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# SPECIAL REPORT

Higher Education

## CLASSES ONLINE

Engagement levels often higher  
when students learn remotely

BY DIANA LOUISE CARTER

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# Colleges find online learning often more engaging for students

By DIANA LOUISE CARTER

Two things are certain about online education in 2020: the phenomenon will continue to grow in higher education and institutions will continue to deliver it in their own unique ways.

If you've been on social media in the last few weeks, you may have seen posts regarding Open SUNY, drawing attention to the state's online higher education system network of 64 campuses. Students enroll at one school in the network but have access to 23,000 courses being taught around the state. They also get a coach that stays with them throughout the SUNY system, potentially from community college to graduate school.

"That's going to have a significant impact at MCC," said Terrance A. Keys, associate vice president of instructional service at Monroe Community College.

While MCC has a range of degrees available online, it has linked three specifically with this newest version of SUNY online learning. That could result in about 3,000 more MCC students going through this online system. Last fall 158 (nearly one fifth) of MCC's 839 courses were offered online.

"We're just getting more SUNY students through a different funnel with a slightly different support system around them," Keys said. But a larger-than-expected number of students are coming through the Open SUNY system for MCC's spring semester, Keys said. (The system doesn't have its formal launch until next fall and registration for spring was still going on as Keys talked.) "It's con-

suming all of our energies right now," he said, as the system works on streamlining support systems for the rush of students.

SUNY has had online learning for some time, Keys noted, but until recently didn't do much to market the possibilities. Its new push is meant to counter the 40,000 college students who "leave" the state each year online, seeking degrees from for-profit entities such as Southern New Hampshire University or University of Phoenix.

It's too early to tell how much SUNY online enrollment will grow, but various local schools in and out of the state system have shown an ever-upward trend.

At Rochester Institute of Technology, online courses have grown by 33 percent in the last five academic years, while enrollment in those courses has increased 52 percent, even though online classes form a tiny fraction of all the courses offered there. Additionally, RIT participates in edX, a network of 140 institutions offering what's known as mass open online classes. In that edX network, RIT has served 1.2 million students from an average of 186 countries at a time.

"For us, edX was a good first step," said Therese Hannigan, director of RIT Online. Cyber Security is one of five "micro-master" programs the university has put online through edX. The RIT brand appealed to that arena, she said. "We're known, but we're not known for every program that we have," Hannigan said.

EdX offers its courses for free but students may pay to get a certificate verifying that they've completed a class or line of study. The courses, however, may entice a student to pursue a traditional degree

online in which they pay the same tuition as on-campus students. RIT currently offers 35 credit-bearing programs online.

SUNY Geneseo, by comparison, is still dipping its toes in the bath, but the water is heating up.

"Online offerings are in the process of growing pretty dramatically right now," said Paul Schacht, professor of English and assistant to the provost for digital learning and scholarship.

Geneseo offers most of its online classes during the January intersession and summer. This January's online courses are double the 23 courses that were offered last January. Enrollment went from about 500 students last year to 870 this term.

Like many schools, Geneseo had a January term years ago but later abandoned it. Schacht said Geneseo brought back its January term two years ago specifically for online classes.

"It gives students a chance to meet prerequisites for the coming semester, to get ahead if that's something they want to do. It's helpful for students who are on the New York Excelsior fellowship to complete credits in a given year," Schacht said, referencing the state scholarship program that requires maintaining a specific academic pace to maintain eligibility.

At the University of Rochester, online offerings tend to be mostly in the university's graduate programs, said Eric E. Fredericksen, associate vice president for online learning and associate professor in educational leadership. There has been, however, a recent influx of summer offerings for undergraduates. Meanwhile online grad courses are growing.

In 2013, UR's Warner School of Education offered a couple of online classes in education, Fredericksen said. Last summer, there were 33 classes offered. In UR's School of Nursing, about 45 percent of graduate enrollments are from online students.

