Online Education's Great Unknowns
by Steve Kolowich

Distance learning has broken into the mainstream of higher education. But at the campus level, many colleges still know precious little about how best to organize online programs, whether those programs are profitable, and how they compare to face-to-face instruction in terms of quality.

That is what Kenneth C. Green, director of the Campus Computing Project, concludes in a study released today in conjunction with the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications.

The study, based on a survey of senior officials at 182 U.S. public and private nonprofit colleges, found that 45 percent of respondents said their institution did not know whether their online programs were making money. Forty-five percent said they had reorganized the management of their online programs in the last two years, with 52 percent anticipating a reshuffling within the next two years. And while a strong majority of the administrators surveyed said they believed the quality of online education was comparable to classroom learning, about half said that at their colleges the professors are in charge of assessing whether that is true.

On the question of profitability, many of the colleges – 45 percent – reported turning a tidy profit from online education (with just 1.6 percent registering losses). But just as many officials said they have no idea whether their online programs made or lost money.

"The fact that many of campus officials couldn't say their programs were profitable, I found interesting," said Green. "Because the lure of this for the past decade has been, 'We're going to make a lot of money on distance ed.'" But despite the buzz, he said, profitability has been hard to gauge, since some campus information systems are not configured to undertake relevant accounting measures, such as tagging online students or parsing faculty and staff time devoted to online course delivery. (Nor does it help that the U.S. Education Department's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data system does not require colleges to track technology expenditures, Green added).

The growth of online programs, especially at public institutions, continues to be based largely on the anticipation that such programs are the wave of the future in terms of broadening access and increasing enrollment – and they will be at least solvent, if not cash cows. Duplicating programs online is not seen as a big risk, despite such notable failures such as the ill-fated University of Illinois Global Campus. John Bourne, executive director of the Sloan Online Learning Commission, noted that colleges generally prefer to be ahead of the curve on building the infrastructure to accommodate widely anticipated shifts, even if there is no way to demonstrate profitability in the short term.

And then there is the question of the quality of online programs as compared to traditional ones. A study released earlier this year by the Sloan commission and the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities found that many in higher education — particularly professors — still had doubts about whether Web-based learning measured up to the kind that happens in the classroom.

What Green found in his survey was that, irrespective of educational merit, many students are paying just as much, if not more, to earn their degree online than on campus.

Bourne said that despite the reservations of some faculty members (most of whom, he suggested, have little experience with online teaching or learning), the question of whether online teaching produces similar learning outcomes to traditional methods has been settled by 15 years' worth of research saying it does. He said he was heartened to learn that according to Green's findings, most campuses do not appear to be studying whether or not this is true anymore. "They're unlikely to find out anything different than what's been found out already", Bourne said.

But Green contended that institutions' complacency with respect to scrutinizing online learning outcomes is misguided. "I don't think the campus conversation about quality is over by any means," he said. The reason, he said, is that broad-lens studies cannot offer insight on the effectiveness of a specific online program at a specific institution. "The burden still falls on the campus" to find out whether the online equivalents of its degree programs measure up to their face-to-face forbears, Green said. "If you're teaching the same course and not using common assessment, then you just don't know. And for too many of these things, we just don't know".

Among the survey's other findings:

- **Tech support for online programs:** 36 percent provide 24/7 coverage; 25 percent provide coverage on weekdays, evenings and limited weekends; 22 percent cover weekdays and limited evenings; and 17 percent provide coverage only from 9 to 5 on weekdays.
- **Projected enrollment growth:** Almost half (47 percent) of colleges project enrollment increases in online programs of more than 15 percent over the next two years. Hardly any colleges project flat online enrollments.
- **Roadblocks:** Asked to identify factors that impede the growth of online programs, colleges cited (in this order): faculty resistance, lack of key resources, program accreditation and federal regulations as the top hindrances.

Green's own study, while "OK" in terms of statistical robustness, also suffered from a dearth of available data, he said. Despite the high demand for hard math on online education, he said, "It was pulling teeth to get people to do this questionnaire". The response rate was only 23 percent, although he said there was no pattern in those who responded that would lead him to discredit the findings. Green said he plans to make the survey a yearly event. "I know people are hungry for this" he said.

"Hopefully people won't freeload off the survey" next time, Green added.