

ENTERING THE MAINSTREAM

Distance Education and Higher Education

Michael Simonson

Co-Editor

Enrollments in distance-delivered courses rose nearly 20% in 2003, according to a report authored by Allen and Seaman (2004). This monograph, supported by the Sloan Foundation, is titled *Entering the Mainstream* and is a follow-up to a similar study reported last year, titled *Sizing the Opportunity*.

Authors of *Entering the Mainstream* collected data using a survey collected from 1,170 institutions of higher education: 585 public, 536 private nonprofit, and 49 for-profit. Among the interesting conclusions offered in the report were the following:

- Slightly more than half of all colleges rated online learning as essential to their overall strategy.
- 1.9 million students were studying online in the fall of 2003.
- Just over 40% of responding institutions agreed that students were at least satisfied with their online courses, as compared to traditional classroom courses.
- Baccalaureate institutions had the lowest online enrollments and lowest opinions about online learning.

- The larger the institution, the more likely it believed that online education is critical.
- Administrators predicted that online enrollments will grow 24% in the next year, with the greatest growth in private, for-profit colleges.
- The majority of academic leaders believed that online learning quality is already equal to or superior to face-to-face instruction.

John Flores, executive director of the United States Distance Learning Association, commented on the study's findings. Flores indicated that his association is seeing similar growth patterns and reactions consistent with those reported by Allen and Seaman. Distance education is particularly attractive to older students, who are more likely to be working and less able to attend traditional residential colleges.

Of critical interest to distance education professionals were the study's findings about the perceptions of quality of online instruction. If instruction is offered to students at a dis-

tance, quality must be of paramount importance. Ultimately, students want to learn, they want to develop skills and competencies, and they demand effective teaching. Entering the mainstream is a goal achieved only if quality is there in the mainstream, also.

REFERENCE

Allen, E., & Seaman J. (2004). *Entering the mainstream: The quality and extent of online education in the United States, 2003 and 2004*. Needham, MA: Sloan-C. Retrieved from http://www.sloan-c.org/resources/entering_mainstream.pdf