

Ontario's public colleges at

50

A Better Plan

Technology that supports learning

Is online learning designed for students – or budgets?

The number of students in Ontario's public colleges has nearly doubled since 1989. Sadly, as a result of government under-funding, the number of faculty has failed to keep pace. This has forced colleges to look for ways to stretch their budgets to educate more students, with fewer faculty.

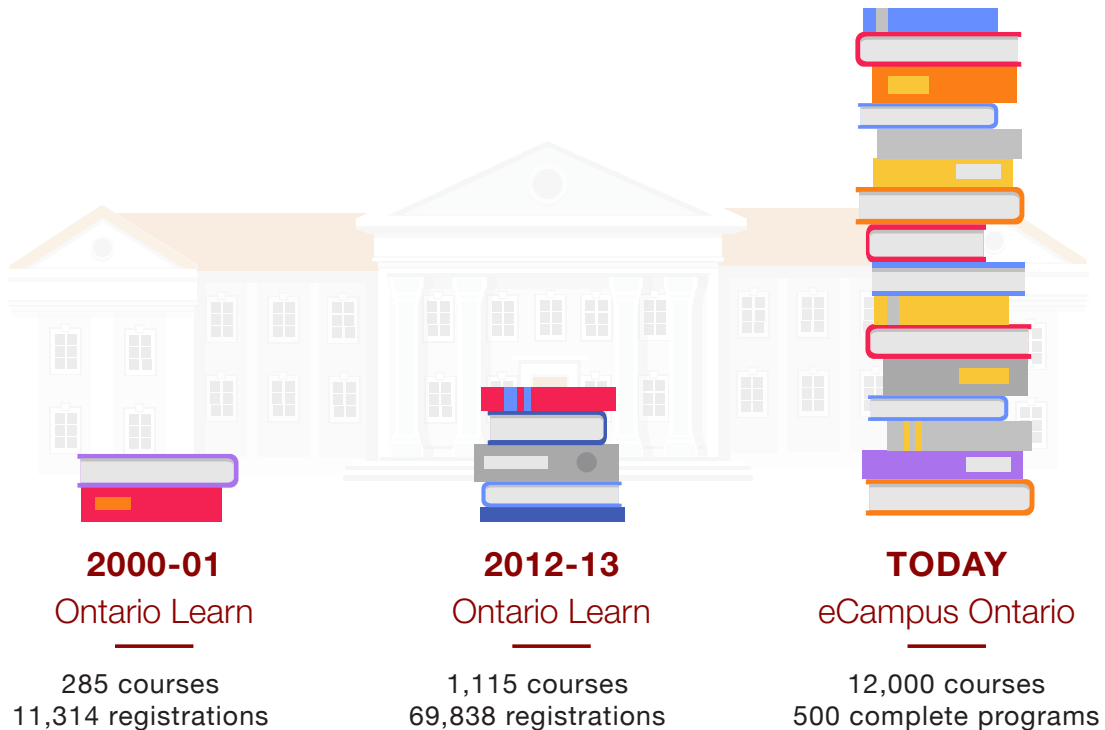
One way colleges are trying to cut corners is through online learning. Whether it comes in the form of online courses through Ontario Learn or eCampus Ontario, or through an increasing number of blended courses, where a portion of the in-class hours are replaced with online ones, students are increasingly finding themselves staring at a screen, rather than

participating in a classroom.

As we look back at the last 50 years of Ontario's colleges, and ahead to the next 50 years, the proper use of technology will be a crucial part of the discussion. After all, online learning – used correctly – can be a way of increasing access to education and enhancing student learning in vibrant, active virtual classrooms. However, the lack of academic control over content at some colleges, as well as the tight budgets behind the decisions made to date, raise significant concerns about which goal the current push for online learning is really designed to help meet: educating students or balancing budgets.



eCampus Ontario: A 25th Shadow College?



Ontario colleges are moving online at a breakneck pace

As enrolment in Ontario's college system continues to grow, so do the cost pressures produced by the government's failure to properly fund the system. In 1989, roughly 120,000 Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) students were enrolled in Ontario's public colleges. By 2016, that number had passed 226,000 FTEs. At the same time, the share of funding provided by the government has fallen, with post-secondary education grants now down to 37 per cent of college revenues – a far cry from the 75 per cent provided by the government when the colleges were founded.

Not only are financial pressures leading colleges to look to risky private ventures in search of additional

revenue sources, they are also pushing them to pursue measures that promise the potential of cutting costs. One of the clearest examples of this in the academic context can be seen in the growth of online learning.

There are now more than 500 programs – and over 12,000 courses – being offered online through eCampus Ontario. This has turned it into the equivalent of a 25th shadow college – one that is almost entirely staffed by underpaid and overworked contract faculty.

It's not just this new shadow college getting into the online game, however. Students in traditional on-campus programs at many colleges are finding themselves forced into taking required courses online. Others who are lucky

enough to be able to find the courses they need on campus are discovering even then that instructional hours in these courses are being replaced by self-directed online learning in a so-called "blended" model.

