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The Online-College Crapshoot

By LAURA PAPPANO

LAST June, when U.S. News & World Report announced plans to add online programs to its college kingmaking franchise, skeptics said it couldn't be done. Predicted to be published in October, the ranking is now promised only for some time "when it's cold out," says Eric Brooks, the data research analyst tasked with developing a methodology.

The company sent 4,837 surveys to institutions seeking data on student participation requirements, training for faculty members and course delivery (is there a smartphone app?). It also requested high school class standings and SAT/ACT scores, which set off a hurricane of objections, including a Huffington Post article by Deb Bushway, interim president of Capella University, saying it wouldn't fill out the survey because U.S. News was "asking the wrong questions" — these are working adults, after all. Kaplan University, with 47,000 online students, bowed out, too. "Not this round," says Geri Malandra, the provost. "We need to make sure they have their data more stable."

Robert Morse, U.S. News director of data research, sees the objections as "an excuse" to pass on the first round. "They want to find out how they will be measured," he says.

Setting aside the question of whether a ranking of any kind takes an accurate measurement, it's worth noting that the effort marks an important acknowledgement. Online programs are shedding "adult learning" labels and coming of age. Enrollment in online education grew 21 percent last year compared with 2 percent in higher education over all, according to the 2010 Sloan Survey, which reports that more than 5.6 million, or nearly one-third of all students, now take at least one course online.

Despite that, there is scant criteria with which to compare programs in search of that "good fit." A Google searcher invariably ends up at lead-generating sites that claim to "match" students to the "right" college. Richard Capezzali, president of Education Connection, says 300,000 unique users visit its site each month and 40,000 sign up for help. Looking for an online bachelor's program? Some 350 colleges pay Education Connection for a certain number of leads each month; you'll likely be connected with for-profits, and then hounded by phone calls and e-mails. Once the lead target is reached, the college stops showing up as a possible match, Mr. Capezzali says, "because the school's marketing budget has hit a cap."

John B. Bear, who has written guides on distance learning since 1974 and is working on one about online M.B.A.'s, says e-learning has improved a lot since the days of dial-up but finding a good program is a crapshoot. "I have two words: Be careful," he says. "The differences among schools are significant, but hard to find." With all manner of institutions diving in, Dr. Bear says, it's tough to tell strong, well-supported programs from duds. "In every field, at every degree level, it's less clear."

For those used to traditional colleges, online is confusing partly because the elements are scrambled. It's all there — the courses, the financial aid office, instructors, fellow students, even online fraternities — but configured differently. Instructors may not "design" courses they teach; the tech help desk may be outsourced to someone's living room and the library to another university (librarians for Excelsior College, a nonprofit that has 30,000 online students and is based in Albany, are actually at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore).

Most students looking to study online face a tension: They want to learn, but they need institutions to operate more like Starbucks than State U.

Libraries with vast holdings? Less critical than 24/7 digital accessibility. Big-name professors with endowed chairs don't matter; e-mailing students quickly does. Faculty quality counts, but online is more about guiding than lecturing. Ph.D.'s and brilliant campus lecturers do not guarantee strong online instruction. "It really takes a different set of skills,"says Ron Legon, executive director of the Quality Matters Program, which works to improve online learning. "The online classroom turns them into coaches."

That's why Alexa Schriempf, a philosophy Ph.D. who teaches online at Penn State World Campus and Southern New Hampshire University, makes herself available to students by smartphone even at her part-time job picking greenhouse vegetables.

"Online platforms are set up for you to very quickly provide feedback," she says. "They have windows all over the place where you can very quickly put two lines of text — 'This is perfect. If you keep this up you will meet the requirement. Have you thought about this?' " she says, noting that some colleagues hardly engage, and "just grade at the end of the term."

One frustration for those researching online programs is that the usual data that helps students choose isn't very helpful here. Because of the government's definition of students for its retention and graduation rates — full time, seeking a bachelor's degree for the first time — statistics miss most online learners. (Capella's graduation rate is officially zero because only five students fit government criteria; the online-only institution has 38,000 students and says that over all 47 percent of students graduate

within six years.) And if you want to see how a traditional college fares with its online students, you can't: the stats are lumped together.

Where to begin? "The answer I give, which infuriates people, is that you have to be as comfortable as you can that the degree will meet your needs," Dr. Bear says. An M.Arch is a professional degree; an M.A. in architecture is not. Dr. Bear received "a tear-stained letter" from someone who confused the two.

