**IMPORTANT NOTE :**

**It is recommended that students read the following essays ( before they come to class) by applying the critical reading strategies they have already learned in the course .**

**ESSAY 1 : NO SHORT CUTS IN LONG- DISTANCE LEARNING**

Distance learning is one of the national rallying cries of Republican politicians and state education officials seeking cheap ways to graduate more students attending public colleges. Community colleges, the old doormats of postsecondary learning that were founded on the sensible notion that anybody who wants an education should be able to get one, are major players in this Web-based instruction movement.

Economists and social scientists know that if the United States intends to remain an economic leader internationally, a much larger portion of the work force must be educated, including citizens who traditionally have been shunned by colleges: low-income students, working adults, select minorities, and those who need remediation before they can tackle college-level work. Here is where community colleges come in. They enroll more students than their four-year counterparts. As such, many politicians, with the support of community college presidents and state officials, see these schools as ideal, cost-effective places to boost online learning.

Besides saving the colleges money, online courses reduce scheduling conflicts for students with families and jobs and other commitments. But according to a recent study released by the Community College Research Center at the Teachers College at Columbia University, Web-based instruction is not the magic bullet for educating more community college students. The research found, in fact, that community college students in online courses fail and drop out more often than students in classroombased courses.

Researchers followed the academic history of 51,000 students in the state of Washington between 2004 and 2009 and found an 8 percent gap in completion rates between students in distance courses and those in face-to-face courses. Two other troubling findings of the study were that students with online credits did not graduate or transfer to four-year schools as often as those enrolled in traditional coursework, and those in online remedial courses fared far worse than remedial students in face-to-face courses.

A second study, conducted for the Virginia community college system, found similar gaps between students in distance courses and those in traditional courses.

Postsecondary online courses are here to stay and will play an increasingly critical role in educating a competitive U.S. work force of people who will demand a lot of flexibility. But community colleges should not succumb to the lure of increased funding only to implement slipshod efforts that ill serve their students. While they are increasing their online offerings, community colleges must make student success in these courses a priority.

The very idea of the community college, open enrollment to residents with a high school diploma or its equivalent, sets many students up for failure. Add to that the enticement of distance learning—never having to leave home to take courses—and we get immature students who are in over their heads from the beginning.

What should community colleges do to improve online learning? The Virginia study suggests, among other strategies :

Students should be tested for their preparedness for online instruction.

■ Online students should be given a dose of reality about time management. They need to be taught from the outset that while working at home with the family around can be advantageous, it can become a trap.

■ Students need to be trained to navigate the online course-related computer systems necessary to complete their coursework.

■ Faculty members should be trained for online instruction so that they can competently guide their students.

■ Colleges should improve support services, offering, for example, 24/7 online tutoring.

As the studies show, distance learning is not a panacea for graduating more community college students. But if it is done effectively, it will become an essential part of sustaining the nation’s economic viability in the world.

**ESSAY 2 : THE RISKS AND REWARDS OF ONLINE LEARNING**

In 2008, investors wanted to buy Rio Salado College, the nation’s largest online public community college headquartered in Tempe, Ariz. The offer was more than $400 million with plans to convert it into a national, for-profit, online school.

Rio Salado wasn’t for sale, but the offer proved how much demand exists for serving students who find traditional education systems inconvenient and need the flexibility of online formats.

Online learning may not be the first thing that comes to mind when community colleges consider providing support for student success. But that mindset is changing. It has to. The 2011 Sloan Survey of Online Learning reported that more than six million college students in the fall of 2010 took at least one online course, comprising nearly one-third of all college and university students. The growth rate in online course enrollment far exceeds the growth rate of the overall higher education student population.

Still, there is healthy skepticism about the proliferation of online learning and views still differ about its value. According to surveys by the Pew Research Center and the Chronicle of Higher Education, less than 30 percent of the public believes that online and classroom courses provide the same educational value. Half of college presidents share that belief.

Any way you look at it, online learning is an increasingly vital part of producing the number of qualified graduates needed to meet future workforce demands—when it is done correctly.

A Calculated Risk In 1996, Rio Salado, one of 10 Maricopa Community Colleges, took a calculated risk and began offering courses online—16 to start—just when the Internet was taking off. Critics at the time challenged the quality of online education and claimed that students wouldn’t adjust well to such a radical change in their learning environment. But Maricopa and Rio Salado pushed ahead, determined to create an innovative, nontraditional, and nimble approach that is responsive to and supportive of changing student needs.

The risks have proven to be worth it. While no one could have predicted the economic environment that students and higher education face today, making the decision to move online proved to be provident for the college and students. Rio Salado extended educational access to students who found traditional college to be out of reach in Arizona, nationwide, and around the world.

The college currently serves nearly 70,000 students each year, with more than 41,000 enrolled in 600-plus online courses.

