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Introduction

Online education has become an accepted part of higher education, with as many as 33.5% of higher education students taking at least one online course\(^1\) and some of the most prestigious institutions in the nation offering online courses and degrees. From 2002 to 2012, online enrollments have grown at a rate of 16.1%, while the number of students enrolled in higher education overall has grown at a rate of 2.5% in that time.\(^2\) To take advantage of these numbers, approximately 80% of public institutions offer at least one online program.\(^3\)

Online enrollments offer an opportunity for growth for higher education institutions, but such opportunity must be considered carefully. For a college to thrive online over the next five years and to combat the intense competition from both for-profit and nonprofit institutions, it needs to produce a portfolio of degree or certificate programs that are not overcrowded from a competitive standpoint, and also provide graduates the skills to gain occupations in fields with substantial growth over the next five to 10 years.

The following is a list of degree programs that we believe should be seriously considered as programs to launch online or in a hybrid format. Each school’s brand, resources and market are unique, so this is not intended to be a definitive list. However, based on our research, we believe this list can help your institution offer programs that are useful to your students and allow your school to increase its footprint.

The degrees were determined based on analysis of secondary research, previous online experience and direct contact with industry professionals. The degrees fall into two categories. One, which we call “mainstream,” is where we feel there will be mass appeal; the other, which we identify as “niche,” is where we feel there are possibilities for success but at a lower volume.
Mainstream Degrees

Bachelor of Health Care Administration or Health Care Operations

As one industry expert stated, “many health care workers are foreign to higher education.” This degree is an opportunity for individuals working in health care (registration, billing, front line staff, bed management, patient safety, insurance verification, etc.) who don’t have bachelor’s degrees to distinguish themselves or transition from front line staff to managerial or credentialing roles. In addition, those outside the field looking to go into health care would greatly benefit from this degree. Topics of study could include: medical terminology, Medicare, revenue cycle, health care finance / billing, collection, IT management, etc.

Conferrals of bachelor’s degrees in the Health/Health Care Administration/Management CIP code increased 83.5% from 2010 to 2013, with steady increases year over year. Ashford’s conferrals more than tripled from 2010 to 2013, increasing from 257 to 1,071. Roles for Medical and Health Services Managers are projected to grow 23%, with 73,000 jobs added by 2022. Although competition is fierce at the master’s level, it is less so at the bachelor’s level, with Ashford University holding a 12.6% share of the total (online and on-ground) market in 2013.

Bachelor of Health Information Management

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 required that all public and private health care providers and other eligible professionals (EP) must have adopted and demonstrated “meaningful use” of electronic medical records (EMR) in order to maintain their existing Medicaid and Medicare reimbursement levels. Additionally, on October 1, 2015, all medical coding will switch from ICD 9 to ICD 10, increasing from 13,000 codes to 68,000 codes. Finally, the implementation of the Affordable Care Act is creating millions more insured patients. Given all these changes, the amount of data that will need to be managed is growing exponentially, driving a need for a degree in Health Information Management (HIM).

The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects job growth in medical records and health information technicians of 21% by 2020. The majority of current workers hold an associate’s degree, but industry experts say that requiring a bachelor’s is becoming more common. This offers an excellent opportunity to provide an accelerated degree program to those holding an associate’s degree, as well as a traditional-length program for those without any prior certification.

A number of institutions do offer a degree in HIM; 56 of the universities offering a bachelor’s of HIM are accredited by the Commission on Accreditation for Health Informatics and Information Management Technology, and 25 of those universities offer the degree online. As the need for data management continues to grow, and the number of medical records being processed also continues to grow, this degree will only increase in value.
Master of Public Health

A Master of Public Health (MPH) opens a variety of doors for people, from working as an epidemiologist to biostatistician to community health worker. The Association of Schools of Public Health estimated in 2008 that 250,000 more health workers would be needed by 2020, both due to a growing population and an aging workforce. At the same time as the workforce is shrinking, the need for public health workers is growing. The United States is facing a significantly aging population; the proportion of the population aged 65 years or older is projected to increase from 12.4% in 2000 to 19.6% in 2030. The stresses of chronic health problems that come with aging and the subsequent demands for health services are expected to be significant, requiring more public health workers to anticipate and manage these challenges. At the same time, increasing globalization has made the spread of infectious disease around the world easier than ever, and a coordinated response is required to prevent catastrophes. People with MPH degrees will be required to navigate these challenges.

Because the degree can be applied to so many jobs, it is difficult to specify job growth. However, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, growth in epidemiology is expected to rise by 10%, while demand for biostatisticians is expected to rise by 27% (much faster than average).

Competition presents a challenge to offering the MPH online, with 31 institutions offering an MPH online, including schools with significant name recognition, such as Johns Hopkins University. Programs also should be accredited by the Council on Education for Public Health, a process that can take up to three years for colleges and universities who are developing a program from the ground up.

