

Online Classes Boom in Tight Economy

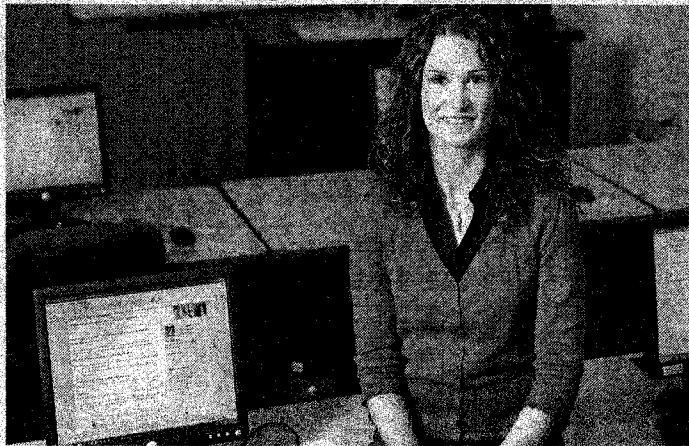
Students prefer affordable web courses

Yi Duan Low is a typical 20-something college student—she's got plenty of money woes, from rental payments to credit card accounts. So when she signed up for classes this fall at Middlesex Community College, she did the math. With volatile gas prices bouncing up and down, she could save up to \$50 a month by taking classes online instead of at the Bedford campus. And by taking the same pre-nursing classes from home, sitting at her computer, and not driving 60 miles round trip, she saves commuting time and wear and tear on the car. "I'd rather take the classes in person, but this was more economical," says Low, who lives in Watertown.

Online learning blogs put it best: "Want to know the great thing about the internet? It doesn't run on gas." That's what commuting students like Low are realizing as their pocketbooks run on empty, fuel prices fluctuate, and distance learning programs get easier to navigate. And even as gas prices decline, students are discovering other value-added benefits of an online education.

"We have already seen how factors such as convenience and the value of time have made online learning more attractive for busy adults managing home, work, and other commitments," says Kimberly Blanchette, associate dean for the School of Business, Management, and Professional Studies at Daniel Webster College in Nashua, NH. "Now fuel prices and today's economic environment are the more recent factors motivating working professionals to explore online enrollment options."

Significant increases in online enrollment have been reported, by four-year col-



UMassOnline allows students to enroll in the same programs and learn from the same faculty as students taking classes on campus at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Boston, Dartmouth, Lowell or Worcester.

Photo courtesy UMassOnline

leges like the University of Massachusetts and to two-year community colleges like Bristol Community College, which cater to commuters. April Bellafoire, an assistant dean at Bristol in Fall River, reports that online enrollments were up 114 percent this summer over last, with many students saying that gas prices or other transportation issues were motivating factors for signing up for web classes.

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Saving on gas certainly motivated many online enrollees at Harvard Extension School, says Len Evenchik, assistant dean for distance education. "But once they look at the courses, they also realize that there are other advantages to distance learning, such as streaming videos of course lectures."

Online learning is more than just "sitting at the screen and scrolling down web pages," says David Gray, CEO of UMassOnline. "It can be highly interactive, with lots of engagement between other students and faculty members." Som Seng, a student in the online MBA program through UMass-Lowell agrees. "I actually connect with students faster online. We chatted and became friends on Facebook and asked each other questions about homework."

For those not yet willing to make the complete commitment to online programs, hybrid courses offer the option of taking classes partly on campus and partly online. This provides flexibility to students, says Evenchik of Harvard Extension School, which is offering 125 courses online this year, from anthropology to web development.

Seng says because of the \$250 a month she's saving in gas by not driving from her home in Shrewsbury to Lowell, she's now able to save for her upcoming wedding and house purchase. "It's a no-brainer," says Seng. •