And students who manage to find a fully classroom-based course are being affected too. In efforts to reduce staff costs, colleges are increasingly offering pre-fabricated courses and canned content that have been developed by and purchased from corporate publishing companies, leaving faculty with very little academic control over the content.

A right way (and a wrong way) to use technology to support learning

Technology itself isn't the problem. In fact, used properly, technology and online learning can be used to offer new modes of teaching, improve educational outcomes, and increase access to education for a broader

WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE CURRENT APPROACH?

In many colleges, the way that online learning is being rolled out is creating a situation where faculty have less involvement in course development, and as a result, less control over the academic content. When faculty aren't engaged in the creation of material, or are given pre-fabricated content that can't be modified to fit changing times or the needs of particular classes, student learning suffers.

And this is only made worse when, in an attempt to save money, these pre-fabricated online courses are being taught by contract faculty, given the fact that these faculty are not being provided the prep time and

A BETTER APPROACH – BUILDING ON FACULTY EXPERTISE

There's a better way to use technology to improve learning outcomes, but it relies on using, rather than ignoring, the expertise that faculty members have to offer.

Faculty need to be engaged in designing the courses they will teach, and in teaching the courses that they design. For this to happen, online materials should be built in a way that supports, rather than limits, the ability of faculty to shape them to fit the changing world around them. This requires more investment – both in time

and resources – than simply posting canned content pulled from traditional courses or purchasing pre-fabricated corporate ones. But the investment pays off in terms of course quality – and student success.

range of students. But a closer look at what's happening in Ontario colleges raises concerns about both the quality of online courses and the accessibility of self-directed online learning.

compensation to do so properly, and in some cases are reduced to walking students through the canned slides of a corporate-designed course. Even in cases where the model is blended, rather than fully online, the reality is that while some students may succeed through self-directed learning, others struggle. This raises serious questions as to whether students are truly learning what they need from courses where self-directed online learning has replaced class time, leaving an increasing number of instructional hours with no faculty member assigned to them.

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When technology is used properly, students get the best of both worlds. They get content that is vibrant, current, and taught by experts in the subjects they are learning, while experiencing the engaging and accessible learning experience that technology has the ability to offer.

Faculty under strain

CURRENT MODEL IS CHEAPER FOR COLLEGES – BUT MORE WORK FOR FACULTY

Offering courses entirely online, or with a portion of instructional hours assigned as self-directed online learning, may be cheaper for the college, but that certainly doesn't translate to a lower workload. If anything, the way the shift to online learning is being implemented is creating additional workload strains for faculty.

The reality is that classes designed for face-to-face delivery don't translate directly to an online model.

The time needed to develop and provide an engaging learning environment for a scattered group of students, no small feat, is simply not covered by the existing workload model, which is based on traditional in-class learning.

Even the time required for something as simple as addressing student questions can be multiplied several times over when comparing responding to dozens of individual emails rather than answering an in-class question for the whole class to hear.

To make online learning a success, we need to properly recognize and compensate the time required for faculty members to be active participants in the development, evolution, and implementation of online courses. This initial investment will ensure the continued quality of the course content, as well as making sure that students get the support they need from experts in the subject matter.

What do students think?

While colleges are moving ahead rapidly in the expansion of online and blended courses, recent research suggests that students are less keen on online learning, at least in its current form. In fact, in one recent survey, more than 82 per cent of Mohawk College business students reported disliking videos replacing face-to-face learning.

Their concern wasn't for the

82% of students dislike videos replacing face-to-face learning

technical quality of the videos either. While most found the videos to be of acceptable quality on a technical level, nearly two-thirds (60 per cent) found them weak when it came to pedagogy. Students are also concerned about losing the relationships they value with faculty, which they see as important to their future success.

The findings at Mohawk, and the statements made by students, show that students know that online courses can't on their own replace the benefits provided by faculty. If students are

"I had one of my professors reach out to me on LinkedIn after I graduated, and actually last week the program coordinator reached out to me with a job opportunity."

– Recently-graduated student

to succeed in online courses, they can't simply be canned recordings of slides and lectures. Instead, online courses need to be designed with care, being aware of both the limits and the possibilities of online technology.

A transfer of public dollars to private pockets

The growing ties between colleges and corporate publishers are raising serious concerns about the colleges' treatment of the intellectual property of faculty. They are also causing a growing number of observers to question whether online learning offers any real savings at all in the longer term.

It's true that colleges are obtaining short-term revenue from the sale of

course materials, video lectures, and class slides to corporate publishers, in what amounts to an outright theft of faculty members' work. Meanwhile, publishers are assembling the purchased content into ready-made courses and selling the packaged content back to colleges, where it can be taught by less-qualified tutors, rather than faculty.

But the high cost of online courses is raising flags about how much money this model truly saves. Recent research suggests that, once the cost of the courses is considered, online learning may be more about a transfer of public resources to the pockets of private corporations and college management than any significant cost reduction.

What can I do to help?

- Share our short video about this issue with your friends and colleagues
- Join the conversation online through our Twitter or Facebook:

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 facebook.com/OntarioCollegeFaculty

- Learn more about this and other issues online at: www.collegefaculty.org
- Let your local executive committee know that you want to help at your college

