

Gas Prices Drive Students to Online Courses

By [JEFFREY R. YOUNG](#)

For Christy LaBadie, a sophomore at Northampton Community College, the 30-minute drive from her home to the Bethlehem, Pa., campus has become a financial hardship now that gasoline prices have soared to more than \$4 a gallon. So this semester she decided to take an online course to save herself the trip—and the money.

"I would prefer to actually go to school and be there to do it," says Ms. LaBadie, a single mother working toward a degree in medical administration. "But it's hard enough paying tuition, much less the price of gas."

Students around the country are echoing Ms. LaBadie's complaint, and online education is booming as a result. Many institutions say their online summer enrollments have jumped significantly, compared with last summer's, and that fuel prices are a key factor in the increase.

The Tennessee Board of Regents, for instance, reports that summer enrollment in online courses is up 29 percent this summer over last year. At Brevard Community College, in Cocoa, Fla., summer enrollment in online courses is up nearly 25 percent. Harrisburg Area Community College, in Pennsylvania, saw its summer online enrollment rise 15 percent to 20 percent. At Northampton summer online enrollment is up 18 percent.

Incentive to Try New Formats

"All across the country, community colleges and universities are getting requests for online programs specifically with students mentioning the price of gas," says Ray Schroeder, director of the office of technology-enhanced learning at the University of Illinois at Springfield. "I just filled up the tank of my little Hyundai, and it was \$50 for the first time ever—I think it really is affecting people."

Some experts say that the rising interest in online programs could lead more colleges to expand their offerings, or experiment with "blended" courses that mix in-person and online meetings.

"Instead of coming to class three times a week, you might only need to come two times a week if you have a blended program," says Frank Mayadas, director of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation's grant program for online education.

Savings in travel costs are beginning to show up as a selling point in marketing materials for online programs.

An online calculator offered by the SUNY Learning Network, the online program of the State University of New York, helps students determine "how much money you will save by taking a college course from your home." The first two pieces of information the calculator asks for are the miles a student drives to and from campus and the gas mileage of the student's car.

But some officials caution that online courses are not for every student, and that distance education requires more self-discipline than courses with set meeting times. Some of the students who choose online courses based on price may end up struggling with the online format.

A Seasonal Effect

Gas prices may be more of a factor in the summer than during other times of year, says Kelvin W. Bentley, director of

online learning at Northampton. Summer courses generally meet more frequently because of the shorter sessions, meaning students must drive to classes several times a week.

"With online courses, they don't have to do that," says Mr. Bentley. "They're saving tons of money on gas, tolls, and wear and tear on their cars."

Edna V. Baehre, president of Harrisburg Area Community College, says many of the college's students struggle to pay for their education, and, as a result, any rise in the cost of necessities can pose an obstacle. The college saw a spike in online enrollments a couple years ago, when heating-oil prices went up, Ms. Baehre says.

At Colorado State University, where a new online program will teach its first students this fall, the high cost of gas led administrators to waive the program's \$50 application fee.

"We've had several of our students ask us if we would waive the fee so they could get a tank of gas," says Rich W. Schweigert, chief executive of Global Campus, the new online division.

So far more than 100 students have registered.

'Too Early to Tell'

Not everyone believes that prices at the pump change educational choices, though.

"The rise was just too fast to make that kind of adjustment in their lives," says Robert M. Brown, dean of the division of continual learning at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, who notes that most online students there sign up for entire degree programs via distance education rather than individual courses. "It's really too early to tell" if gas is the driving factor, he says.

Officials at the University of Phoenix say they have not seen a spike in online enrollments this summer or heard much about gas prices affecting students' choice of formats.

That may be because face-to-face courses are already designed to minimize drive time. William J. Pepicello, Phoenix's president, says those courses meet just once a week for four-hour sessions, and textbooks and library services are delivered online.

"I wouldn't want to say we built anticipating the gas crunch," Mr. Pepicello says, but it has less impact on Phoenix than on other institutions because "we have a wide variety of virtual services."

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