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High Cost of Driving Ignites Online Classes Boom

By [SAM DILLON](#)

NEWTOWN, Pa. — First, Ryan Gibbons bought a Hyundai so he would not have to drive his gas-guzzling Chevy Blazer to college classes here. When fuel prices kept rising, he cut expenses again, eliminating two campus visits a week by enrolling in an online version of one of his courses.

Like Mr. Gibbons, thousands of students nationwide, including many who were previously reluctant to study online, have suddenly decided to take one or more college classes over the Internet.

“Gas prices have pushed people over the edge,” said Georglyn Davidson, director of online learning at Bucks County Community College, where Mr. Gibbons studies, and where online enrollments are up 35 percent this summer over last year.

The vast majority of the nation’s 15 million college students — at least 79 percent — live off campus, and with gas prices above \$4 a gallon, many are seeking to cut commuting costs by studying online. Colleges from Massachusetts and Florida to Texas to Oregon have reported significant online enrollment increases for summer sessions, with student numbers in some cases 50 percent or 100 percent higher than last year. Although some four-year institutions with large online programs — like the [University of Massachusetts](#) and Villanova — have experienced these increases, the greatest surges have been registered at two-year community colleges, where most students are commuters, many support families and few can absorb large new expenditures for fuel.

At Bristol Community College in Fall River, Mass., for instance, online enrollments were up 114 percent this summer over last, and half the students queried cited gas costs or some other transportation obstacle as a reason for signing up to study over the Internet, said April Bellafiore, an assistant dean there.

“Online classes filled up immediately,” Ms. Bellafiore said. “It blew my mind.”

Enrollments in online classes expanded rapidly early in this decade, but growth slowed in 2006

to less than 10 percent, according to statistics compiled last year by researchers at Babson College in Massachusetts. Some recent increases reported by college officials in interviews were much larger, which they attributed to the rising cost of gasoline. Pricing policies for online courses vary by campus, but most classes cost as much as, or more than, traditional ones.

At Brevard Community College in Cocoa, Fla., online enrollment rose to 2,726 this summer from 2,190 last year, a 24.5 percent increase. “That is a dramatic increase we can only attribute to gas prices,” said Jim Drake, Brevard’s president.

Dr. Drake and officials at several other colleges expressed concern that mounting fuel costs could force some students to drop out of college altogether, especially since only a fraction of courses at most colleges are offered online. Dr. Drake has put Brevard on a four-day week to help employees and students save gas.

David Gray, chief executive of UMass Online, the distance education program at the University of Massachusetts, said that at an educators’ conference this week in San Francisco, officials from scores of universities discussed how the energy crisis could affect higher education. “There was broad agreement that gas price increases will be a source of continued growth in online enrollments,” Mr. Gray said.

Once an incidental expense, fuel for commuting to campus now costs some students half of what they pay for tuition, in some cases more. Sergey Sosnovsky, who is pursuing pre-engineering studies at Bucks County Community College, paid \$240 a month for gas during the spring semester, while his full-time tuition cost about \$500 a month, he said. Other students here and in half a dozen other states told similar stories.

Ozarks Technical Community College in Springfield, Mo., which enrolls residents on both sides of the Arkansas-Missouri border, had 52 percent more students sign up for Internet-based courses this summer than last, said Witt Salley, the college’s director of online teaching and learning.

One student taking online coursework for the first time is Kameron Miller, a 30-year-old working mother who lives in Buffalo, Mo., 40 miles north of Springfield. Her commute to classes in her 1998 Chevy Venture during the spring semester cost her at least \$200 a month for gas, Ms. Miller said. This summer, she is taking courses in health, humanities and world music — all online.

“I don’t feel I get as much out of an online class as a campus course,” Ms. Miller said. “But I couldn’t afford any other decision.”

Among the four-year institutions reporting increased online enrollment, UMass Online, which enrolls students at its five Massachusetts campuses and worldwide, experienced 46 percent growth this summer over last among students at the university's Dartmouth, Mass., campus. At [Villanova University](#) in Pennsylvania, enrollment in online, graduate, engineering, nursing and business courses has increased more than 40 percent this summer, said Robert Stokes, an assistant vice president there.

Waiting lists for Web-based courses have lengthened at some institutions. At the [University of Colorado](#), Denver, for instance, 361 students are on the waiting list for online courses for the fall term, compared to 233 last year on the same date, said Bob Tolsma, an assistant vice chancellor.

In Tennessee, the six universities, 13 two-year colleges and 26 technology centers overseen by the Tennessee Board of Regents enrolled 9,000 students for online courses this summer, compared with about 7,000 last summer, a 29 percent increase, said Robbie K. Melton, an associate vice chancellor.

"We had to train more faculty and provide more online courses because students just couldn't afford to drive to our campuses," Dr. Melton said.

Sandra Jobe, a 46-year-old bookkeeper who is studying for a master's degree in education at Tennessee State University, said she reduced the number of trips she had to make each week to the university's Nashville campus to two from four by enrolling in an online course.

"The campus experience is good; I wouldn't diminish that," Ms. Jobe said. "But when you're penny-pinching, online is a good alternative."

South Texas College, which has five campuses in Hidalgo and Starr Counties in the Rio Grande Valley, saw a 35 percent increase in online enrollments this summer over last, said William Serrata, a vice president. Other years have seen summer increases of 10 percent to 15 percent, he said. "This really speaks to students' not wanting to travel due to the gas prices," Mr. Serrata said.

Elvira Ozuna, who is 37 and studying for an associate's degree in occupational therapy, was driving four times a week, 50 miles round trip from her home to South Texas College's campus in McAllen. But this summer she enrolled in two online courses, eliminating that commute.

Ms. Ozuna said she found online work more difficult than classroom study. "But I saved on the gasoline," she said.

Distance education is no silver bullet that can alone solve the challenges posed for higher education by rising gasoline prices, officials warned.

For one thing, many students, especially in rural areas, lack the high-speed Internet connections on which online courses depend.

“The infrastructure doesn’t exist to give all rural students clear online access,” said Stephen G. Katsinas, a professor at the [University of Alabama](#). “Rural America is where the digital divide is most dramatic.”

Furthermore, most colleges still offer only a fraction of their courses over the Internet. Bucks County Community College, for instance, will offer 414 credit courses during the fall term. Only 103 of those will be offered online, and another 48 as hybrid courses, that is, partly online but with some campus visits required. So most students will still need to come to campus.

Mr. Gibbons, who is 20, works days and aspires to be a writer. He said his online course, “Introduction to the Novel,” had been a good experience, especially the Web-based discussions of [Jane Austen](#)’s novels. (He likes posting comments by e-mail better than speaking in class.) He said he still preferred on-campus study, “but with the price of gas jumping up, I’ll probably be taking more courses online now.”

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