

Preparing Educators Through Online Program Delivery

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As a young aspiring teacher going through a teacher preparation program in the early 1970s, I remember my mentor telling me that to be an effective teacher, I must learn all I can about my students. That solid and sage advice has not changed over the years and truly applies to all who teach. As we guide teacher candidates through our various preparation programs, we must learn all we can about them—their strengths, needs, learning styles, and so forth. We are told that teachers who are being prepared today come from a generational group called the “millennials”—and so we must ask ourselves, What traits define this group?

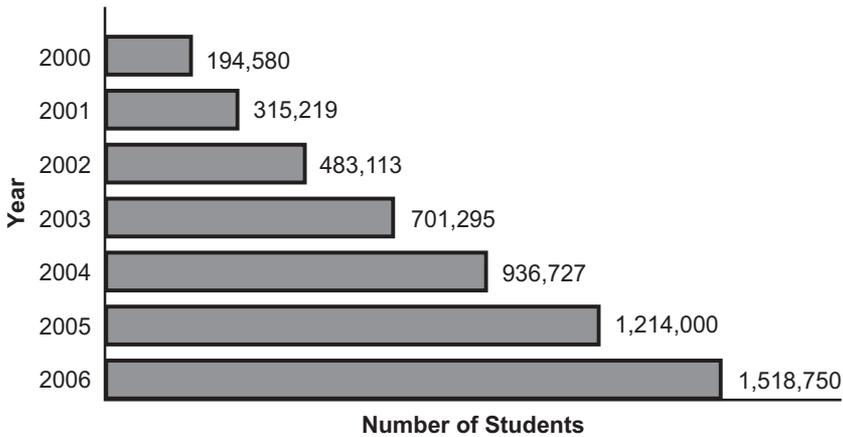
According to Alicia Moore (2007), millennials are much more diverse than the members of any other generation. They’re pressured to perform, they’re ambitious, and they’re achievers. They’re team oriented, though in a different way than how we’ve traditionally conceived a team player to be. They’re very connected socially—not only through face-to-face interactions but through text messaging and e-mailing. They’re very service oriented, they’re excellent time managers, they’re structured, and they’re the most protected of any generation in U.S. history. There are more female, Asian, Hispanic, and immigrant students in this particular generation than in any generation to ever go to college—one in five are children of immigrants. They are video-game savvy, marking over 10,000 hours of screen time before their first day of college. There have been more technological innovations in the lifetimes of this particular generation than in any previous generation. Immediacy of response is very critical for this group. Seventy percent use instant messaging to keep in touch, 41 percent use e-mail to connect with teachers and classmates, and 81 percent use e-mail to stay in touch with friends and family (Moore 2007). As an example of the generation gap, I have a “millennial” daughter who communicates with me frequently via text messaging. When she text-messages me and I respond, it takes me several minutes to type out a simple “How are you doing?” Within seconds of sending



the message, she replies with a couple of paragraphs. Her quickness in text messaging seems to be a characteristic of this generation; my slow response, a characteristic of my own.

With millennials' great acceptance and use of technology, it should come as no surprise that technology is greatly impacting education at both the K–12 and the higher education levels. Michigan will soon require K–12 students to experience online learning before graduating from high school. Last year Georgia passed a law allowing cyber charter schools. North Carolina created the North Carolina Virtual Public School, and Missouri passed a law to create a new state-led program that will include both full-time and part-time students in grades K–12. Thirty-eight states have e-learning initiatives, including virtual schools, cyber charter schools, online testing, or Internet-based professional development. Twenty-five states have statewide or state-led virtual schools. In 2000, there were 40,000 to 50,000 enrollments in K–12 online education. In 2002–2003, there were 328,000 distance education enrollments in K–12 public school districts (the most recent year data are available). The Peak Group has estimated that online enrollments in 2005 were at 500,000 (State Legislatures 2007).

Just as e-learning has expanded in K–12 schools, so has it in higher education. According to Andrea Foster and Dan Carnevale (2007), the number of students who exclusively take online courses has grown from 194,580 in 2000 to 1,518,750 in 2006 (see fig. 1). And about 3.2 million students took at least one online course during the fall of 2005—up 39 percent (2.3 million) from the previous year.