Bachelor of Professional Sales

Sales is a skill that is needed across a variety of industries and, to a certain extent, functions. In addition, the prevalence of information and social networking has revolutionized the way sales is conducted; some are now referring to “Sales 2.0.” Harvard Business Review published an article in the summer of 2012 that stated, “There is a growing consensus that professional sales has entered a new era, requiring skills that are scarce but teachable—and best taught in a collegiate setting.” Discussions with industry insiders indicate employers would very much like to hire sales people with this degree. In fact, this degree is so desirable that many of the Sales Education Foundation’s top schools for professional sales have career placement rates near or at 100%.

Low online competition for this degree and a relatively easy subject matter to develop for schools that already offer marketing or business degrees makes this degree even more appealing. Sales people are needed across industries and in large numbers, so while the growth percentage is not as high as some of the other professions, in absolute numbers more than 150,000 jobs are expected to be added nationally by 2020.
Master of Project Management

Project Management is a widely applicable skillset that is becoming increasingly needed across a variety of industries, including health care, information technology and manufacturing. The Project Management Institute (PMI) estimates nearly 700,000 new project management positions being added from 2010 to 2020 in the United States. Because of increasing demand, expected salaries for these graduates continue to rise. PMI stated a median salary for U.S. Project Managers of $105,000.

While the Project Management Professional (PMP) certification from PMI is well recognized, it is seen by many as simply a ticket to entry to even be considered for a position in the industry. At the same time, industry experts cite employer “disappointment” in the certification, because the certification does not necessarily convey that people will be successful at project management in the real world. Developing a program that allows students to build a portfolio and offers them experience in managing real world projects will be critical to creating a degree that is useful to employers.

The Master of Project Management (MPM) easily translates to the online environment with several providers, such as Penn State, Northeastern, and Brandeis, already offering the degree fully online. The student demand also appears to be there with Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) showing a 113.9% increase in MPM degree conferrals from 2010 to 2013. To strengthen its market share and attract student attention, a university may want to tailor its MPM program to the industries strongest in its region.

Bachelor and Master of Accounting

Accounting is a lucrative profession in the United States, with a median annual salary of $63,500, and an average starting salary of $53,300. Job growth is expected to be steady, with the Bureau of Labor Statistics projecting a 13.1% growth rate, and, on average, salary has grown 7% year over year.

Online college students, who are frequently older and already in the job force, tend to be deeply interested in degrees that can be immediately monetized, so accounting is an attractive option. In fact, accounting is one of the most desired degrees for online students; in 2012, accounting was listed as the second most popular field for undergraduates and the seventh most popular field for graduate students, while in 2013, accounting was the second most popular field for undergraduates and the third most popular field for graduate students.

Institutions have several options for accounting degrees. Education minimums for becoming a Certified Public Accountant require 150 credit hours (essentially, a bachelor's degree plus one year). Schools could offer a bachelor's in accounting; a combined “4 + 1” degree (where students take the extra year to graduate with enough credits to earn CPA certification); a degree to students who already have a bachelor's, giving them enough credits to earn CPA certification if they pass the CPA exam; or an accelerated degree program. Depending on an institution’s faculty and potential student population, any or all of these options could be appealing.
Accelerated Master of Business Administration

Master of Business Administration (MBA) Degrees have long been a bulwark of online programs and degree conferrals in general. The number of MBAs awarded overall grew from 26,000 in 1970 to 168,000 in 2009. And people continue to pursue the degree because it pays off. According to one survey, 95% of people with MBAs are employed, with an average starting salary of $90,000.

Online degree options offer flexibility and convenience for those who are seeking an MBA while also juggling work and family. An accelerated MBA is appealing to those who are eager to reap the benefits of better job and salary prospects that come with an MBA, without committing two years to the process.

According to those who have graduated from an accelerated MBA program, the benefits of learning online were significant, because the flexibility allowed them to complete more coursework than they had anticipated and at times convenient to them. Instructor interaction was seen as key to success, with rapid response times and quick turnaround and feedback on projects cited as two important factors in completing a class successfully.

Competition for accelerated MBA programs online is not strong, with only a handful of schools offering this option. Most accelerated online programs take between 10 to 15 months to complete and require 30 to 35 hours of work weekly, including homework and class time – significantly more than a traditional-length online MBA program. While demand is strong, institutions will need to carefully structure their program to ensure the workload is feasible, and will need to choose students for the accelerated program thoughtfully.

Master of Business Administration in Information Technology Management

Technology is the backbone to many business operations, whether it functions as a key product or service or as operational support. But for many, frustration comes when attempting to bridge the communication gap between Information Technology (IT) professionals and business leadership. At the same time, IT professionals who are promoted to management positions frequently do not have an understanding of management techniques or basic business fundamentals such as budgeting or strategic planning.

