

Online learning

Under pressure to provide education to growing numbers of students without increasing faculty numbers, colleges are increasingly turning to online learning as a way to stretch limited budget dollars.

A 25th shadow college

Under Ontario's centralized online learning portal, eCampus Ontario, over 12,000 college courses and 500 programs are being offered online by what is essentially a 25th shadow college, staffed largely by underpaid contract faculty. While some courses are being moved entirely online, an increasing number of even those offered

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traditionally are being moved to a "blended" model, where a portion of the contact hours are replaced by self-directed online learning.

Some colleges, such as Mohawk, are mandating that nearly all courses be offered in this blended format, presenting significant challenges for students who struggle to learn online. While other colleges have yet to institute this requirement, most

"a growing number of instructional hours without faculty assigned to them."

are rolling out an increasing number of these courses, leaving students with a growing number of instructional hours without faculty assigned to them.

Workload strains

The shift to online learning has created workload strains for faculty, as the time needed to answer student questions

and provide an engaging and stimulating learning environment to a scattered student body is not captured by the current model. While adding to the burden on faculty, the move online also raises concerns over intellectual property, as faculty-developed materials, including video lectures, are packaged and sold to publishers or other institutions, only to have these groups turn around and sell the course content back to colleges. In a growing number of cases, these online courses are being managed by tutors who are not considered faculty, eroding the quality of the educational experience for students.

Best for the student - or the budget?

Online courses have a role to play in increasing access to education and supporting traditional learning. But when decisions about course delivery are based on what's best for the budget, rather than what's best for the student, there's a real problem. In the race to cut

costs, little or no consideration is being given to the impact of online learning models on quality of instruction, student experience, or consequences for faculty.

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What cost savings?

Even the assertion that online courses will lead to cost savings is being called into question. Research highlighting the high cost of online courses has led to suggestions that “online learning is largely a means of shifting public resources away from students and faculty, and toward college management and private corporations.”¹

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¹ MacKay, K. (2014). *Report on Education in Ontario's Colleges*. Retrieved from: <https://opseu.org/information/college-faculty-caat-report-education-ontario-colleges>

