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Budget Woes Pressure Enrollment Limits for Online Courses

By [Marc Parry](#)

Madison, Wisc.—The University of Illinois at Springfield capped online classes at 20 students each more than a decade ago, concerned that more would burn out professors. But does that limit make sense today?

During a distance-education conference here, Ray Schroeder, a Springfield online-learning guru, raised the prospect that his university and others may have to reexamine online-enrollment restrictions as budget pressures mount.

"Quite a few institutions are going to look at that, to see if they can let in 25, or maybe a few more, students, rather than opening additional sections of classes," said Mr. Schroeder, director of Springfield's Office of Technology-Enhanced Learning.

A class of 25 sounds like a luxury in an environment where an institution like Arizona State University has talked about cramming 1,000 students into lectures. But the volume of one-to-one feedback in online classes can make teaching them highly labor-intensive, especially for professors new to the medium.

Adding more students may erode quality and drive professors to adopt different online-teaching strategies, like assigning more group projects because they're easier to grade, Mr. Schroeder said in an interview after his workshop on "Teaching in a Recession" at the Annual Conference on Distance Teaching & Learning, which runs through Friday here.

Beyond bigger classes, the recession is forcing information-technology departments to consider not renewing licenses for some e-learning products, such as learning-management systems and lecture-delivery tools, said Mr. Schroeder.

For some departments, he said, the alternative could be more layoffs.

Mr. Schroeder and his colleagues walked his workshop audience through a guide to free alternatives to commercial products. He also pointed out a daily blog, [Recession Realities in Higher Education](#), that collects news about higher-education budget doom. It already has about 700 posts.

"It's kind of a sad blog," Mr. Schroeder said to laughter during his workshop. "You might get ideas. Or when you're feeling bad about the way things are for you, you can at least say, 'Well, we could be in Louisiana.'"

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