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Digital Solution for Sacramento

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In the face of growing demand, limited infrastructure, and diminishing funds for state-supported higher education, some experts believe the only way California's higher ed system can continue fulfilling its mission is by expanding its online offerings.

A new [report](#) ^[1], released Monday by the California Legislative Analyst's Office, calls for the state legislature to explore a number of moves toward this end — including facilitating the sharing of online courses across public university and community college campuses; evaluating potential online “re-entry” programs for former dropouts looking to finish their degrees; and allowing adult learners who are approved for in-state grants to attend Western Governor's University, an online institution based in Utah.

The authors of the report acknowledge that the instructional costs of online courses are not much different than face-to-face ones, but they note that having campuses “collaborate on design and delivery of instruction” could yield “significant cost savings.” The idea, says Paul Steenhausen, a principal fiscal and policy analyst for the state, is that campuses that want to add a new department would, instead of hiring 10 new faculty members and additional administrative staff, hire three or four new faculty members and share the design and teaching load with other campuses in the network that already have similar departments.

“There would be potentially less need for faculty, administrators, and support staff,” says Steenhausen. There would also be less need for expensive new buildings to accommodate these departments and the additional students they would serve, write Steenhausen and his colleagues in the report. “By educating online those students who would have otherwise attended class in-person,” they write, “...colleges can reduce the need to build new infrastructure such as classrooms and parking lots.”

The implication is that in the post-geography world of online instruction, duplicate departments are in many cases unnecessary. Hence, the report recommends that the legislature “require that reviews of proposals for new academic programs evaluate whether shared distance-education programs would be a better alternative.”

In some ways, the group's recommendations echo the views of Christopher Edley, dean of the law school at the University of California at Berkeley — who, as co-chair of the UC Commission on the Future, [has been evangelizing](#) ^[2] about online education as a way to reach more students while cutting costs for a system that is running a \$5 billion deficit. And, like Edley's overtures, the legislative analysts' recommendations stand to face resistance from faculty leaders.

Brian Ferguson, a spokesman for the [California Faculty Association](#) ^[3], a union representing 23,000 higher ed professionals, says the association is wary of proposals that might threaten jobs and put

cost savings ahead of students' best interests. "There seems to be an idea with political types that they can save money just by putting stuff online, without thinking through the effects on students," Ferguson said. He cited an experiment conducted last year at the California State University at Bakersfield, where the performance of students in a remedial math program reportedly suffered [4] after the campus moved much of the program online and removed four of its nine instructors.

The legislative analysts did not ignore online education's unknowns and shortcomings. They noted that retention in online courses has been lower than in face-to-face courses, perhaps because "it generally takes more discipline and self-motivation for students to succeed in a distance-education class." There is also the question of whether academic integrity can be safeguarded as easily in online courses. "Our review of [the California Community College and California State University systems] found a lack of uniform standards with regard to student verification in distance-education courses," the authors wrote. Thus, the group included in its recommendations a call for "a standard definition of distance education" and a requirement that California's various public institutions "report periodically on student enrollment and performance in distance-education coursework."

The analysts' final recommendation would not, by Steenhausen's own admission, save all that much money for the state or for the average student — but it does invoke a new model of subcontracting public education to out-of-state providers that has emerged somewhat recently. The analysts recommended that the California legislature appoint a task force to explore formally partnering with Western Governor's University, an online institution based in Utah, to serve some of its adult learners — following the example of Indiana [5], which announced a similar arrangement with Western Governor's in June.

Not many adult learners end up getting state education grants, but those who do would be allowed to use them on tuition at Western Governor's, which offers a narrow but inexpensive menu of degrees: in nursing, business, information technology, and teaching.

"The main appeal is to give students more options," says Steenhausen, "so if they decide Western Governor's education is right for them," those eligible for state grants can use them to go there.

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[1] http://www.lao.ca.gov/reports/2010/edu/distance_ed/distance_ed_102510.pdf

[2] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2010/08/03/california>

[3] <http://www.calfac.org/about-cfa>

[4] <http://www.bakersfield.com/news/local/x1974424874/Taking-teachers-out-of-equation-fails-CSUB-math-students-figures-show>

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