Note: Estimated figures cover students enrolled at U.S. degree-granting institutions that provide financial aid under Title IV.

Source: *Eduventures*

Figure 1. Number of Students Who Enroll Only Online. (*Chronicle of Higher Education* 53 [34]: A49.)

Currently, the most popular outlet for online delivery is the University of Phoenix. It has the lion’s share, but in the next couple of years the major universities will be equipped to compete and take some of that share for themselves.

Stephen F. Austin State University (SFASU) mirrors U.S. universities in online delivery growth (see fig. 2). In particular, the College of Education at SFASU has become a big leader in online program development and offerings, having far more online programs in 2007 than it did in 2000. SFASU has an enrollment of about 11,500 students, 3,400 of which are in the College of Education, which makes up about 30 percent of the university. SFASU is rurally located in deep East Texas, about 2.5 hours northeast of Houston. If it is to grow its graduate enrollment, it must occur through an online delivery system.

In 2000, SFASU began offering its first online programs, with an online post-baccalaureate program for initial teacher certification at the elementary and secondary levels. In these programs, students may apply up to eighteen hours of their course work toward a master’s degree. These initial online programs were immediately successful. Since then, SFASU has developed and now offers full master’s degrees in Educational Leadership, Early Childhood Specialist, Standard Elementary, Content Emphasis, Music Education, and Resource Interpretation. It has also expanded into offering certifications in Family and Consumer Sciences, ESL and Bilingual Education, Master Reading, and Reading Specialist,



and is working on an international teaching certificate to be delivered worldwide. Undergraduate online programming has been more challenging, but recently two new baccalaureate degrees have been added: a bachelor degree that allows nurses to move from RN to BSN, and a Bachelor of Science in Interdisciplinary Studies with Early Childhood Through Fourth Grade (EC-4) Teacher Certification Completer Program.

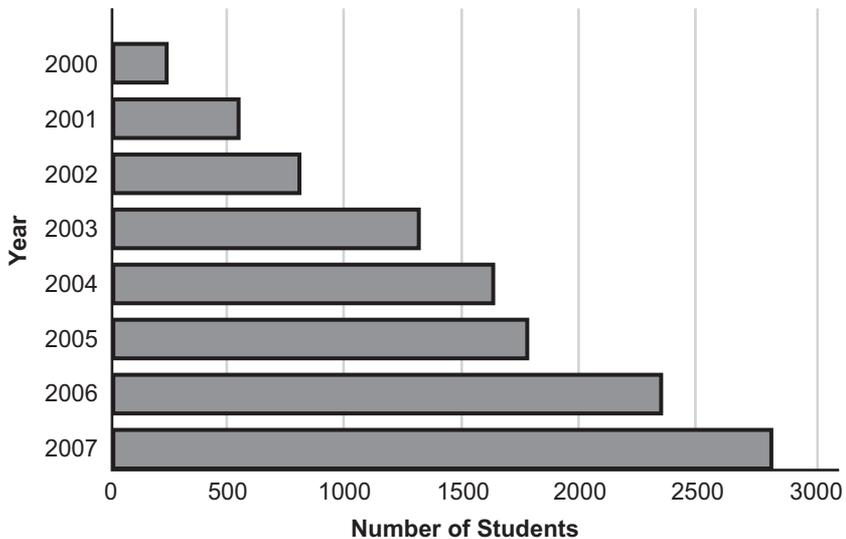


Figure 2. SFASU Enrollment in Online Courses.

With online programming beginning to flourish nationwide, skeptics have begun questioning online program quality. It's one thing to develop a series of PowerPoint presentations and put them into a WebCT type shell and call it an online course, but quite another to put into place and maintain a quality assurance system for online program delivery. SFASU has established the Office of Instructional Technology to oversee distance education. Policies were developed to govern course development, ownership, faculty compensation, and course and program quality. At SFASU, individual courses may be approved, but the development of full programs is given preference. To offer online courses at SFASU and receive an additional stipend for teaching an online course, faculty members are required to successfully complete a thirty-four-hour training program. The course approval process is rigorous, requiring demonstration of good teaching principles and several levels of approval. Students are charged a \$25 fee per each credit hour of an online course. This fee is used to pay faculty a \$2,500 course development fee and a \$1,000 stipend each time a course is taught. All courses are evaluated each semester by students, and online courses are reviewed regularly to ensure course and program relevance and quality.