**Keeping Costs Down :**

To keep costs down, Rio Salado supports more than 60 certificate and degree programs with just 22 residential faculty and more than 1,400 adjunct faculty. Our “one-course, many sections” model uses a master course approved by the resident faculty and taught by adjunct faculty in more than 6,000 course sections. The college’s cost to educate students is as much as 48 percent less than peer institutions nationwide.

Without the expense of a traditional campus, Rio Salado has been able to focus on building and improving its RioLearn platform, a customized learning management system that provides access to course-related resources, instructors, fellow students, and other support services.

Focused on Student Support :

Meeting students’ needs means providing access to robust, comprehensive support services that are customized for their complex lifestyles, whether they are a working adult, an active military student accessing their coursework online, or someone taking in-person classes in adult basic education, incarcerated reentry, early college, or workforce training programs. Today’s students need the resources of round-the-clock instructional and technology helpdesks, tutoring, and virtual library services. Additionally, we never cancel an online class and offer the flexibility of 48 start dates a year.

Students also need real-time support to keep them on track. Predictive analytic technology allows the college to monitor online student engagement and predict by the eighth day of class the level of success students will have in a course. When needed, instructors facilitate interventions to minimize risks and support successful course completion.

Building a culture of unified support focused on completion won’t happen overnight. It took 30 years for Rio Salado to get to this point. Our upsidedown faculty model has made it possible for the college to adapt a corporate “systems approach,” and all Rio Salado staff and faculty participate in a training program to instill a unified commitment to helping students complete their degree programs.

**Technical Challenges :**

Staying ahead of the online curve comes with its share of challenges. Rio Salado had to build its own learning management system because there wasn’t one available that would support all of the features that our faculty and students wanted. In partnership with Microsoft and Dell, RioLearn was designed to be scalable to more than 100,000 students.

However, a few years ago, it didn’t fully support Mac users. Although students could access their coursework, they had to switch Internet browsers to do so. A new version of RioLearn was launched in 2010 to help students access their courses, regardless of the platform they are using.

We’ve also learned that many of our students are co-enrolled in traditional colleges and universities. They come to Rio Salado for flexibility, affordability, and convenience to accelerate their degree on their terms. They bank credits and ultimately transfer those credits to complete their degrees at another institution.

A recent report examines Rio Salado’s efforts and the experience and perspectives of more than 30 institutions throughout the U.S. addressing similar challenges to ensure student success—especially for low-income, minority, and adult students—and pursuing promising approaches to increase college completion rates.

Reimagining the System Our country can’t continue to allow millions of people who are college material to fall through the cracks. We must find new, convenient, and high-quality educational options for students who might otherwise have missed out on a college education. That means serving more students in more places—especially where college enrollments have been capped— through efforts such as online early college initiatives, by creating cohorts at the high-school level and developing opensource courses.

With tuition rising faster than the rate of inflation, and the best-paying jobs requiring some form of postsecondary degree, specialized certification, or licensure, we have to find solutions that lower costs for students. We need to innovate. We need new models of education to leverage public resources through private and public partnerships and increase the capacity to serve nontraditional students through productive and cost-efficient means.

It’s encouraging to see the rapid growth in affordable online learning. It has broken down the barriers of time, distance, and affordability without sacrificing high-quality academics. But shoring up its credibility and value for students means heeding some of the lessons learned over the past 15 years. The stakes for getting it right are certainly high and getting higher.

**ESSAY :** **3 RELIANCE ON ONLINE MATERIALS HINDERS LEARNING POTENTIAL FOR STUDENTS**

Students of today should be thankful for the . . . plethora of ways available for them to learn. Compared to our grandparents, parents, and even older siblings, we have access to modes of communication and education that would not have been possible even 10 years ago.

Students today, not just in college but in high school, middle school, and elementary school, take in and process astounding amounts of information on a daily basis. We have access to TV and the Internet, social media outlets such as Twitter and Facebook, and a nearly inexhaustible supply of ways to keep in contact with and learn about one another.

This variety has begun to work its way into academia, as well; more and more, it seems, organized instruction is moving beyond the classroom and into cyberspace. Pencils and paper, once the sole staples of the educational experience, are slowly being ousted by keyboards, webcams, and online dropboxes.

Here at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, this growing prevalence is easy to see. Just look at Blackboard and how some courses are completely dependent upon it. Blackboard has everything from grade tracking and homework assignments to the administration of quizzes and exams.

Look at MyRED, which now handles everything from class enrollment and scheduling to residence hall contracts and meal plans

. Look at things such as the Love Library’s EBSCO search engine, which gives students access to a greater wealth of information than even the most practiced scholar would know what to do with, and online courses such as the Keller Plan, which allow students to complete coursework and earn credit without having to leave their dorm rooms.