Some students in those programs do live in other states, Fredericksen said, but noted "distance from campus isn't the biggest driver for why students take online courses." Rather, students in education and nursing in particular tend to seek graduate degrees while they are already employed. Online courses allow them to fit their academic schedule around their employment.

And work schedules can get wacky at times. Fredericksen noted some students who also work as athletic coaches find online courses easier to manage during the athletic season, but then take courses on campus in their off season.

Local colleges have been engaging in online programming for decades. RIT, for instance, began teaching courses "online" with cable television 40 years ago, Hannigan said.

The thought used to be that such courses made higher education possible for people at great distances from campus. But with some exceptions — edX, notably — online students today are more typically quite close to campus if they're not actually on campus. They might be taking face-to-face courses on campus most of the time and add in a few online courses as well.

"Probably the biggest motivator for the student is that it makes plotting out their two-or four-year progress at Geneseo to a bachelor's degree easier because it gives them greater flexibility," Schacht said. All Geneseo freshmen are required to take a critical writing and thinking course in their first year. Having an online section

of the course makes it easier for students to meet that requirement.

For those students who are entirely online, there is often still a geographic proximity to campus. The local online-learning experts agreed that students pick their online program based on whether the school's campus is close enough to visit if that becomes necessary. Some online courses have an in-person requirement, such as an intensive seminar once a semester.

Online courses are taught differently in some ways from face-to-face courses. To allow students to move at their own pace, all the material for the entire semester needs to be made available at the same time. That takes an adjustment for faculty members who might be used to planning lessons, presentations and assignments a few weeks out instead of completing the entire semester's planning before the first day of class even begins.

"Many people who go into teaching at the college level are subject experts, but they might not have a teaching degree, said MCC's Keys. When organizing an online course, "you spend a lot of time thinking about ... delivery."

RIT's Hannigan agreed. "We have experts in so many different fields. But expecting faculty to be an expert in online delivery..."

The local online experts said instructional design is particularly important in online courses because the student working at midnight or on the weekend can't simply raise their hand and get a question answered by the professor. MCC offers faculty developing an online course a technology expert and a librarian to assist in the designing of the course.

The Warner School now offers — online, of course — a certificate in online education.

Hannigan said research in online education offers some lessons in best practices. Putting up a video of a one-hour lecture is probably not one of those best practices. "With technology, we can see where someone drops off in a lecture," she said.

The best online courses include animations, short videos, graphics and interactive texts that allow a student to explore links that provide deeper context for the lesson being taught.

Geneseo's Schacht said he posts a literary work in his English classes and students are required to make annotations on the text, rather than just answer questions about or offer an opinion of the work.

"Good instruction is when students are actively engaged," UR's Fredericksen said. "When you have higher levels of interaction, it's all good," regardless of the mode of delivery.

Some of these tricks of the online trade are filtering into face-to-face classrooms, the local college experts said.

Even so, online classes are not for every student.

"Online, your grade is determined by participation, not just logging in," Keys said. "There are students who will not be successful at this because they're not that well organized, and that's why face-to-face classes will never go away."

The person who enjoys the back-and-forth of a class discussion may be disappointed by online discussions, which don't take place in real time, and sometimes are artificially structured. Some courses



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# Colleges take pains to make sure academic programs are up-to-date

By ANDREA DECKERT

One are the days when a college or university can use a course catalog for several years, those in higher education say.

“Sometimes they don’t even last for 10 months,” says David Basinger, vice president for academic affairs and chief academic officer at Roberts Wesleyan College. The reason is because as workforce dynamics change, so do college offerings, he says.

As a result, those in higher education constantly have to re-evaluate and decide what programs to add or drop in order to meet the changing needs.

At Roberts Wesleyan, for example, an internal and external review is done on individual programs, Basinger says.

Externally, the college collaborates with educational resource consultants who review areas such as workforce needs and the availability of people to fill those positions.

The school also utilizes professional advisory groups, in fields such as nursing and business, to further understand the skills and need, as well as the employment forecast.

