

News

Legislative analyst: Beef up online college courses

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California needs a “clearer statewide vision” for online college courses, the state’s Legislative Analyst’s Office said Monday.

The office called on the community college, University of California and California State University systems to offer more Internet-based classes in order to improve college attendance and completion. However, the three systems need to do a better job of coordinating their efforts, said Paul Steenhausen, the analyst who wrote the report.

“There already is quite a bit of distance education occurring,” he said. “But right now, they’re only realizing the benefits to a certain extent because it’s not a coordinated system.”

The state should give the schools better direction about how to develop online courses, the report said, and it should require colleges to consider Web-based classes every time they create a new academic program.

Schools also could avoid duplicating efforts by creating an online coursework depository, Steenhausen said.

“Why should faculty at college X go through all the trouble of designing an online psychology 101 course when faculty at college Y have already designed a (strong) curriculum?” he said.

Sharing is not a problem at California’s 112 community colleges, where 600,000 students per year take at least one online course, said Jack Scott, chancellor of the statewide system.

“I’m sure there’s rather frequent borrowing between community colleges right now,” he said. “We would be very open to courses that have been developed by other institutions.”

Supporters of online education say the classes allow students who have trouble finding the time to come to campus an opportunity to attend college. Critics argue that some students underestimate the workload of online courses and drop out without completing the work.

Cal State East Bay has created one of the state’s most extensive online university catalogs. The school focuses on upper-division and graduate courses, said Susan Opp, associate vice president for academic programs and graduate studies.

“It’s not going to work for every program, and it’s not going to work for every student,” she said. “We think it’s really important for students to be on campus here if they’re coming in as a freshman.”

The UC system is developing a pilot program of online general-education courses, said Dan Greenstein, a systemwide vice provost. The university hopes to launch the project next year, he said.

Schools should aim for innovative online courses that use technology to improve graduation rates, Greenstein said.

“You can figure out who needs help and how, instantly,” he said. “Opportunities are there.”

The report also suggested that California create a task force to consider a partnership with Western Governors University, an online, Utah-based nonprofit school with more than 20,000 students. The pairing essentially would add the university to California’s higher-education offerings, potentially allowing students to use state financial aid to attend the school.

Western Governors University has formed a similar partnership with Indiana, said Robert Mendenhall, the school’s president. Using self-paced instruction — rather than traditional classes — the school has helped boost the state’s college graduation rates, he said.

Other institutions have laid the groundwork for California to improve its online offerings, Mendenhall said.

“You should not be developing your own online courses,” he said. “There are 2 million online courses. Go find the best ones and use them.”

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