It seems obvious that you should know what degree you want, but Mr. Capezzali of Education Connection says many who call about finishing a bachelor's are unsure what to study and pick criminal justice because it looks appealing on TV. "It's 'C.S.I.' this and forensic that," he says. "People say, 'I want to go back to school.' They don't have a strategy so they default to certain things."

It's easy to be sold if you don't have a plan. Or even if you do, says Russell Poulin, deputy director of research and analysis at the WCET-WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies, who played secret shopper looking for an online M.B.A. program focusing on nonprofits. He shared his contact information, and quickly was called by for-profits who did "a pretty hard sell." When those who called didn't have the kind of M.B.A. he wanted, he says, "they tried to get me into their regular M.B.A."

Despite his experience, Mr. Poulin wouldn't rule out [for-profit schools](). "Sometimes for-profits match very well. They have done a good job figuring out how to deliver courses in smaller modules that are available to students with the proper library and support mechanisms. It may be a good fit. You just have to guard against a high-pressure recruiter talking you into something."

Ray Schroeder, director of the [Center for Online Learning, Research and Service]() at the University of Illinois at Springfield, says bricks-and-mortar institutions are putting "their reputations on the line" when they start online programs. "As a blanket statement don't avoid for-profit universities," he says. "But scrutinize them as you would any really young university." One caution is that, as moneymaking enterprises, unpopular courses or programs could be eliminated or changed to suit the market.

For-profits have gotten into trouble because of aggressive recruiting tactics, but some nonprofits have rolled out online programs without the student support they need. Students typically do classwork from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. What if they can't access the library or log in?

"A large number of colleges offering online courses have the equivalent of bankers' hours," says Kenneth C. Green, founding director of the [Campus Computing Project](), which studies technology policies in higher education. "They close at 8 p.m. and they're not open on weekends."

Traditional colleges jump online hoping to make money from faculty expertise they already have but don't rethink how they operate, says Wayne Brown, chief executive officer of Educators Serving Educators, a year-old division of Excelsior College that helps traditional colleges start online programs. For example, he says, colleges are used to taking months to review applications. "In online learning, the potential student is out there surfing the Web page and they will send an e-mail," Dr. Brown says. "They expect a response really quick. Not two weeks. The for-profits will respond before they leave that Web page."

It is a stretch for traditional colleges to suddenly focus on customer service. But that is something online students sitting at their kitchen table in another time zone count on.

"Undeniably, the for-profits have a lot to teach us about improved service to students," says Paul J. LeBlanc, president of Southern New Hampshire University, which hopes an emphasis on service at its College of Online and Continuing Education will result in an increase in online enrollment to 8,900 students by June from 2,034 in 2007.

The online "campus" — 24,000 square feet (soon to be 57,000) of new-smelling industrial carpeting and cubicles in a renovated brick warehouse on the Merrimack River in Manchester, N.H. — hardly resembles an academic institution. But deans, advisers and financial aid officers work from here along with recruiters staffing phones. Online is about function over style, and about serving adults — typically female, in their 30s — who need degree programs that can be molded around hectic lives juggling work and family.

That is why Dr. LeBlanc will chase down your transcript (and pay the fees). It's why if you don't log into class for five days, your adviser (who's received an alert) will call and find out what's up. And it's why instructor evaluations are heavy on relationships ("Instructor-student interaction demonstrates respect") and light on scholarship ("Provides accurate information that demonstrates in-depth knowledge of topic/subject").

This is not your tree-dappled campus experience. It isn't exactly new — online study has been around a few decades. But it does still, to many, feel risky, says Dr. Green of the Campus Computing Project.

"No one would confuse Phoenix with Princeton," he says, noting that the for-profit behemoth and the elite institution have entirely different educational goals. The prospective online student must always weigh that there is, Dr. Green observes, "stigma in various industries about whether an online degree is 'as good as.' "

One bonus for students in programs connected to traditional universities: diplomas likely won't mention that the degree was earned online.

That concern was not lost on Tamika Ahlfeld, a 40-year-old single mother from Pottsville, Pa., who wanted to go to a college that was familiar, solid and credible. Ms. Ahlfeld enrolled in the online program of Florida Institute of Technology in 2009 and plans to graduate in 2014 with a bachelor's in computer information systems.

How did she choose? "When I was in high school, I wanted to go to Florida Tech. I knew it was a good school. I had friends there. And," she says, "I liked the weather."

RESOURCE:

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/06/education/edlife/the-online-college-crapshoot.html?pagewanted=print