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Learning in Dorm, Because Class Is on the Web

By **TRIP GABRIEL**

GAINESVILLE, Fla. — Like most other undergraduates, Anish Patel likes to sleep in. Even though his Principles of Microeconomics class at 9:35 a.m. is just a five-minute stroll from his dorm, he would rather flip open his laptop in his room to watch the lecture, streamed live over the campus network.

On a recent morning, as Mr. Patel's two roommates slept with covers pulled tightly over their heads, he sat at his desk taking notes on Prof. Mark Rush's explanation of the term "perfect competition." A camera zoomed in for a close-up of the blackboard, where Dr. Rush scribbled in chalk, "lots of firms and lots of buyers."

The curtains were drawn in the dorm room. The floor was awash in the flotsam of three freshmen — clothes, backpacks, homework, packages of Chips Ahoy and Cap'n Crunch's Crunch Berries.

The [University of Florida](#) broadcasts and archives Dr. Rush's lectures less for the convenience of sleepy students like Mr. Patel than for a simple principle of economics: 1,500 undergraduates are enrolled and no lecture hall could possibly hold them.

Dozens of popular courses in psychology, statistics, biology and other fields are also offered primarily online. Students on this scenic campus of stately oaks rarely meet classmates in these courses.

Online education is best known for serving older, nontraditional students who can not travel to colleges because of jobs and family. But the same technologies of "distance learning" are now finding their way onto brick-and-mortar campuses, especially public institutions hit hard by declining state funds. At the University of Florida, for example, resident students are earning 12 percent of their credit hours online this semester, a figure expected to grow to 25 percent in five years.

This may delight undergraduates who do not have to change out of pajamas to "attend" class. But it also raises questions that go to the core of a college's mission: Is it possible to learn as

much when your professor is a mass of pixels whom you never meet? How much of a student's education and growth — academic and personal — depends on face-to-face contact with instructors and fellow students?

“When I look back, I think it took away from my freshman year,” said Kaitlyn Hartsock, a senior psychology major at Florida who was assigned to two online classes during her first semester in Gainesville. “My mom was really upset about it. She felt like she's paying for me to go to college and not sit at home and watch through a computer.”

Across the country, online education is exploding: 4.6 million students took a college-level online course during fall 2008, up 17 percent from a year earlier, according to the Sloan Survey of Online Learning. A large majority — about three million — were simultaneously enrolled in face-to-face courses, belying the popular notion that most online students live far from campuses, said Jeff Seaman, co-director of the survey. Many are in community colleges, he said. Very few attend private colleges; families paying \$53,000 a year demand low student-faculty ratios.

Colleges and universities that have plunged into the online field, mostly public, cite their dual missions to serve as many students as possible while remaining affordable, as well as a desire to exploit the latest technologies.

At the [University of Iowa](#), as many as 10 percent of 14,000 liberal arts undergraduates take an online course each semester, including Classical Mythology and Introduction to American Politics.

At the [University of North Carolina](#) at Chapel Hill, first-year Spanish students are no longer offered a face-to-face class; the university moved all instruction online, despite internal research showing that online students do slightly less well in grammar and speaking.

“You have X amount of money, what are you going to do with it?” said [Larry King](#), chairman of the Romance languages department, where budget cuts have forced difficult choices. “You can't be all things to all people.”

The University of Florida has faced sweeping budget cuts from the State Legislature totaling 25 percent over three years. That is a main reason the university is moving aggressively to offer more online instruction. “We see this as the future of higher education,” said Joe Glover, the university provost.

“Quite honestly, the higher education industry in the United States has not been tremendously effective in the face-to-face mode if you look at national graduation rates,” he added. “At the very least we should be experimenting with other modes of delivery of education.”

A sampling of Florida professors teaching online found both enthusiasm and doubts. “I would prefer to teach classes of 50 and know every student’s name, but that’s not where we are financially and space-wise,” said Megan Mocko, who teaches statistics to 1,650 students. She said an advantage of the Internet is that students can stop the lecture and rewind when they do not understand something.

Ilan Shrira, who teaches developmental psychology to 300, said that he chose his field because of the passion of a professor who taught him as an undergraduate. But he thought it unlikely that anyone could be so inspired by an online course.

Kristin Joos built interactivity into her Principles of Sociology course to keep students engaged. There are small-group online discussions, and students join a virtual classroom once a week using a conferencing software called WiZiQ.

“Hi, everyone, welcome to Week 9. Hello!” Dr. Joos said in a peppy voice recently to about 60 students who had logged on. She sat at a desk in her home office; a live video feed she switched on at one point showed her in black librarian’s glasses and a tank top.

Ms. Hartsock, the senior psychology major, followed the class from her own off-campus home, her laptop open on the dining room table. As Dr. Joos lectured, a chat box scrolled with students’ comments and questions.

The topic was sexual identity, which Dr. Joos defined as “a determination made through the application of socially agreed-upon biological criteria for classifying persons as females and males.”

She asked students for their own definitions. One, bringing an online-chat sensibility to an academic discussion, typed: “If someone looks like a chick and wants to be called a chick even though they’re not, now they can be one.”

Ms. Hartsock, 23, diligently typed notes. A hard-working student who maintains an A average, she was frustrated by the online format. Other members of her discussion group were not pulling their weight, she said. The one test so far, online, required answering five questions in 10 minutes — a lightning round meant to prevent cheating by Googling answers.

In a conventional class, “I’m someone who sits toward the front and shares my thoughts with the teacher,” she said. In the 10 or so online courses she has taken in her four years, “it’s all the same,” she said. “No comments. No feedback. And the grades are always late.”

As her attention wandered, she got up to microwave some leftover rice.