Recently the College of Education at SFASU has sought several outside grant sources—many of them through the U.S. Department of Education—to help with the development of online programming. Some of these grants are listed below.

- Early Intervention Training Program (Project Vision), U.S. Dept. of Education: \$1.5 million is used to train visually impaired teachers living in four northwestern states via distance education.
- Consortium for Excellence in Rural Teacher Preparation (CERT-Prep), U.S. Dept. of Education: \$2.1 million is used to identify and prepare teachers living in twenty-five rural school districts.
- Consortium for Excellence in Rural Teacher Preparation (CERT-Prep)—ELL, U.S. Dept. of Education: \$1.5 million is used to identify and prepare teachers living in seven rural school districts and help SFASU make modifications to the online curriculum that enhance teachers' skills in English language learning.
- Developing Entrepreneurial Vision for Exemplary Leadership and Ongoing Professionalism (Project Develop), U.S. Dept. of Education: \$820,000 helps SFASU and its twenty-one school-district partners identify, prepare, and support future principals.

Another of these grants is from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE). This \$600,000 grant has helped SFASU enhance its EC–4 Completer Program, which is designed to help paraprofessionals earn a bachelor's degree with Texas EC–4 teacher certification. We have found that many paraprofessionals in Texas want to become teachers—and would make excellent teachers—but they can't quit their jobs to go to school due to personal reasons (single parent raising children, live too far from a university). Whatever the obstacle, this grant helps paraprofessionals overcome the barriers to earning a degree and teacher certification through distance education. SFASU has joined with twenty-two Texas community colleges—representing approximately 45 percent of all community college students—to recruit, mentor, and support paraprofessionals in their goal to become teachers. The first two years of student learning are offered through the community college (many offer online and face-to-face options), and then students transfer into SFASU's two-year EC–4 Completer Program. Paraprofessionals can continue to work in the schools where they are employed and take all course work online. At this time, SFASU requires participants to come to campus once a semester for a two-day seminar, where they will meet with teachers and observe teaching in the nationally accredited Early Childhood Laboratory and the Texas-exemplary-rated Charter Campus School.



In this online program, SFASU provides university faculty mentors, chats, video clips of best teaching strategies, and other activities. Teacher work samples that demonstrate student learning, lesson design, and so forth are required. If paraprofessionals qualify for the Texas Aide Exemption, student teaching is waived and all field experiences are embedded in their regular course work. Observation evaluation has typically been through students video-taping and sending their captured lessons to professors for critique and grading. Under this model, by the time students receive the feedback, the “teaching moment” is lost. Thanks to the FIPSE grant, SFASU has purchased laptop computers and Webcams so that observation can take place in real time, along with pre-observation and post-observation capabilities. After much research, SFASU selected a product called Elluminate for its Webcam observation tool (www.illuminate.com). This videoconferencing tool allows for secure transmission between parties using a link sent through e-mail for connecting to a meeting and easily punches holes through school district firewalls.

Graduates of the EC-4 Completer Program have experienced much success, achieving a 100 percent pass rate on the mandatory state teacher certification exams. The program is recognized through the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education. Graduates in May 2007 were largely diverse in terms of age and ethnicity. Several have reported that if it weren’t for this online program, they would not have been able to complete a four-year degree and become teacher certified. Preparing paraprofessionals to become teachers is significant. With the great demand for teachers and the struggle to retain good teachers, SFASU has found that paraprofessionals who become teachers are more likely to stay in their communities and remain in the profession.

I began this brief paper by describing the characteristics of students who now make up our college classrooms—the millennials. Because of the nature of these students, online degree and certification programs are becoming increasingly popular. As most universities are experiencing, SFASU’s online courses fill up first. As we develop online offerings, attention to quality and program delivery is critical. Finding viable quality alternatives to traditional face-to-face modes of instruction is imperative. The use of Webcams, online chats and blogs, streaming video, text messaging, and other technologies holds great promise in meeting the needs of today’s students.



References

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