

Chapter 5

Opportunities and Challenges of E-Learning in North America

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to report the current trends, opportunities, and challenges of e-learning in academic institutions located in North America. A narrative review of the published studies that investigated e-learning is reported. Discussion and analysis of literature are themed according to the dimensions of e-learning reported in the “e-learning framework.” Annually there is an increase in the number of students enrolled in online courses in North America. E-learning offers many opportunities for self-motivated learners. Academic institutions have started updating their curriculums by employing more teaching-integrated technologies and e-learning into the learning pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

Technology has affected all aspects of our life, including the educational field. Nowadays, more and more learners are eager to enroll in online programs and meet the requirements of an online professional degree that aims to help them develop professionally and join the work taskforce after graduation. According to the United States National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2019) in fall 2018, there were 6,932,074 students enrolled in distance education courses at degree-granting postsecondary institutions. Thirty percent (30%) of American college and university students are now taking at least one online course and online learning enrollments continue to grow at a much faster rate than overall enrollments in higher education (Kearns, 2012). In addition, academic institutions have rapidly extended the acceptance of online based education and extended their programs to be conducted fully online.

This chapter focuses on the current trends, opportunities, and challenges of e-learning practiced among different disciplines in North America. Discussion will include published studies that investigated e-learning in academic institutions. The analysis is done according to the dimensions of e-learning in the “E-learning Framework” (Khan, 2003).

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-7607-6.ch005

BACKGROUND

As a concept, e-learning is also called Web-based learning, online learning, virtual education, Internet-based learning, distance education and computer assisted instructions. The trends, statistics, and background information about e-learning in North America is affected by many institutional and technological factors. Institutional factors include online programs marketing and recruitment; new admission; retention and graduation policies; instructors/students training factors; and financial factors. For example, in 2019, only 48% of 4-year schools increased their budgets for online learning compared to 41% of 2-year schools (Education Data, 2019). On the other hand, technological factors include online program design and development; the need to develop online canvas that provides effective interactive learning opportunities, the availability of excellent Internet access connection between instructors and students, and the availability of 24/7 technology support for both students and faculty.

In addition, the traditional learning is affected due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many universities around the world have fully digitalized their operations to meet with the social distancing needs of the pandemic. “Online learning is emerging as a victor ludorum amidst this chaos” (Dhawan, 2020, p. 5). It is important to note that e-learning was flourishing even before COVID-19 pandemic. In 2016, over 6 million students in the U.S enrolled in at least one online course (Lederman, 2018). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in 2017 the number of students enrolled in “exclusively distance education courses” increased by more than 4% (NCES, 2020). The number of students enrolled in a minimum of one distance education course increased by more than 6% (Ginder et al., 2018). There is a tremendous growth in online course enrollments in the United States (U.S), and this trend has increased for the 14th consecutive year irrespective of the economic status and overall college enrollment, and the proportion of students enrolled in at least one online course has risen to over 30% in the U.S (Davis et al., 2019). Public institutions and not-for-profit institutions like community colleges and state base universities have the largest percentage of students taking online classes; with 4.6 million (32%) students in public institutions participated in distance education, in contrast, only 1.1 million students at private nonprofit institutions enrolled in distance learning (Education Data, 2019). The economic growth of online learning is huge, according to Meskhi and colleagues (2019) online learning has become one of the fastest growing industries, with a “market growth rate over 900% since 2000, which is expected to reach in 2025 with total market value of \$325 billion” (p.1).

The most recent resource that reported the e-learning trends in the United States (US) is the “2020 Online Education Trends Report” published by “BestColleges”. This report aimed to track trends in learner demographics and program development with insights from students and administrators. The data collection method included sending an online survey conducted between October 2019 and December 2019. The “BestColleges” outreach team connects with schools offering online courses. The survey was targeted to include public and private two- and four-year institutions. By the end of 2019, the number of school participants that responded to questions about online program management, new program development, and the future of online education included 398 schools from the United States (USA) (BestColleges, 2020). The results showed that almost half (49%) of the schools’ administrators reported that prospective online students are asking about the placement or employment rates of online program graduates. They shared that students are also interested in a wide range of career-related information and support, such as graduate salaries, national board exam pass rates, alignment of careers with individual degree programs, transfer opportunities, and access to alumni mentors (BestColleges, 2020).

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