Internally, Roberts Wesleyan sends out surveys to alumni, asking if the skills they developed at the school helped on the job. Officials also want to know what can be done better to help make the transition from school into the workforce as seamless as possible.

Roberts Wesleyan also uses corporate partnerships – and is currently working with more than 50 area businesses – where they provide a tuition reduction to their workers who take programs centered around the company’s needs.

Based on the data received, the college decides what they can add, modify or remove.

Basinger also oversees the school’s program development council which prioritizes what programs need to be implemented first.

The group – which also includes school deans and those from the enrollment department – meets at least quarterly and sometimes more often if there are a number of options to consider.

“It is a holistic way of evaluating what needs to be done,” Basinger says, adding any decisions regarding program changes require a several-phase process, as well as college and state approval.

One recent area where the school

is adding to its offerings is in public health where the need for a skilled workforce is growing.

Basinger says the school does not drop a lot of programs, but rather modifies them to better meet current needs.

For example, a master’s degree in health informatics was recently removed from the school’s offerings after a review determined that the needs of the field changed and could be better met through a different degree program.

In the adult and graduate programs, the number of cohorts offered each year may change depending on the need. Online offerings have changed over time as well and have continued to increase in popularity, he says.

These modifications have become the norm, Basinger says, noting some 75 percent of the programs offered today have changed from what they were five years ago.

“Our programs are constantly evolving,” Basinger says.

Katy Heyning, provost at the College at Brockport, says programs there are reviewed every five years as part of a periodic program review.

Five to 10 programs are reviewed each year, she notes, adding program reviews are also required by the State University of New York.

The periodic program review gives all academic departments a regularly scheduled opportunity to reflect and report on their current status and see if it is still a fit with the college’s mission and goals.

As part of the process, programs are reviewed by experts in the field, including faculty from other schools. There are also meetings with students and faculty to review the programs.

The college also looks at documents generated by the Department of Labor utilizing career outlook statistics and national trends to make sure the college’s programs align with the upcoming trends, Heyning says.

She adds it is important to see what courses are in high demand and those that are beginning to fall out of favor. Over the past five years, Brockport has eliminated some programs based on these reviews in areas such as recreation and leisure studies.

The college also uses employer and alumni surveys to gauge workforce needs, she says.

Health care continues to be a growing field, Heyning says, adding Brockport just received state approval for its first doctoral program in nursing, which could begin in the fall of this year.

An online MBA program has also been added, as has a graduate program geared at educators who teach

English as a second language.

Brockport pays attention to the market and sees what other educational institutions in the area offer and tries not to replicate what is done elsewhere, she says.

The college’s focus is on business and nursing, as well as education, particularly in physical education and health sciences, as well as being a strong liberal arts college, Heyning says.

When the decision is made to remove a program, the school makes sure it still has the courses available for those who are in the process of completing it, and often runs two similar programs simultaneously as one is phased in and the other phased out.

The school relies on faculty to help balance and align resources, she says.

“These are decisions we don’t take lightly,” Heyning says, adding the goal is to offer programs that are marketable in the workplace.

Todd Oldham, vice president of economic and workforce development at Monroe Community College, says the two-year school also has a number of internal and external steps for tracking what skills are in demand in the workforce, and then determining how the school can best prepare its students to meet

that need.

“It’s critical,” Oldham says of the process used to make sure there is enough market demand for students after they graduate.

The school closely works with industry groups and other organizations, including Greater Rochester Enterprise, to determine what programs may need to be added, tweaked or removed.

They also track data internally, reviewing skill clusters in the region and statewide.

The culmination of the work will be the Finger Lakes Workforce Development Center, which will be housed on the MCC’s downtown campus on State Street, Oldham says.

Two areas where MCC is looking to expand due to need are health care and information technology.

The college recently reinstated a program for those seeking to become certified nurse assistants, and research is being done on new programs that would focus on cloud-based computing applications, Oldham says.

