

Chair Dembrow, committee members:

Good morning.

My name is Kevin Gable, and I am President of the OSU Faculty Senate for 2013. I am also a professor of Chemistry, and a former chair of my department. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about online delivery of higher education.

I'll start by noting that at OSU, online courses and programs are integral to how we meet our missions. Over the past 15 years, we have developed more than 30 degree and certificate programs and have made more than 800 courses available online. While I was Department Chair, we saw student credit hours for online delivery grow to 8400 per year—more than 15% of our total delivery of >50,000. For my department, about three quarters of the students are not enrolled in local degree programs: they are “true” distance students. The rest take the online offering for various reasons; “time shifting” is a popular one. While the mechanisms of delivery are necessarily distinct, we demand that online and “in-person” courses set identical student learning outcomes, use common frameworks for the selection of topics, and allow a student in a sequence to seamlessly migrate between modes of delivery. Our faculty involved with online instruction are also providing “in-person” delivery—we make no distinctions.

One of the important observations I make from our experience is that instructors involved in online delivery have rethought how they engage students and deliver material to a greater degree than have many who are not doing online instruction. The Internet provides an expanded set of tools, and many of these can enhance the quality of the faculty-student dialog in any setting. Further, the expectation to match student learning outcomes has forced us to be deliberate in choosing what those must be.

From my institutional perspective as Faculty Senate president, I see a range of opportunities and challenges. Clearly, online instruction allows us to meet needs of students in ways that the traditional classroom cannot. However, it's not a universal replacement for the traditional classroom. I have more students wanting my Organic Chemistry course in Corvallis than I saw even five years ago. We have discovered that successful online learners have to bring a degree of motivation that not every student has. The tools the Internet adds for asynchronous communication, assembly of information, and delivery of multimedia are just that: tools. They expand our instructional capability but are not equally effective in reaching every student.

There is skepticism among many faculty about effectiveness of the venue, and we are currently engaged in an assessment of teaching that will allow us to directly compare achievement of learning outcomes between online and face-to-face courses. Research has suggested that broadly, this is the case, but we want specific data for the courses we present. Not only do we need to do this to assure we are meeting our commitment to the students, but we also see this documentation as giving us a competitive edge in the very active marketplace for online education. This comparison is something the for-profit online institutions are incapable of providing. We expect preliminary results in the next year.

For the future, I see online education serving a variety of functions. We will clearly continue to use it to reach the nontraditional (particularly nonresidential) student. The results we take from experimenting with how to deliver content will spill over into the traditional classroom; I expect most courses we offer will earn the description of being "hybrid" courses in that we will use some element of online instruction in every course we teach. (I certainly do.) Students' need and desire to have face-to-face interaction is never going to go away, though.