

The Effectiveness of Online Learning in the Wisconsin Technical College System

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Abstract : Over the past decade, there has been significant growth in online courses and programs at all levels of education in the United States. This study explores the growth of online and blended (or hybrid) programs offered by the sixteen technical colleges in the Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS). The WTCS provides education and training programs to more than 300,000 students each year in career clusters including agriculture, business, energy, information technology, healthcare, human services, manufacturing, and transportation. These programs range from short-term training programs that may lead to a certificate to two-year programs that lead to an associate degree. Students vary in age from high school students who are exploring career interests to employees who are seeking to gain additional skills or enter a new career. Because there is currently a shortage of skilled workers in nearly all sectors in the state of Wisconsin, it is critical that the WTCS is providing fully educated and trained graduates to fill workforce needs in a timely manner. For this study, information on online and blended programs for the past five years was collected from the WTCS, including types of programs, course and program enrollments, course completion rates, program completion rates, time to completion and graduate employment rates. The results of this study indicate that the number of online and blended courses and programs is continuing to increase each year. Online and blended programs are most commonly found in the business, human services, and information technology areas, and they are less commonly found in agriculture, healthcare, manufacturing, and transportation programs. Overall, course and program completion rates were higher for blended programs when compared to fully online programs. Students preferred the blended programs over the fully online programs. Overall, graduates were placed into related jobs at a rate of approximately 90 percent, although there was some variation in graduate placement rates by programs and by colleges. Differences in graduate employment rate appeared to be based on geography and sector as employers did not distinguish between graduates who had completed their programs via traditional, blended or fully online instruction. Recommendations include further exploration as to the reasons that blended courses and programs appear to be more effective than fully online courses and programs. It is also recommended that those program areas that are not using blended or online delivery methods, including agriculture, health, manufacturing and transportation, explore the use of these methods to make their courses and programs more accessible to students, particularly working adults. In some instances, colleges were partnering with specific companies to ensure that groups of employees were completing online coursework leading to a certificate or a degree. Those partnerships are to be encouraged in order for the state to continue to improve the skills of its workforce. Finally, it is recommended that specific colleges specialize in the delivery of specific programs using online technology since it is not bound by geographic considerations. This approach would take advantage of the strengths of the individual colleges and avoid unnecessary duplication.

Keywords : career and technical education, online learning, skills shortage, technical colleges

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