The new offerings are not just additional programs at the school, Oldham notes, but rather the start of career pathways for students that prepare them to have professional success.

“It’s not just about adding programs,” Oldham says. “It’s also how you teach them.”

Andrea Deckert is a Rochester-area freelance writer.



Basinger



Oldham

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# Deep dive into data helps colleges improve student retention

By MATTHEW REITZ

Student retention and graduation is important to both schools and college students, and local higher education institutions are using data to boost retention and graduation rates and improve students' overall experience.

Data collection and analysis has altered the landscape for many industries, and colleges and universities are utilizing data in new ways to improve curricula, enhance student experiences and increase efficiencies. Data analytics can identify students or subsets of students — sometimes before they ever step on campus — that might be more likely to struggle in a particular area or course and allow schools to step in and help by offering tutoring or other assistance.

Over the past decade, schools have started to focus on student retention and graduation rates in large part due to increased competition among schools.

Nicholas LaMendola, director of institutional research at Nazareth College, said in New York state the number of incoming freshmen in recent years has been shrinking, and as the pool of available students becomes smaller, the emphasis on retention has increased.

"Retention is a higher priority now than it ever was," LaMendola said. "Because there's more competition for fewer students, getting those students you bring in to stay and graduate is probably the single greatest priority of our institution and probably every other institution in the region. There's a reason why so much effort is being placed on this."

Eileen Lynd-Balta, associate provost at St. John Fisher College for about seven years, said the school has always had retention and graduation rates in mind, but data analytics in recent years has al-

tered the landscape. Since implementing a more methodical usage of data over the past two years, Lynd-Balta said the school has seen a roughly 1 percent increase in retention.

"The use of data to really be able to do more and to do more targeted campaigns to help certain groups of students has been more possible in the last couple of years," Lynd-Balta said. "We just continuously try to improve on what we're doing, but it's an ongoing process."

With data analytics, schools can disaggregate collected data — or separate it by variables such as race, gender or socioeconomic status — and isolate particular groups of students who aren't progressing. Lynd-Balta said in recent years data has helped St. John Fisher identify certain populations that might be vulnerable or more likely to require assistance to succeed.

"Then we can see if there are particular interventions that can be designed to try to improve the success rates for those students," Lynd-Balta said.

Lynd-Balta said an example the school found was first-generation college students. St. John Fisher started a first-generation scholars program for students who are the first in their family to attend college, and though students in the program had a higher retention rate than average, other first-generation students who weren't admitted to the program had a lower retention rate.

"So we looked at what we can do to help those first-generation students who aren't part of that program — that's where the disaggregated data really comes into play," Lynd-Balta said. "And we can do that for different populations of students, and now we're getting down to the level of looking at it for individual courses."

Nazareth found first-generation students were retained after the first year at about the same rate as the general population, but a gap developed as time progressed and graduation rates were lower.

"So the college responded by developing specific strategies and assigning a specific position at the college to address that challenge and develop programming and support services for that specific popu-



Morris

lation," said Andrew Morris, associate vice president for retention and student success at Nazareth. "That's just an example of the way we can start to drill in on data at different levels."

LaMendola said Nazareth undertook a series of efforts to improve retention in recent years after the school's rate dipped. He said the school developed a number of computational models using existing data to measure retention rates and developed a model to better understand incoming freshmen.

Nazareth collects information from students' applications, including demographic information, geographic data and information about their previous education. LaMendola said Nazareth is using that data to identify incoming freshmen who might be at risk of not returning to school or not succeeding.

"That way we might be able to get in front of that and offer those students some intervention strategies — whether they might be academic supports or it might be attempts to increase the affinity that the student has with the institution," LaMendola said.

Before a student steps on campus there are more than 30 variables, according to LaMendola, that are plugged into statistical models that predict a student's likelihood to succeed academically, whether or not a student is likely to become a part of the campus community and if finances could become an issue.

