They Thought Globally, but Now Colleges Push Online Programs Locally

By MARC PARRY

Milwaukee

With a 2-year-old daughter, two jobs, and a stethoscope stashed in the console of his Chevy Blazer, Joel M. Kolberg is one busy working adult.

Homework? The emergency medical technician plunks down his laptop on a checkered tablecloth in the frat-house-style lounge of a Milwaukee ambulance station. It's as good a place as any to squeeze in late-night posts to one of his occupational-therapy class discussions.

"For a while last year, I wouldn't go home for like three days," says the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee graduate student. "I'd go to work. Go to school. Come here. Shower. Go back to work."

For years, some universities have dreamed of border-defying online programs that vacuum up tuition dollars far beyond local students like Mr. Kolberg. But now a growing number of institutions like Milwaukee are ramping up their efforts to attract working adults in their own backyards.

Commuter-serving urban universities can't match the marketing muscle of faster-growing, for-profit, online colleges. What they can try to do is parlay stronger local brands, cheaper tuition, and blended programs that shift a lot of class time online into an appealing package for area adults. The kind of adults who might value coming to campus periodically but struggle to do it three times a week.

The "go local" trend follows the flameout of one of the latest public efforts to forge an online institution of international scope. The University of Illinois is remaking a more modest version of its Global Campus after the project crashed in a confetti of bad press in May as enrollment flagged and faculty raised concerns about quality. Anxiety arose from its push to set up shop as a separate entity beyond the system's bricks-and-mortar universities, with its own professors and programs.

Growing Locally

By contrast, proponents of going local with online and blended programs sometimes sound like small farmers touting the virtues of fresh arugula. They pitch the "authentic" product: classes taught by the same faculty you would get face to face, in programs that grow "organically" from the same departments.

But under the fuzzy phrases are some hard realities.
Traditional universities, especially smaller ones that aren't state flagships, fear losing students to the for-profit ones, says A. Frank Mayadas, an Alfred P. Sloan Foundation program director considered by some to be the father of online learning.

"How," he asks, "can you sit back and say, 'Our business is now going to be stolen'?"

The University of Southern Maine, in Portland, solicited Sloan's help after watching its bread-and-butter commuter population erode by roughly 10 percent in recent years, apparently because students are choosing online competitors and cheaper community colleges.

To get a sense of the advertising arsenal these universities are up against, try Googling "Milwaukee" or "Southern Maine" and "online degree." Top of the page: a sponsored link to the University of Phoenix.

The Sloan foundation's response — and, because its online-education grant program is closing, one of the philanthropy's last acts in the field — has been to hand out more than $2-million in so-called "localness" grants to help colleges compete. Grantees include Milwaukee and Southern Maine, the University of Central Florida, and the University of Massachusetts' five campuses, plus Simmons College.

Some say the budget doldrums facing universities heighten the urgency for change.

"The regional publics, which are finding themselves more and more tuition-dependent, due to shrinking state resources, have found themselves in a very competitive environment where we need to adapt," says Robert J. Hansen, Southern Maine's associate provost for university outreach. "The average student is getting older and older, and they've got busy and very complicated lives."

Blended or hybrid courses that combine online and face time have been around for years. Now universities are surveying regional needs and blending whole programs, sometimes eliminating fully face-to-face options for courses.

Mr. Mayadas lays down a rule for localness money. At least 50 percent of classroom time must be pushed online (at the level of programs, not necessarily individual courses). How they get there varies. Some throw in fully online courses, blended courses that meet weekly, or hybrids that meet even less often.

**Less Face Time**

Robert J. Kaleta, director of Milwaukee's Learning Technology Center, has little doubt where are all this is going: "Three years ago, all of our degrees would have required this face-to-face contact in all courses. Ten years down the road, you probably won't have a class that requires just face-to-face contact."

That statement might sound radical were it not delivered by a modest, white-and-gray-haired man with the easy-to-smile warmth of a greeter at a church door. And early statistics bear him out. Students from the surrounding seven-county region made up 78 percent of the 4,767 online and blended enrollments in 2008, up from 68 percent of 1,673 enrollments four years earlier, according to the university.

Over lunch recently in Milwaukee's iconic winged art museum, Mr. Kaleta and a colleague, Laura Pedrick, assistant to the provost for strategic initiatives, unfold a large regional map. Then, like generals carving up territory, they outline how blended and online programs can help Milwaukee reach an educational sphere of influence across southeastern Wisconsin. The half-moon-shaped zone embraces Port Washington on Lake Michigan to the north, the strip malls of Waukesha to the west, and the urban corridor toward Chicago to the south. The idea is to render programs so flexible and so aligned with local employment needs that commuters as far as 90 miles away might enroll, because now they don't have to visit the campus as much.
The Milwaukee campus also sees online learning as a way to cope with another issue familiar to urban universities: a severe space crunch. Enrollment swelled from about 19,000 in the mid-1990s to more than 29,000 today. The campus's boxy brick-and-concrete buildings offer some sweeping views of Lake Michigan, but the spaces inside are limited.