According to a survey by Forrester Research, only 28% of CEOs saw CIOs as offering proactive leadership and 24% said IT would lead only when pushed. Frustration and lack of planning frequently ensued. Industry experts agreed, saying that the challenge with people in leadership positions from IT is that while they understand the technology involved in launching new projects, they are not as experienced in key areas of business such as finance and accounting, leadership, and project management.

An MBA in IT Management can help technology professionals
better understand overall business needs and vice versa. The curriculum would typically be the same as a traditional MBA, but with a focus on IT project management and leadership. A number of the major online institutions, including Colorado Technical University, DeVry University, the University of Phoenix and University, Maryland University College are offering this program, indicating strong interest in this degree. Many students, however, might be more comfortable studying at a smaller, more regionally-known institution, most of whom are not currently offering this degree.

**Bachelor of Computer Science**

For the past two decades, employment in IT has grown steadily, as the world has become more connected through computers. Since 2003, employment in the IT industry has grown by 37% – more than any other industry. Even the recession of 2009 had a minimal impact on IT employment; the industry shrank by only 1%, significantly less than other industries. And by 2010, the industry had made a full recovery.

To take advantage of the many job opportunities in this field, a bachelor’s degree often is required as a point of entry. In October, 2014 a search for “Computer Science” on Indeed.com revealed more than 125,000 jobs currently open, with a large percentage requiring at least a bachelor’s in computer science. At the same time, many programmers can learn at least some skills on the job, so there is an opportunity to reach out to already working adults who are looking for a promotion or a raise due to having a degree.

Competition is moderate online, with 28 institutions offering a bachelor’s degree in computer science online, including for-profit institutions such as Walden University and Rasmussen, as well as large nonprofit players in the online space, such as Liberty University. Articulation agreements with community colleges would help an institution stand out among this crowded field, as well as developing a strong portfolio that would allow graduates to demonstrate tangible, relevant skills to potential employers.

**Master of Social Work**

Social work offers many avenues for those with a master’s degree; working for the federal and state government, schools, and health care are just a few of the industries where the degree is helpful. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that demand for social workers will grow 19% from 2012 to 2022.

Competition is not strong in the online market; according to IPEDS, 238 colleges and universities offer Master of Social Work (MSW) degrees, but only 17 do so online. The biggest challenge facing institutions is price; average salary for those holding MSWs is $44,200. Keeping tuition affordable will be key to success in offering this degree. Colleges and universities also should consider developing partnerships with area employers and government agencies for job placement after graduation. Additionally, laddering
degrees or 4+1 degree programs that allow students to earn a bachelor’s and master’s in social work within a short time frame could be an appealing option.

**Niche Degrees**

**Master of Data Science**

Big data is becoming increasingly prevalent throughout business in the U.S. McKinsey and Company reports that by 2009, nearly all sectors in the U.S. economy had at least an average of 200 terabytes of stored data (twice the size of U.S. retailer Wal-Mart’s data warehouse in 1999) per company with more than 1,000 employees. This data can indicate large industry trends as well as allow for micro-segmentation. To analyze and exploit this large and growing volume of data, a Master in Data Science is recommended.

Because the industry of data science is new, industry trends are difficult to track. However, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, projected growth for computer information research scientists is expected to be 15% by 2022, while growth for statisticians is expected to be 27% by 2022. For both of these occupations, master’s degrees are preferred to bachelor’s degrees.

The relative newness of this degree means that competition is not strong. Approximately four schools offer a degree in data science, with the most popular degree offered by University of California, Berkeley. Google and Udacity also offer MOOCs in data science. While these are not for credit, they can indicate a strong interest in the field and the ability for this information to be taught online.

While this is a niche program, it is one that will be increasingly important as gathering and analyzing big data becomes a significant part of business operations. Institutions can consider not only offering a master’s degree in this field, but also graduate certificates. In addition, competency-based programs would be a good fit for this track, as potential students likely already have experience with some advanced analytics and would appreciate the opportunity to more quickly progress through the program.

**Bachelor of Market Research**

With technology advancements and adoption, “big data” is quickly becoming a reality. With this, the need for analytics professionals will grow and experts are predicting a substantial shortage of qualified candidates. One study by the McKinsey Global Institute predicts that by 2018 more than half of the approximately 300,000 new big data jobs will go unfilled.
An area that will be heavily impacted by this is marketing. One professional pronounced, “Big Data is the biggest game-changing opportunity for marketing and sales since the Internet went mainstream.”

The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that Market Research Analysts and Marketing Specialists will grow 32% with an additional 131,500 hired from 2012 to 2022. Market research analysts and specialists were ranked No. 2 in Forbes’ “Top Jobs for 2014.”

