

Who Is Studying Online (and Where)

New federal data show continued (and accelerating) growth in online course taking in 2016, even as overall college enrollments were flat or falling. Big gainers: Western Governors and Arizona State. Big losers: the big for-profits.



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The number of college students enrolled in at least one online course -- and the proportion of all enrolled students who are studying online -- continued to rise at U.S. institutions in the 2016 academic year, newly released federal data show.

The statistics, part of a major release of provisional data on enrollments, employment and other topics from the Education Department's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, provide the most up-to-date information on enrollments in online and distance education.

The overarching story is a familiar one: even as overall enrollment in postsecondary institutions stays flat (unlike recent numbers from the National Student Clearinghouse, the federal data show enrollments staying roughly constant, not declining), online enrollments climb.

As a result, so, too, does the proportion of all students at institutions eligible to award federal financial aid who are taking at least one course at a distance, as seen in the table below.

The increased likelihood of being enrolled online is occurring at most levels and types of institutions in higher education.

Since 2014, the proportion of undergraduate students at Title IV-eligible institutions who are enrolled in at least one distance education course has risen from 27.1 percent to 30 percent in 2016, and the proportion of graduate students enrolled at least partially online has grown from 32.5 percent to 36.6 percent in 2016.

Community college students (30.9 percent) were more likely than undergraduates at four-year public institutions (29 percent) and four-year private colleges (25.6 percent) to be enrolled in at least one online course.

But more than two-thirds of the students taking at least one online course in 2016 were at public institutions, while roughly 18 percent were at private nonprofit colleges and 13 percent were at for-profit institutions. And the growth in the number of students taking at least one online course in 2016 was greater among public institutions than it was for private institutions, a change in the pattern of recent years.

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
All Students	20,511,849	20,454,336	20,637,987	20,536,231	20,464,608
Students Not Enrolled in Any Distance Courses	15,425,940	15,157,495	14,885,489	14,547,400	14,124,317
Students Enrolled in at Least One Distance Course	5,085,909	5,296,841	5,752,498	5,988,831	6,340,291
Proportion of All Students Who Are Enrolled in at Least One Distance Course	24.8%	25.9%	27.9%	29.2%	31%
Students Enrolled Exclusively in Distance Courses	2,310,056	2,427,504	2,804,867	2,873,144	2,983,075
Students Enrolled in Some (but Not All) Distance Courses	2,775,853	2,869,337	2,947,631	3,115,687	3,357,216

Students at for-profit colleges were by far likeliest to be enrolled at a distance -- a full 57.5 percent studied at least partially online in 2016. But for-profit institutions as a sector continued to see a large overall drop in the number of students they enrolled (from about 1.54 million in 2015 to about 1.46 million in fall 2016), so the number of students enrolled online dropped, too.

Where Are They Enrolling?

Not surprisingly given that fact, for-profit institutions dominate the list of individual institutions that experienced meaningful drops in online enrollment from 2015 to 2016, led by the University of Phoenix, American Public University System and Kaplan University. Phoenix's drop was particularly stark -- more than 30,000 students.

But not all for-profit institutions had similar fates: Grand Canyon University grew by nearly 25 percent, and institutions such as Walden, Capella and Ashford Universities held steady or grew modestly.

The biggest gainers among nonprofit institutions were behemoths like Western Governors University and Arizona State University. A few, including Liberty University and Baker College, lost significant enrollments. *(Note: The table below has been updated from an earlier version to correct some data.)*

Institution	Students Taking at Least One Class Online	
	2015	2016
University of Phoenix-Arizona	162,003	129,332
Western Governors University	70,504	84,289
Grand Canyon University	54,543	68,542
Liberty University	72,519	67,766
Southern New Hampshire University	56,371	63,973
Walden University	52,799	52,565
University of Maryland-University College	48,677	50,932
American Public University System	52,361	48,623
Excelsior College	43,123	41,658
Ashford University	42,046	41,343
Capella University	34,365	37,569
Kaplan University	45,268	37,431
University of Central Florida	33,034	36,107
Brigham Young University-Idaho	33,551	35,826
Ivy Tech Community College	34,103	34,811
Arizona State University-Tempe	22,809	30,989
University of Florida	28,838	30,720
Florida International University	26,341	30,126
Arizona State University	19,094	24,917
Colorado Technical University-Colorado Springs	900	24,692
Chamberlain College of Nursing-Illinois	22,114	24,284
Lone Star College System	21,811	22,873
University of South Florida-Main Campus	20,993	21,661
Columbia Southern University	20,823	21,442
University of Texas at Arlington	17,541	21,330
Full Sail University	19,939	19,273
Houston Community College	19,111	18,877
Valencia College	17,216	18,058
DeVry University-Illinois	20,458	18,015
California State University-Northridge	16,130	17,384
St Petersburg College	16,501	16,349
Texas Tech University	14,826	16,248
Ultimate Medical Academy-Tampa	12,106	16,140
Pennsylvania State University-Main Campus	14,355	15,955
College of Southern Nevada	14,906	15,127
Kent State University at Kent	13,754	15,100