So is students' free time. Most commute. They may work multiple jobs. They may be the first in their families to attend college. They may have families.

Lindsey Kempinski fits the mold. An unplanned pregnancy her senior year coincided with the blending of her occupational-therapy program. Instead of taking a break from school, the 23-year-old suburban commuter saved about 100 hours of class and driving time through a hybrid course that met once a week.

"That time when they are young is so precious," she says of her daughter. "That's something I could have never gotten back."

Mr. Kolberg is less enthusiastic. As he looks out toward an ambulance parked in front of his station, the soon-to-be-25-year-old EMT proclaims himself "just not a big fan of the entire online thing."

"There's just a certain, like, touch of instruction from a professor that is just lost," he says. And hybrid courses? "It's the same concept, in my opinion," says Mr. Kolberg, who faces four more of them in his occupational-therapy program next year — courses that are only offered in hybrid format now. "Well, why don't you just buy the textbook and read the textbook and take a test? What's the difference?"

Simone C.O. Conceição, an associate professor in Milwaukee's School of Education, has generally seen online sections of courses fill faster than face-to-face ones. At the same time, some students in the hybrid higher-education-administration program don't want to take online courses, she says. They already check Twitter. Facebook. MySpace. Now they would have to constantly check the course-management site, too.

"The technology was being too intrusive to their lives," she says. "They wanted to separate the social versus the professional or the academic." One simple resolution, she suggests, is for these students to stick with face-to-face and hybrid courses.

For faculty members, blended learning can actually be an easier sell. Professors who might shun fully online courses will attempt hybrid ones, Mr. Mayadas says, because they can still see students. Simmons College even speaks of "blended faculty," since the format reduces professors' commuting time to a satellite program at Mount Holyoke College.

Milwaukee also benefits from subtler strategies. Mr. Kaleta's center, which helps the faculty with technology, is a softly lit oasis staffed by technologists who also teach, critical for relating to professors who don't want techies telling them what to do with their courses.

"UWM did it right," says John R. Johnson, a faculty member in the department of communication who has been at Milwaukee more than three decades. "It wasn't top-down from administration. ... It has always been faculty driven."

Luring Professors

Still, while the administration may not have used sticks, Rita Hartung Cheng, Milwaukee's provost, concedes that it has dangled some carrots. Officials have pointed out that weak enrollments — which jeopardize a program's future — could be boosted by blended programs. They also let schools within the university "keep more of their tuition from their online courses," Cheng says.
"The return to a school or college is a little higher for a blended class than it is for a traditional class," Ms. Cheng says. "It's helped. It funds faculty research and travel and course development."

The carrots don't always help, however. Ronald A. Perez, an associate dean, would like to create a blended engineering program but has been unable to overcome what he describes as "ideological resistance" among faculty members.

He feels all courses in, say, mechanical engineering would work in a hybrid format. But there's a "perception problem" among the faculty, accustomed to training students the old way — the perception being that "it cannot be done."

The bottom line is that even online, for many students there seems to be no place like home. Surveys show around two-thirds of consumers interested in online education would rather do it at a local institution, notes Richard Garrett, program director and senior research analyst with Eduventures Inc., an education-consulting firm.

That preference may fade in the future, he says. But for now, "there's a strong sense, at least so far, that geography isn't removed from the equation by any means."
thinkglobal, actlocal: The variant "think globally, act locally" was particularly associated with US environmental campaigner Hazel Henderson and appears to have been prevalent before the version adopted as a slogan by David Brower (1912–2000) when he founded Friends of the Earth. Proverbs dictionary, locally: adjective connected with a particular area, especially the area where something is produced. The company borrowed the Financial and business terms. TGAL — Think Globally, Act Locally Abbreviations, SMS and Internet. TGAL — Think Globally, Act Locally Glossary of chat acronyms & text shorthand. Colleges experiment with online classes to compete with national for-profit universities. By contrast, proponents of going local with online and blended programs sometimes sound like small farmers touting the virtues of fresh arugula. They pitch the "authentic product: classes taught by the same faculty you would get face to face, in programs that grow organically from the same departments. But under the fuzzy phrases are some hard realities. Traditional universities, especially smaller ones that aren't state flagships, fear losing students to the for-profit ones, says A. Frank Mayadas, an Alfred P. Sloan Foundation program director considered by some to be the father of online learning. How, he asks, can you sit back and say, "Our business is now going to be stolen?" Global network of local leaders. Oslo is one of 7,400 cities from 120 countries that have made voluntary commitments to take significant action on climate change, under the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy. "Alone we can't do it, but globally we can." Solomon Islanders face rising sea levels. Life on the water. At high tide, Lau Lagoon's manmade islands barely rise above the waterline. During king tides and strong winds, which are becoming increasingly frequent, some islands are now completely submerged. Solomon Islanders face rising sea levels. People of the sea.