Few universities currently offer a degree specifically in Market Research. IPEDS actually only shows four schools reporting degree conferrals in 2012 under the Marketing Research code, leaving the opportunity to be a trailblazer wide open.

**Bachelor of Interpretation and Translation**

The number of Americans who do not speak English in the home has tripled over the last three years. Within that segment, more than 13 million rate their English speaking ability “not well” or “not at all.” This can impact the ability for these individuals to communicate within their communities. In response, some federal requirements exist for providing medical and / or court interpretation and translation for non-English speakers.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects 42% job growth for Interpreters and Translators through 2020. They estimate approximately 20% of those in this field are self-employed. As online students are looking for flexibility with their studies, this type of career outcome might resonate.

Initial feedback from industry experts is both passionate and conflicting. Some feel that while translation could be taught online, interpretation could not. Others feel both could be taught online as more interpretation migrates online. Several indicated the importance of including training on the latest Computer Assisted Translating (CAT) and productivity tools.

Initial research shows very little competition for such a program. Perhaps this degree can focus on career changers with degrees in key foreign languages where the basic bachelor’s requirements are already fulfilled. In addition, initial feedback from the industry shows international interest. Marketing for students could also be targeted to English speakers in the countries where the U.S. has high demand, for instance Spanish-speaking countries like Argentina or Spain. At the same time, this degree could be a way to help sustain language departments that may be struggling on-ground.

**Master of Speech Pathology**

Speech pathology is a rapidly growing field, due to both increasing demand and increased access to health insurance. The Individuals with Disabilities (IDEA) Act of 2004 requires that “School-age children with communication disorders that adversely affect children’s educational performance” be provided access to speech therapy services, while the Affordable Care Act requires that insurance plans provide...
coverage for up to 30 speech therapy sessions. In addition to children, speech therapy is becoming increasingly important to an aging population, as speech therapists can provide assistance in services such as rehabilitating after stroke.

The job projections for speech pathologists are strong; the Bureau of Labor Statistics expects a 19% growth by 2022, stronger than average. And because the field requires a minimum of a master’s degree, this provides colleges and universities with an opportunity to re-engage students who already have a bachelor’s and wish to pursue further studies, or maintain relationships with students studying for a bachelor’s and keep them through the master’s degree process.

Industry experts suggested two potential future paths for the profession, saying that demand was growing for both doctorates and also specialization certificates (i.e., those already holding a master’s in speech pathology would get a certificate in pediatric language acquisition or swallowing, etc.).

Competition is strong, with 90 institutions already offering this degree online. Colleges and universities who wish to offer this degree online should consider making their program appealing through job placement services or partnering with area health care providers.

Reverse Transfer

While not an actual degree or field of study, Learning House would like to highlight the potential around “reverse transfer,” when academic credits at a university are transferred back to the community or career college for the awarding of an associate’s degree. In the last few years there has been a growing focus on increasing the number of individuals with a college degree. Reverse transfer is seen as an effective way to not only award a degree to those who have earned the credit, but also as motivation for these students to continue on to obtain their bachelor’s degree.

Why is an associate’s degree so important? Research continues to show those with a degree are more employable and have lifetime earnings much higher than those without a degree. Research conducted by the American Institutes for Research in 2013 concluded that “Even after factoring in the costs that graduates incur when earning the degree, the associate’s degree is a good investment: with a median net gain during a 40-year work-life of more than $259,000 compared with that of a high school graduate in the state where the community college is located.”

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, more than 45 million Americans over 18 have some college, but no degree, so there is a large potential market for reverse transfers. While coordination of creating these reverse transfer agreements will take time, it provides an additional enrollment stream and should be taken into consideration.
Degrees to Watch

While the degrees explored above are ones Learning House feels can have a significant impact for schools, there are other degrees that we will be watching over the next six to 12 months, to determine if they, too, are worth pursuing. Degrees with strong potential include:

- Certificate of Social Media
- Associate of Paralegal Studies
- Bachelor of Digital Marketing
- Bachelor of Health Education
- Bachelor of Digital Media and Design
- Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Studies
- Master of Science of Applied Behavior Analysis
- Doctor of Occupational Therapy

The Learning House, Inc. helps colleges and universities create, manage and grow high-quality online degree programs and courses. Partnering with more than 100 schools, Learning House enables institutions to efficiently and affordably achieve their online education goals. Services include product development and market research, marketing and lead generation, admissions and enrollment management, student retention, curriculum development and management, faculty training and professional development, learning management systems and 24/7 technical support. As a thought leader in the industry, Learning House publishes an annual report on online college student preferences and demographics and presents an online higher education conference.

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References


21. Note: IPEDS only added the Project Management CIP code in 2010. Some schools have not yet started to report under this code.


References


