is how they want to learn."

College President: "An investment in online learning will raise our profile internationally and be an effective recruitment tool for us."

College President: "We have declining enrolments in the north and our video-enhanced delivery to remote regions will improve both participation rates and student persistence."

University President: "Pedagogical innovation is one of the top four priorities of the institutional strategic plan. It consists of experiential learning, online learning and service learning. We do not have precise targets yet but are asking the deans to develop specific benchmarks for each program area."

Faculty attitudes towards online learning

Almost every institution reports a bell curve distribution of faculty members in terms of their interest and participation in online learning (the technology adoption lifecycle). The most frequent response is that about one third of the faculty is enthusiastic, one third is disinterested or opposed and another one third is open to, but not strongly engaged in, online learning.

However, many presidents note that the balance is gradually shifting towards the first category, especially as older faculty members retire and younger people who have grown up with the Internet are hired. Even those not formally committed to online learning recognize its evolution as inevitable, given the rapid and universal trends to highly accessible and innovative technologies.

College President: "Modern technology is so effective and so pervasive that applying it to teaching and learning is inevitable"

University President: "There has been a big change in faculty attitudes over the past 10 years. Online learning is generally well accepted by professors, now – it really is no longer a big issue."

College President: "Expectations for the use of new technologies in teaching tend to be lower for general and apprenticeship programs. That's why I am so proud of what we have achieved in such a short time, with all such programs already reaching their 25% goal."

University President: "It is easier to introduce something like high-end video conferencing because it simulates the classroom – the teacher can see and interact with the individual students even when they are not on site."

College President: "The number of dissenters is falling rapidly as there is increasing acceptance of social trends and as older faculty retire."

University President: "Faculty have accepted online learning as inevitable. It doesn't mean they are necessarily keen about it but they are not resisting it. We must keep working with those most committed to it if we are to achieve real and lasting change."

Provision of training for online learning

Most, but not all, institutions offer specific faculty training opportunities in online learning, usually on a voluntary basis. Online learning is included in most new faculty orientation programs, which are more apt to be mandatory. However, it is fairly easy to conclude that, if online learning is to be really well-established across the province, there needs to be a much greater investment in education and training for the faculty, staff and students who will be most involved in making it work.

For some, this would argue for mandatory training programs but, as anyone who has worked in an academic leadership position knows, a more effective approach is to ensure the quality of training opportunities so that those who are most in need will readily volunteer to participate in them. Indeed, there are already successful examples the post-secondary education of faculty enthusiasm for online initiatives and the training components that support them.

College President: "All our new faculty members have taken an extensive professional development program which includes a significant 'teaching with technology' component."

University President: "Demand for our online training is increasing – we have had an 8% increase in online sites in 2011-2012."

College President: "We have really developed our Centre for Academic Excellence and there is increasing faculty participation in the training opportunities it provides."

University President: "We have an excellent technology team in our continuing education centre that is readily available to any faculty member, full- or part-time, who requires assistance in the development and delivery of online courses."

College President: "We are in the process of developing an online course on online teaching for our faculty members."

College President: "We have recently hired three key personnel from a local university who will really make a difference to our training and development of faculty."

University President: "We don't do much training right now but have made an agreement with a sister institution to share in some of theirs, which is first-rate."

Presidential attitudes towards external support

Leaders whose institutions are the most engaged in online learning are the ones most apt to be interested in, and to support, stronger external support. However, the majority of presidents do not see the need for a new agency, opposing further bureaucratization at a time when overall resources are declining and preferring the autonomy to deal with institutional challenges in their own way. However, and not surprisingly, many presidents welcome further financial assistance for technological innovation.

University President: "We have been able to take care of our own training and support to date but that is because we are offering only a few courses online. In planning to really gear up this mode of delivery, we will need a much stronger technical infrastructure, better online administrative systems for registration, examinations, student advising and effective instructional designers to ensure the quality of our courses."

University President: "I can envision a new agency modeled after the Ontario Universities Application Centre. It would have no brand of its own but would provide a world-class infrastructure and support network for institutions that wanted to be members."

College President: "We can always benefit from the expertise and experience of others. I see the value of cloud computing, encouraging more collaboration across the system for infrastructure support, common learning management systems, and faculty training."

College President: "We're a small college but we have the same infrastructure needs for online learning as the largest institutions. Funding to date has been enrolment based – this is unfair and leaves us significantly behind the larger colleges in online learning."

College President: "We don't need an over-arching body and more bureaucracy. I favour the sort of innovation fund in British Columbia which has allowed an institution like BCIT to move to the forefront of Canadian colleges. Relatively small amounts of incentive funding would really make a difference to our individual institutions."

College President: "Faculty training and support from an external agency would be very much appreciated."

Motives for pursuing online learning

One of the most interesting questions is the extent to which presidents see online learning as a crucial response to their current and future primary institutional challenges. There is widespread agreement as to what the latter are – costs escalating faster than revenues, burgeoning class sizes and student-faculty ratios, overcrowded facilities, responding to the learning needs of a new generation of students and ensuring institutional quality. As the following quotes demonstrate, there is less agreement as to the importance of online learning

in responding to these challenges.