"From that we can really determine whether we believe a student has an inherent risk to not being retained here," LaMendola said. "And whether that risk is academic-based or primarily affinity-based. From that we can then direct our efforts into how we might intervene with that student."

In addition to retention rates, schools closely track four-year graduation rates and keep semester-by-semester data, or sometimes in real time, to ensure students are continuing to progress toward graduation. Morris said Nazareth, largely based on data collected, created a marketing campaign for students and par-

ents around the importance of staying on track for a four-year degree.

Students who graduate in four years have less debt than their counterparts who graduate in five or six years, and officials said parents — who are often supporting students financially — want to know their children are enrolling in a school from which they're likely to graduate in four years.

Morris said data analysis can identify potentially at-risk students, but educators still must develop strategies to intervene and help students succeed. He said Nazareth uses a program called Starfish Early Alert to communicate with students via email to offer opportunities for support.

"We'll start that communication process even before students step foot on campus to make sure they're aware of the resources that are available to them like tutoring and academic coaching," Morris said. "And we'll continue to use that system."

Since utilizing data in that way and implementing the related programs, Morris said Nazareth has seen "huge growth in tutoring and academic coaching" programs, which served more than twice as many students last year compared to 2013.

Nazareth can then utilize data to see how the tutoring and academic coaching programs impact on students' grade point averages, course grades and probation and dismissal rates, which Morris said are all trending in the right direction.

LaMendola said school officials are always looking for new ways to analyze the data collected in an effort to further identify students who aren't on track and to better improve services and programs.

Though the quantitative data and subsequent analysis has been invaluable for Nazareth, Morris said school officials also conduct interviews with students, collect surveys and convene focus groups to ensure a full picture is available for administrators to make informed decisions. Morris said "big data is great," but administrators have to be careful not to get lost in the data and continue to use it in a way that leads to real world strategies that make a difference for students.

Matthew Reitz is a Rochester-area freelance writer.

## ONLINE LEARNING

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might require everyone to post a comment by a certain time on a topic, and then respond to each person's original post.

Local educators, though, say good course design can help make sure discussions are useful and interactive.

It seems to go against intuition, but the educators said online learning is often more engaging than in-person classes. They're even less isolating at times.

That's because for everyone who loves debating issues face to face, there may be even more people who keep their hands down in class. These are the people that online learning experts say often thrive in an online environment.

"Every class I've been in, there's always the handful of students who are really outspoken, and a student who never says a word," Keys said. "Some people do better up on the stage and (with) quick thinking. Other people like to reflect and think a bit before they respond." Online discussions allow those introverts and slower responders time to gather themselves.

"Students who ordinarily would be silent... it turns out they have lots to say," Schacht said.

The result may be higher quality comments all around, Fredericksen said.

Professors sometimes get to know their students better when they interact online, Schacht said.

"It's devilishly easy in a classroom to

believe the whole class is engaged in a classroom discussion, when really seven out of 30 keep raising their hands" Schacht said. "Online, *everybody* is writing something and you're getting a much better sample as an instructor."

One reason online learning is expanding is because the group of students who are the traditional age for college is shrinking.

"Until five years ago, the focus (of online classes) was on access and providing new sections," Keys said. Then MCC shifted to providing entire degree and certificate programs online so it could reach students it never had before.

Hannigan notes that the audience RIT is reaching through the edX platform has an average age of 32 — at least 10 years

older than the traditional undergraduate.

At Geneseo, the student population has been largely undergraduates of traditional age.

"We are interested in going forward in designing courses and even potential certificate programs for students who are not in the 18-to-22-year-old bracket," Schacht said. "One reason we've been a little bit behind other institutions in embracing online learning opportunities is we want to make sure we don't lose what we have face-to-face. We're at a point now where we understand better than we might have in the past what can be done to create an online experience that is every bit as engaging as the face-to-face experience."

darter@bridgetowermedia.com/ (585) 363-7275