



PUTTING RESEARCH TO WORK

BRIEF

Exploring Pros and Cons of Online Driver Education

Currently three agencies in Wisconsin regulate driver education courses. The Department of Public Instruction regulates all high school and Cooperative Educational Service Agency—or CESA—programs; the Wisconsin Technical College System oversees offerings from technical colleges; and the Wisconsin Department of Transportation regulates all private or commercial DE schools. Both the Department of Public Instruction and the Wisconsin Technical College System permit online DE, and in 2003 and 2004, CESA Region 2 and the Southwest Wisconsin Technical College began offering online DE.

What's the Problem?

There is growing interest in online DE, but little is known about potential advantages and disadvantages. Currently, WisDOT does not allow private DE schools to offer online DE courses. There are questions regarding the quality of instruction, cost and outcomes of online DE compared with traditional classroom-based DE. Objective information about the cost, student success and satisfaction, and the effectiveness of online DE will help WisDOT determine whether to allow an online alternative in the future.

Research Objectives

This project sought to evaluate the costs, benefits and limitations of online DE by reviewing existing research and conducting interviews with students, instructors and program coordinators. The results of the study could then be used to provide guidance to WisDOT in determining whether to allow this alternative to traditional classroom DE.

Methodology

Investigators first conducted a literature search to identify research and documented experiences from states currently offering online DE. The preliminary research focused on the benefits, challenges, costs, program details, quality and instructor standards, and overall effectiveness of online DE courses. The results of the preliminary research were then used to draft questionnaires for phone interviews completed in the second phase of the study.

Investigators conducted interviews with three groups of people involved with the online DE experience:

- Online DE program coordinators from seven of 12 states offering online DE at the time of the study.
- Thirty-four DE instructors (both online and traditional) from five states.
- One hundred two Wisconsin DE students—half from CESA Region 2 and half from SWTC—who recently completed DE, both online and in the classroom.

Results

The preliminary research identified 12 states that currently permit online DE. Advantages frequently cited in support of this type of course include convenience and flexibility for students, cost savings, the potential for more parent involvement, and an instructor's ability to handle more students with more approaches than in the classroom. A variety of challenges were identified as well, from the potential for student procrastination to basic concerns about the quality of the instruction and effectiveness of the courses.

Investigators discovered that there is currently very little research on the overall effectiveness of online DE. The limited data that exists does not make a compelling case for or against it. For example,

Investigator



"Incorporating technology through online courses is viewed as the wave of the future for learning, including for driver education. The convenience of online driver education draws young, prospective drivers."

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Percentage of Students Taking Online Driver Education in 2009

Online DE continues to grow in popularity. As shown by this table, more than half of students in California used an online driver education course in 2009.

crash statistics in Virginia demonstrate students taking online DE are no more likely than other students to be involved in crashes, and one California study found no difference in the knowledge level of students completing the in-class course compared to an online alternative.

Interviews with program coordinators, instructors and recent students were aimed at identifying key issues and concerns surrounding the development and implementation of online DE courses. A major concern identified in the preliminary research and confirmed by interviews with program coordinators and instructors is ensuring that students registered for an online class are actually the ones completing the coursework. This security concern has been addressed in a variety of ways, from requiring students to sign honor statements to keystroke analysis that monitors typing speed and rhythm of students throughout the course to confirm the same student is doing the work.

Researchers also interviewed students who had recently completed DE in Wisconsin. Slightly more than one-third of those interviewed had completed an online course, with the rest taking the traditional in-class version. The most frequently cited reason for choosing the online version was scheduling convenience. Student satisfaction with instructor knowledge of materials, responsiveness to questions and amount of instructor interaction was very similar between online and traditional courses. Overall satisfaction with the courses did vary, with 92 percent of students taking the in-class course satisfied compared with 73 percent of those who took the online course. In addition, 88 percent of those who took the traditional course would do so again, while only 54 percent would choose to take the online course again.

Implementation

WisDOT is currently reviewing the study and its findings to determine if private DE schools in Wisconsin should be allowed to offer online courses.

Further Research

This study provides information that will help in deciding whether to move forward in allowing online DE; its results will be considered by the WisDOT driver training school coordinator and other management. If WisDOT ultimately decides to permit the use of online courses, additional information may be needed to identify which types of courses and formats will be the most appropriate and effective.

Project Manager



“This research gives us what we need to move forward in the decision-making process. It will be used to help determine whether WisDOT should allow the use of online driver education courses in the future.”

—Brian Banach

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