In particular, most respondents do not envision financial savings through online learning initiatives, at least in the short term. Whatever savings realized by online students putting less pressure on campus space and facilities are easily matched by increased investments in technological systems, course adaptation and development and faculty and staff training.

The principal motives for pursuing online learning are responding to a new generation of students who have grown up with the Internet (familiarity with social media, the convenience of working at home or in the workplace, more flexible time management given busy schedules, enhancing the quality of their learning), its contribution to a more efficient use of existing resources (reducing the number and size of classes on campus and all the associated demands on campus services and facilities and for additional space) and, in some cases, to accommodate expectations from employers for the technological skill sets of their graduates. In a couple of cases, presidents saw a significant online presence as important to attracting new students to the institution, notably international students.

University President: "Instead of having faculty members teach five courses face-to-face, we could reduce their workloads and make better use of existing resources if each taught one course online."

College President: "As a northern college facing enrolment declines, online learning allows us to promote our programs in the rest of the province, attract more students and increase retention rates. It is a critical part of our response to our biggest challenge."

College President: "It's a combination of several key forces – responding to what students bring and demand, what employers want and making optimal use of our physical resources."

University President: "Classes have been getting larger and larger for years. The trend to more online courses will help us to reduce the student-faculty ratio and give more personal attention to students, both online and in the classroom."

College President: "It helps address our biggest problem – finding a place to park!"

College President: "Online learning should not be pushed for financial reasons – I'm not sure it will be less expensive and it's the wrong reason for pursuing it anyway."

Institutional partnerships

Most presidents acknowledge the value of partnerships in online learning but there are not many concrete examples to date. A few note that partnerships are not easily realized in the prevailing atmosphere of intense competition for students and institutional reputation. There are fledgling bilateral initiatives to share course development costs for a given program with

each institution preparing courses in its areas of strength but it is too soon to report on their extent and effectiveness.

Many respondents cited a wide gulf between colleges and universities but also noted there are also considerable differences within the two sectors, such as those between the larger GTA located institutions and smaller institutions serving more remote parts of the province. The former are bursting at the seams at the same time that some of the latter are facing serious enrolment declines. However, most presidents see the value of such partnerships and concede that the widely anticipated continuation of funding cutbacks may be the best catalyst for better cross-institutional collaboration in the future, necessity being the mother of invention.

College President: "We're getting away from the old model which strictly defined a college's catchment area by geography. Instead, we are working with a sister institution to develop and offer our strongest programs in their area and their strongest ones in our region. This ensures the availability and high quality of courses for our community in a cost effective way, with online learning as a critical component to the success of this venture."

College President: "The funding system rewards enrolment growth and 'co-opetition' which is not an environment particularly conducive to inter-institutional collaboration."

University President: "We are working with another university to develop collaborative online programs, building on our respective strengths. This cuts developmental costs in half and allows us to build program quality, capitalizing on the most capable faculty in our respective institutions."

College President: "A lot of collaboration across the colleges has been quietly fostered by Ontario Learn, a grassroots movement that is really bearing fruit. It is effective because it has been developed quietly and cooperatively behind the scenes by practitioners across the system and not as something imposed from on high."

University President: "Institutional partnerships do not play a prominent role in online learning at the present time."

College President: "Collaborating with other post-secondary institutions is more difficult because of the competitive atmosphere in Ontario. Actually, our best partnerships are with our local school boards in working together to encourage high school students to continue to post-secondary education and to be well prepared for it."

College President: "While collaboration among colleges has improved now that we have put the infighting around degree-granting status behind us, there remains a huge gap between the college and university sectors. Even university leaders who espouse better connections with colleges don't seem to be able to deliver on this."

Conclusion

Ontario's post-secondary education sector is one in considerable transition. The Internet is becoming increasingly integral to teaching and learning on all of our campuses and there can be little doubt that hybrid or blended learning will be the primary mode of operation in the vast majority of college and university courses within the decade.

There is, and will continue to be, more significant growth in completely online programs and courses, emulating the success of the world's open universities and colleges. These offer essential opportunities for older students, part-time students, those pursuing formal education while also in the workforce and others for whom the prevailing system of full-time attendance is inconvenient or unaffordable. At the same time, full-time on-campus students are enrolling in online courses in unprecedented numbers - so much so that they are often the majority of the students in a given course.

Institutions need to continue to build their online courses and programs and to add many more in response to demand from students and employers alike. Online offerings in most institutions are well located in continuing education departments which pay close attention to market demand and tend to have more flexibility in course offerings and delivery mechanisms than do the regular academic departments in colleges and universities.

Online learning may not yet be a top priority for college and university presidents, but there is increasing awareness among them that it should be, not as an end in itself but as a key component of improving both the quality and the cost effectiveness of teaching and learning, on and off campus.

Blended or hybrid learning works because it is evolving naturally, because students both like and demand it, because faculty find that it enhances rather than replaces their traditional classroom teaching methods and because it becomes easier and easier to implement. In fact, it is highly likely that such terms as "online", "hybrid" or "blended" learning will disappear in the near future as the technology becomes so integrated into teaching and learning that it is taken for granted