Florida State University	12,858	14,985
University of Houston	12,961	14,667
University of Cincinnati-Main Campus	13,992	14,491
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign	10,720	14,090
Ohio State University-Main Campus	11,747	13,640
Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University-Worldwide	12,857	13,443
Pennsylvania State University-World Campus	12,242	13,411
University of North Texas	12,517	13,331
National University	12,116	13,168
Utah State University	13,360	13,122
Northern Virginia Community College	13,421	13,028
University of Arizona	9,660	12,997
Northern Arizona University	11,769	12,906
California State University-Fullerton	11,148	12,742
University of Minnesota-Twin Cities	10,037	12,519
Thomas Edison State University	13,093	12,489
Rutgers University-New Brunswick	10,652	12,461
Florida Atlantic University	10,433	12,441
North Carolina State University	12,321	12,377
Ohio University-Main Campus	10,828	12,177
East Carolina University	12,011	12,133
Columbia College	9,870	12,062
San Diego State University	9,634	12,061
Broward College	10,923	11,991
Cuyahoga Community College District	12,266	11,909
Delgado Community College	4,826	11,791
Fort Hays State University	10,950	11,746
Michigan State University	9,901	11,616
Colorado State University-Global Campus	9,838	11,605
University of Nevada-Las Vegas	10,319	11,529
Florida State College at Jacksonville	11,611	11,506
Rio Salado College	12,092	11,329
Oregon State University	10,148	11,251
Northcentral University	11,029	10,916
Nova Southeastern University	12,147	10,893
Portland Community College	10,849	10,640
Indiana University-Purdue University-Indianapolis	9,807	10,597
Old Dominion University	9,343	10,484
Central Piedmont Community College	10,177	10,463

Wilmington University	12,745	10,409
Utah Valley University	9,557	10,408
Tarrant County College District	10,377	10,402
Austin Community College District	9,896	10,364
University of Alabama at Birmingham	12,371	10,301
The University of Alabama	9,658	10,242
University of Nebraska-Lincoln	7,911	10,237
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley	9,914	10,200
American InterContinental University-Online	11,560	10,091
California State University-Sacramento	7,511	10,086
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University	9,140	10,077
University of Utah	8,598	9,947
Saint Leo University	11,244	9,899
Central Texas College	10,354	9,775
Columbus State Community College	11,907	9,685
Hillsborough Community College	7,441	9,588
Tidewater Community College	9,989	9,573
SUNY Buffalo State	2,303	9,475
Sam Houston State University	9,278	9,456
Ball State University	8,822	9,395
Drexel University	9,878	9,384
Lamar University	9,120	9,326
Central New Mexico Community College	8,557	9,288
Coastline Community College	9,776	9,227
Wake Technical Community College	8,642	9,187
The University of Texas at El Paso	9,384	9,116
University of Oklahoma	7,617	9,104
Indiana Wesleyan University	0	9,079
The University of Texas at Austin	7,021	9,003
Weber State University	8,433	8,982
South University Savannah Online	10,781	8,954
Johns Hopkins University	8,119	8,882
Baker College	12,081	8,881
Saddleback College	8,514	8,848
Kennesaw State University	10,056	8,800
George Mason University	7,901	8,777
University of New Mexico-Main Campus	8,059	8,771
Texas Woman's University	8,787	8,761
Park University	8,352	8,754

American River College	8,383	8,731
Troy University	8,824	8,706
Texas A & M University-Commerce	8,335	8,699
University of North Carolina at Greensboro	7,395	8,644
Grantham University	11,721	8,637
Eastern Kentucky University	8,368	8,630
Salt Lake Community College	7,504	8,595
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee	8,600	8,588
University of Missouri-Columbia	10,572	8,576
Keiser University-Ft Lauderdale	7,672	8,568
Oklahoma State University-Main Campus	7,413	8,479
San Jacinto Community College	7,961	8,475
University of Iowa	12,784	8,405
Western Kentucky University	7,687	8,395
University of South Carolina-Columbia	7,094	8,394
Richland College	5,343	8,317
Lorain County Community College	4,967	8,232
San Francisco State University	6,557	8,147
Santa Monica College	7,499	8,096
Palomar College	7,306	7,952
San Joaquin Delta College	7,474	7,941
California State University-East Bay	7,684	7,913
University of Nebraska at Omaha	7,537	7,893
Wichita State University	7,483	7,873
California State Polytechnic University-Pomona	6,298	7,871
Bellevue University	8,516	7,814
Fayetteville Technical Community College	7,520	7,789
University of Tennessee-Knoxville	6,515	7,760
Tulsa Community College	7,870	7,612
The University of West Florida	6,922	7,611
Regent University	6,010	7,554
University of Toledo	7,266	7,545
Palm Beach State College	7,399	7,536
Arkansas State University-Main Campus	6,747	7,525
West Virginia University	4,882	7,516
University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth	930	7,514