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[More college students taking degree programs online](#)

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Danny Ashcom reports for class in the living room of his Uptown one-bedroom apartment.

The 32-year-old counselor is earning an online master's degree in computer science through the University of Illinois at Springfield. He started the program in August, the same month he graduated with a traditional bricks-and-mortar master's degree in psychology from a different school.

"Doing psychology I wouldn't have thought about an online degree because you need to be face-to-face with people," he said. "In computer science, there is no real price to pay for doing it on your own. You can do it quickly and efficiently."

Online classes and degree programs have exploded in size and popularity in the last decade, led primarily by public universities who see the programs as a way to reach non-traditional students.

Traditional students are also finding more online options mixed in with lectures and seminars.

Nearly 30 percent of all higher education students take at least one class online. More than 60 percent of chief academic officers said that online education was critical to their long-term strategy, according to a Sloan Consortium report, "Class Differences, Online Education in the United States, 2010."

In autumn 2002, 1.6 million students were taking an online class. That number jumped to nearly 4 million in fall 2007, the group reported.

And in the past two years, the dismal economy pushed even more students into online classes. Universities responded to meet the demand.

More than 5.6 million students were taking at least one online class in 2009, an increase of nearly 1 million students from 2008, the report said.

In Illinois, online enrollments jumped 27 percent from spring 2009 to spring 2010, according to Illinois Virtual Campus.

Illinois schools with the largest online enrollments compared with their peers are DePaul University, the College of DuPage and College of Lake County, DeVry University and the U. of I.'s Chicago campus.

"The big question that keeps coming up is when does the growth stop- " said Jeff Seaman, co-author of the "Class Differences" study and co-director of the Babson Survey Research Group, which has surveyed universities about online offerings for the last eight years. "If the economy picks up, what's the impact going to be for online enrollments- Will they slow growth, stay steady or will they drop- No one knows."

As their popularity grows, the stigma that these degrees aren't worth as much as a traditional degree is fading, Seaman said.

"It can be at least as good as face-to-face," he said.

"The stigma was not within the higher ed community," Seaman said. "There's always been a perception issue in the general public side more so than in higher education."

Getting the public to accept that these degrees had the same value as a traditional bricks-and-mortar degree was helped in large part by having well-known schools offer online programs.

"Look at Penn State World Campus [which offers 70 online degrees and certificates]. People believe Penn State is a quality institution and offers good educational value."

Ray Schroeder has taught at the U. of I.'s Urbana-Champaign campus and then its Springfield campus every semester since 1971. He now leads online programs at the Springfield campus, which offer more online courses than the other two U. of I. campuses combined.

"What drives many of us in this field is serving the student who cannot come to campus," he said.

Students include those with disabilities, military students or others working full time and parents who can't make it to class at a specific time and place. Almost all of them are paying for their own education.

Schroeder said more than half of the school's students are enrolled in at least one online class during the fall semester. For students seeking degrees totally online, the average age of an undergraduate is 34, the average master's is 35, he said.

"At most brick-and-mortar universities we don't dilute standards one bit when we go online," he said. "It's the same faculty members, the same outcomes."

The students who are successful are self-motivated, he said.

"There are people who are surprised that the rigor is the same and in some respects it's a little more difficult to take an online class," he said.

For Sue Nierstheimer, 56, of Vernon Hills, the personal connections she has made in the online master's degree program in education through the Springfield campus has been the biggest surprise.

A full-time faculty member at the College of Lake County and the department chair in the school's dental hygiene program, Nierstheimer enrolled in the online master's program to meet a requirement of her current job.

An empty nester, Nierstheimer does her schoolwork at the kitchen table while her husband watches sports in the next room.

"I can get online anytime," she said. "It makes it so possible for me. I don't think I could be doing this otherwise."

She is now looking at her school's dental hygiene program to see where online classes would fit.

"This generation of students, they are all becoming so technically competent that I really see this as being a preference," she said. "Many of our courses are hands on in the dental hygiene program but there are ones that could be online and others could do a hybrid."

Of the roughly 4,000 higher education institutions in the United States, about one-third offer no online options, Seaman said.

He doesn't see a day when online classes will replace the traditional college experiences of dormitory all-nighters and classes in ivy-covered buildings.

Colleges and universities are assessing their missions to see where online coursework might fit in, Seaman said. In some cases, there is no place for it.

"If I am a large but private research institution where my students are paying \$40,000-plus per year, it's not a good match for my mission," he said.

Schroeder agrees, calling the traditional post-high school, on-campus university stint a "wonderful experience for the 18-year-old."

"Many, many students can't afford it when they need to have a job," he said. "Having this has really opened up higher education."