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Sloan Foundation Ends Major Grant Program for Online Education

By MARC PARRY

The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation is closing its online-education grant program, a foundation official has told *The Chronicle*. Some college officials are concerned that the decision will leave a fast-growing sector of American higher education without a major source of support.

The New York City-based foundation has funneled roughly \$80-million since the early 1990s into online-education ventures around the country. The philanthropy's impending withdrawal has aroused anxiety about what will fill the vacuum. Robert Kaleta, director of the Learning Technology Center at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, compared the change to losing a parent "who has always been there to support, guide and encourage us."

"There's concern that the momentum may slow down," said Mr. Kaleta, who administers a Sloan grant at Milwaukee.

The most recent report from the Sloan Consortium, a foundation spinoff that promotes online education, said that more than 3.9 million students took at least one online course during the fall-2007 term. That represented a healthy 12-percent increase over the previous year.

'Largely Achieved Its Goals'

In a telephone interview, A. Frank Mayadas, who is a program director at the foundation, credited Sloan's efforts with spearheading "a revolution which forever will change education." Some educators consider Mr. Mayadas, who helped steer millions of dollars toward online programs, to be a father of online learning.

But foundations "are not in the business of sustaining things," he said. "Foundations are in the business of starting new things."

In a statement e-mailed to *The Chronicle*, Paul L. Joskow, president of the foundation, said the online-education program "has largely achieved its goals and grown to a point where the foundation's support will soon no longer be necessary."

Mr. Mayadas described the program as "effectively closed," since the grants being made now "are almost exclusively already in the pipeline." He plans to leave Sloan at the end of this year.

"We have a new president who wants to set new directions," he said. "We've been at this for over 15 years. I think we've largely pushed it to where it is irreversible."

The Sloan Consortium will continue to offer its services to online-education providers. The foundation has awarded it a \$4-million grant to make a transition from an informal membership group to a nonprofit organization.

The goal is for the consortium to "institutionalize our program's achievements," Mr. Joskow said. It will help colleges share techniques that work, support them, and certify new courses.

The consortium will be able to receive grants, Mr. Mayadas added, but it will not award them.

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The foundation's support for online education predates the commercial Internet. In 1992, a year after the World Wide Web was developed, a former president, Ralph E. Gomory, enticed Mr. Mayadas to leave his job at IBM and begin the program.

Over the years, as the Internet evolved from what Mr. Mayadas described as "a congested network that catered to a couple of research universities," he committed millions of dollars to "stir things up" on about 120 campuses.

The foundation gave money to community colleges. It gave to tribal colleges. It gave to large research universities. The money went to create courses, to convert face-to-face courses into online ones, and to build a community with conferences and publications.

"They've been just a huge player in this field," said Ray Schroeder, director of the Office of Technology-Enhanced Learning at the University of Illinois at Springfield, "and in shaping the way in which online learning has rolled out across the traditional universities."

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