

Stay at Home, Earn a Degree

Andrea Fuerst and Maribeth Pennekamp both earned master's degrees in education at the University of Cincinnati last year.

But while keeping their full-time teaching jobs and shepherding their children to piano lessons and swim meets, there was one thing at UC that the two Ross residents never saw.

The campus.

Instead, they took all of their courses online, working mostly at night through the Blackboard system. All of their class discussions and term papers were on the screens of their laptops, not in person or on paper.

"The first time I saw the campus was at graduation," said Pennekamp, a seventh grade teacher in the New Miami School District. "And I didn't even have to go there."

Fuerst, a satellite teacher in the Lakota School District, said the online courses allowed her to fit the graduate program into her own busy life.

"It's more individualized and you can work at your own pace," she said. "My Saturdays and Sundays were just gone. We travel quite a bit, so I could do the work wherever I went."

Fuerst and Pennekamp aren't alone. They're part of one of the biggest trends in higher education as more and more students take classes away from traditional campuses and classrooms.

UC enrolled 2,559 students in distance learning degree programs last fall; more than double the number from 2004 and 10 times the number in 2001. Driven by Internet technology that has made it easier to connect at any time of the day, other universities throughout Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky have seen similar trends.

Universities love the distance-learning programs because they increase access to a new audience of students, plus they build student enrollment without taking up expensive classroom space. Students who have jobs love them because they can set their own schedules.

"As soon as we open up an online class, it's filled," said Vicki Culbreth, executive director of educational outreach at Northern Kentucky University.

Nationally, about 3.5 million students took at least one online course in 2006, according to the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. That's nearly 10 percent more than the previous year, dwarfing the 1.5 percent growth in college students overall.

Because the online offerings are targeted to older students who already are working – dubbed "nontraditional" – community colleges have seen the highest growth rates and account for more than half of all online enrollment, the Sloan study reported. Add virtual-only schools such as Union Institute in Walnut Hills, plus for-profit operators, and the number of offerings increases.

The next generation of distance-learning courses could move from laptops to hand-held mobile devices. The company that operates Blackboard, the online system that is common on college campuses, just bought one of the biggest mobile messaging companies.

As universities look for ways to add enrollment, more traditional students are taking online courses, according to administrators of the growing programs.

More than 1,600 NKU students took at least one online course last fall and 468 of those were totally online, Culbreth said. The university hopes to reach 2,500 students operating online for at least part of their course load, and add 20 percent more online courses each year, she said.

Students in online courses pay an extra \$20 per credit hour for technical support, but they all pay the same in-state tuition rate. Culbreth said she compared grades on online students and those in traditional courses last year and they came out nearly the same.

The trend is the same at Miami University. The Center of Online Learning is in its third year with about 20 classes offered, and Miami hopes to offer an entire program that leads to a bachelor's degree in nursing by September, with many of the courses offered at the Middletown and Hamilton campuses.

"We'd like to get several entire programs online so students don't even have to come to campus," said Janet Hurn, a senior physics instructor at Miami's Middletown campus and director of the online program. "When we develop a course, we want it to be a high-end quality course, not just, 'Here's a bunch of Power Points, now take a test.'"

Administrators say that's the latest evolution in distance learning, converting courses from traditional curriculum simply put online to courses designed specifically for students the professors will never see.

Hurn, for example, teaches an online physics course with a lab. Students buy a lab kit and fill in results and graphs using Blackboard.

"It takes a lot of discipline," she said. "We do lose a few students who say that it wasn't for them. There are so many tools out there now that you can offer a good quality course."

Culbreth said online courses should include lots of video and audio files and interactive lessons. Online message boards, so popular for social networking sites, are used for class discussion, with most students required to post a certain number of times and graded on the quality of those responses.

In Pennekamp's and Fuerst's masters program in educational administration, they didn't follow the normal academic calendar but instead took individual six-week classes.

Fuerst said it allowed her to work mostly at night after putting her 8-year-old daughter to bed and finishing her preparations for the next day.

She said she liked working at her own pace but would have preferred having some face-to-face interaction with professors and other students.

She and Pennekamp graduated together from New Miami High School and then from Miami University in 1991.

They live within minutes of one another in Ross and only realized they were in the same UC program together once they saw each other's names online.

Pennekamp said the distance-learning class is best for self-starters who have plenty of online experience.

"It forces people who aren't as good at communicating to learn the appropriate way to do it," she said.

About the Author

Cliff Peale is a representative of [NKU Distance Learning](#), an [online degree program](#) at Northern Kentucky University.

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