It’s clear to even the most casual observer that taking in and processing information is far easier for the students of today than it was for the students of 100, 50, or even 10 years ago.

But it begs the question: While the Internet has certainly made learning easier, has it made it better? Not necessarily.

Think for a moment about the fundamental differences between a traditional course, taught in a classroom, and one conducted entirely via Blackboard’s online services.

In the former, students are bound by structure and organization. They must attend class on a regular basis or suffer the consequences, typically (though not always) complete regular homework assignments for points, and are constantly reminded of the work that needs to be done by the ever-present figure (or specter) of the professor.

Such is not the case with classes taken outside the classroom. The instructions for such courses are, at least in my experience, pared down to the following: “Read this by this date, this by this date, and this by this date. There are quizzes on Day X, Day Y, and Day Z, and the final exam can be taken at any time during finals week in the testing center. Have a nice semester.

” Now, I know that college is supposed to be a place of greater expectations, of increased responsibilities and better time management skills. I get that, I really do. But the sad truth is that all too often, giving a student that kind of freedom doesn’t end well.

By removing the sense of structure from a course, you remove the student’s notion that he or she is under any sort of pressure, any sort of time constraint. By removing a constantly present instructor, you remove what is, in many cases, the sole source of motivation students have to do well in a class. You take away the sense of urgency, the sense of immediate requirement, and by extension the student’s drive.

Readings are put off or forgotten, material review sessions (if there are any) are blown off or missed, and quizzes and exams are ultimately bombed. More often than not, the student will get caught up with work from the other, more traditional courses on their schedule—the ones they remember they have homework in because it was assigned in class this afternoon or the ones they have to study for because the professor reminded them about the upcoming exam the other day. Unfortunately, another marked difference between traditional and online courses is that the latters are typically far less forgiving when it comes to things such as deadlines and extensions, making it next to impossible for students to get out of the holes they dig themselves into.

The Internet is a powerful tool. It allows us to share, distribute, and absorb more information in a single year than our ancestors absorbed in a lifetime, and its capacity to do those things is constantly growing. What people, educators in particular, need to realize is that no matter how powerful a tool it becomes, the Internet should never become anything more than that: a tool.

There will never be an adequate online substitute for the watchful eye and the stern voice of a professor, or the pressure of an exam time limit that is about to expire, or the dismay and subsequent motivation to improve that can come from a handed-back assignment with a failing grade scrawled on it.

Now . . . off to class

**ESSAY 4 :** **ONLINE EDUCATION INNOVATORS SHOULD BE WARY**

Some professors at elite universities are trying to devise a more economical university model, and they are using the Internet to do it.

Sebastian Thrun, a Stanford professor, is an advocate of the online university and has ambitious goals: producing lectures and live, online discussions to thousands of students at a fraction of the cost, rewarding students for honed skills instead of “grades,” and eliminating the inefficiency of large campuses.

Thrun is now offering free, online courses on artificial intelligence to over 100,000 students around the world. These courses teach the same material for which Stanford students pay $50,000 per year. Thrun offers dynamic, live lectures that end in a “Statement of Accomplishment” but not Stanford credit. However, the opportunity to learn from the man who led the team that built Google’s self-driving car is probably incentive enough to take his course.

The high cost of a college education unfortunately perpetuates immobility between social classes; students from higher socioeconomic classes have almost automatic access, while students from disadvantaged neighborhoods have a much harder time.

Supplementing a student’s education with online classes reduces the amount of money he or she has to spend. If students attend class only two days a week and have online courses the other three days, they save on gas, food, university fees, and other costs.

However, what Thrun and other advocates of online universities do not consider are the nonacademic skills and values that universities instill in students. Taking courses on a computer at home deprives students of a practical, social education that is necessary in most professions and not taught in high school.

How does somebody develop a personal relationship with a professor, or necessary networking skills, when he or she is only one in a class of five thousand, and the only method of communication with peers and professors is through online chat or a discussion board? Professionals, especially service providers, need social skills almost as much as they need qualifications.

Another problem with online courses is cheating from lack of supervision. Thrun portrays students with an idealism that is inspirational but seems to be ignoring reality. Anyone can sit behind a computer screen and take a course, including a friend of a person enrolled in that course. So how do we know who is sitting behind that screen? Without a professor and teaching assistants, to whom is the student accountable?

Reducing the amount of money spent on a college education and increasing accessibility does not fix the problem of individual drive, appreciating the significance of one’s education, and whether or not students entering these classes can handle the material. Unequal opportunity and training in public schools also makes the “universal accessibility” dream unrealistic. To reap the benefits of these classes, students must have the proper training before they graduate. Otherwise, even a completely free education does no good.

Online courses are a great idea, they are already being used by some degree at most universities, but implementing the online change slowly may make room for constructive criticism and ensure that the system works as well as it could.