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Online classes post huge growth in nation, Iowa

By Diane Heldt

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More than one in four college students takes at least one class online, says a recent national report.

Online education is a booming market nationally and for many Iowa colleges and universities, and officials expect that growth — and the competition — to increase as students seek more flexibility in earning degrees.

“Online programs are the fastest-growing segment of our university,” Upper Iowa University President Alan Walker said. “It remains robust.”

People want to retrain, finish a degree or earn advanced degrees to become more competitive in a tough job market, Walker said. Often, those people have mortgages, families and jobs, so they can't uproot their lives to attend college far away.

“We're still serving a lot of the same people who would have been walking through our doors, but we're serving them in an online format,” said Todd Prusha, dean of distance learning and secondary programs at Kirkwood Community College in Cedar Rapids. “There's a push for it. We're an on-demand society.”

Kirkwood's online classes often fill quickly and form waiting lists. Enrollment in the college's Anytime Anywhere program jumped 24 percent this spring, with 183 sections of 99 courses and total enrollment of 5,525. Kirkwood offers five degrees that can be completed entirely online.

“A lot of times I do the work early in the morning before my children get up, or I can do it at night,” said Kari Voss, 36, a stay-at-home mom of three from Atkins and an online Kirkwood student. “I don't have to be in a classroom at a certain time on a specific day.”

At Upper Iowa in Fayette, online enrollment grows 25 percent to 30 percent yearly, Walker said. Upper Iowa was a pioneer of online education in Iowa, launching its program in 1998. The university's online enrollment is 1,618, up from 570 in 2004.

“The flexibility was awesome,” West Des Moines resident Maury Malone, 32, said of his Upper Iowa online classes. “Even if you're traveling, as long as your hotel has computer access, your school work still gets done.”

The convenience is great, but Urbandale resident Billi Hughes said she did miss the traditional classroom experience. Hughes, 33, took Upper Iowa courses online while

working from home as a graphic designer and Web designer to be with her 1-year-old daughter, and she said online education is a great opportunity.

“What I feel you miss out on, though, is I think you’re forced to learn more when you’re sitting in the class,” she said.

Nationally, online enrollment continues to grow at rates far exceeding total higher education growth, according to a recent report by the Sloan Consortium. More than 4.6 million students took at least one online course in fall 2008, a 17 percent increase over the previous year. Comparatively, the overall higher education population grew 1.2 percent in that period.

Some colleges and universities want to take advantage of that online trend. Coe College in Cedar Rapids and Cornell College in Mount Vernon don’t offer online courses, but Mount Mercy in Cedar Rapids piloted two classes last summer and will do so again this year, with an eye on exploring more online options for 2010-11, officials said.

Iowa’s regent universities also must capitalize on the trend and boost their own online enrollments, state Board of Regents President David Miles said. He doesn’t envision the University of Iowa, Iowa State University and the University of Northern Iowa offering a significant number of degrees entirely online, but he sees online becoming part of all classes — in a hybrid delivery model.

Online delivery also could mean some cost savings, but educational quality can’t be sacrificed for that, Miles said.

“I think it’s soon going to be ubiquitous,” he said. “Regardless of how a student interacts with us, some element of their educational experience is going to be online as well as in the classroom.”

Universities and colleges face growing competition from for-profit models, which educate about 7 percent of the nation’s 19 million students who enroll each fall, according to a Chronicle of Higher Education report last month.

For example, the University of Phoenix became the second-largest higher education system in the country this year, with 455,600 students as of February — larger than the entire undergraduate enrollment of the Big Ten Conference, the Chronicle reported. The University of Phoenix had 25,100 students in 1995.

“They present a challenge, and we need to respond,” Miles said.