



Minnesota
STATE COLLEGES
& UNIVERSITIES

Online Learning

The Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system has been providing online courses for more than 10 years. In fiscal year 2010, about 93,300 students took at least one online course. Collectively, these courses are known as Minnesota Online. By spring 2011, more than 100,000 students had enrolled in a single year.

Nearly 30 percent of all Minnesota State Colleges and Universities students take at least one online course. And about 75 percent of students who take online courses also take classroom-based courses at one of the system's 32 colleges and universities.

Demand for online courses continues to increase. Between fiscal years 2005 and 2009, full-year equivalent enrollment in online courses increased 186 percent while the system's overall full-year equivalent enrollment increased 6 percent.

A growing number of students also take courses from more than one system institution at the same time. In 2010, more than 12,000 students were enrolled in more than one system college or university, which may allow students to complete their programs sooner.

An online course is defined as one that has no more than two face-to-face classroom meetings. Online courses are distinct from "hybrid" courses, which meet on campuses for some sessions and online for some sessions. Classroom-based courses that use the Internet for enhancing learning in other ways are not considered to be online courses.

Online course and program offerings

In fiscal year 2010, the system offered more than 400 programs online that lead to diplomas, certificates and degrees at the associate, bachelor and graduate level. These programs include more than 10,000 courses.

Online tuition

Each college and university sets its online tuition rates after consulting with students at the institution. In the 2010-2011 academic year, the

average online undergraduate tuition rate is \$175 a credit hour for students at two-year colleges and \$253 a credit hour at the state universities. Between fiscal years 2005 and 2009, online tuition rates increased 19.2 percent while tuition rates for classroom-based courses went up 18.6 percent.

Tuition for online courses is often higher than tuition for classroom-based courses because it costs more to provide the necessary technology and online support services for students and faculty. These services include student advising and help desk support, training for faculty and instructional designers to assist faculty in creating and improving courses.

Colleges and universities with more online programs tend to charge higher online tuition rates. At the same time, online tuition rates at the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities are 50 percent lower on average than tuition rates of online competitors.

Preliminary findings of a system study evaluating student travel data also indicate that students in travel costs offset most of the additional tuition charged for online courses.

Online course development costs

Online courses are developed by faculty at the system's colleges and universities. Faculty members have developed most online courses with little or no financial incentive. The main cost in course development is faculty time, which is not calculated by the system.

The cost of creating a course depends mostly on the content. It ranges from as little as \$2,500 for converting an existing course to a basic online course to more than \$20,000 for a new highly interactive, media-rich online course with video clips, simulations and other features. Most courses delivered within the system have been developed at the lower end of the cost range.

In tracking the costs for providing online courses, a preliminary cost analysis in 2010 shows that direct instructional costs for online courses are comparable to the cost for courses delivered in classrooms. Costs vary by institution, however.

And while direct instructional costs comprise about half of total costs, it is difficult to measure such non-instructional costs as student support and technology. This is because the colleges and universities provide many online services for online students that also are used by students taking only on-site courses.

For example, the instructional management system, known as Desire2Learn, serves all online courses and many classroom-based courses and does not distinguish when students use a service as an online student or as a classroom-based student.

Although it is difficult to track non-instructional costs, they appear to be slightly higher for online delivery, primarily due to campus investments that support online learning, such as site administrators, instructional designers, faculty training and software licensing. These costs also vary by institution.

Advantages of online education include:

- Easy access from any computer connected to the Internet.
- Convenience that allows learners to engage in learning when it suits them.
- Flexibility in scheduling classes
- Adaptability to various learning styles.
- Higher learning productivity by saving time used for travel to campuses.
- Availability of courses and programs from 32 colleges and universities.
- Wide variety of programs, instructors, formats and learning resources.
- Some students find they contribute more freely in online classes than in regular classes.

Conditions needed for successful online learning

- Students need an adequate computer and Internet connection and must have basic Internet and computer skills.
- Students must be motivated to succeed, have good time management skills, be able to work independently and ask for help when needed.
- Students must be good readers and able to express themselves well in writing.
- Students must be willing to devote a sufficient number of hours each week toward their online education studies. Online courses are not a shortcut to a degree or certificate.

Minnesota Online support center

The online support center provides information and assists students in navigating the system. The support center is open 82 hours a week and features a toll-free number (800-456-8519), live online chats and other resources at www.minnesotaonline.org to help students succeed.

Online student profile

	Online students	All students
Average age	26.4 years	25.5 years
Percent of students registered at more than one institution	15.3 %	10.9 %
Students of color	11.9 %	14.8 %
Students from Minnesota	88 %	89 %

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The Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system, www.mnscu.edu comprises 25 community and technical colleges and seven state universities serving the higher education needs of Minnesota. The system serves about 277,000 students per year in credit-based courses and an additional 157,000 students in non-credit courses.



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