FITCHBURG STATE UNIVERSITY

DISTANCE LEARNING *10 Years*

From the President

Fitchburg State University is steeped in history and tradition, with the concepts of teaching and learning at its center. Yet the lofty goal of teaching and learning has evolved greatly over the university's 120 years.

Visitors to our campus are struck by its physical beauty and technological sophistication. The evolution of our buildings and grounds in recent years has been remarkable, testament to a broad vision and high expectations for—and of—our students, faculty and staff. We have sought to create a teaching and learning environment that is second to none.

That aspiration extends beyond the physical campus to the digital realm. As you will read in this report, the breadth of online offerings has exploded, from a mere handful in 1998 to the hundreds available today. Whole degree programs can be completed without setting foot in one of our classrooms, while many more are offered in a hybrid format designed to maximize efficiency and convenience for our students.

Distance learning creates boundless opportunities for students and faculty. The future is here, and I invite you to explore it in the pages that follow.

ROBERT V. ANTONUCCI
President

We are pleased to present this report covering the last 10 years of distance learning at Fitchburg State. The Office of Graduate and Continuing Education is responsible for the oversight and development of online offerings within the University. Over the last 10 years, we have seen significant growth, increased faculty participation and collaboration amongst departments to create an infrastructure that supports students in their goal of pursuing higher education through distance learning . We are committed to providing quality online courses and programs that are grounded in the university's mission and provide an accessible option for students determined to advance their knowledge and earning power through the pursuit of higher education.

CATHERINE R. CANNEY
Assistant Vice-President and
Dean of Graduate and Continuing Education

Joseph Lawless
MBA

Joseph Lawless of Worcester was looking for a way to enhance his skill set and pursue new career opportunities.

"I had wanted to pursue my MBA for some time," Lawless said. "The challenge was always how to balance work and family with classroom attendance and school work."

Lawless had taken a pair of online undergraduate courses, so he knew that was an option worth pursuing. "I came across Fitchburg State University's MBA program, and the online, accelerated format fit my needs perfectly," he said.

The program has lived up to his expectations, offering a rich and challenging academic experience.

"The asynchronous nature of online coursework requires a great deal of self-direction and self-motivation from students," Lawless said. "As a student, it is an active and engaged learning process, where course material is applied to help analyze, evaluate and resolve problems and case studies. The one course at a time design of the online MBA program allows for a deep, focused engagement with the subject matter."

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Lawless said he was able to develop a rapport with his instructors and peers despite not sharing physical space.

"I think the faculty of the MBA program does a fantastic job of emphasizing use of the discussion board in the online environment," he said. "The faculty has also been great at providing constructive feedback on coursework. This is one of the true advantages of online distance learning, the ability of faculty to provide one-on-one communication and feedback regarding coursework and learning outcomes. I have also been fortunate to live close enough to campus that I have stopped in during office hours–just as a traditional student would—when I have sought additional guidance on coursework."

At the same time, the ongoing online dialogue between the MBA students has allowed the cohort to become a closet-knit group, Lawless said.

Lawless is in the latter half of his online MBA coursework, but has already seen an impact on his work as a manager through enhanced analytic skills, a deeper awareness of business problems and methods to begin solving them. His future goals include employment in the analytics field as well as part-time teaching.

The online program has helped him seek those goals while maintaining a home life as the parent of two young children.

"One of the best parts of distance learning through Fitchburg State has been the ability to balance time with them and the schoolwork," he said, noting that he gets a lot of his academic work done once the children are in bed.

The net result is a program that works, and one that Lawless recommends to others with similar goals.

"You will be exposed to many critical and important facets of business, operations, and leadership. It will require a commitment on your part to be active in your learning. You must be self-motivated and disciplined to see through the completion of work on a weekly basis. The seven-week accelerated courses move quickly, but never feel overwhelming as the one-course-at-a-time design allows you to focus solely on that subject," he said. "It is an outstanding program."

Anderlene Streeks
BS IN NURSING

After Anderlene Streeks graduated from high school she decided to continue her education at nursing school. Her degree plans sat on a shelf, however, as she stayed home to raise her five sons.

"I always felt like I never finished," the Ashburnham resident said. That nagging feeling of unfinished business intensified when she was filling out federal financial aid forms for her sons. A question on the form concerned whether either of the college-bound student's parents had completed a college degree.

"I couldn't say I had a degree, and that really bothered me," she said. "I felt like, here I was trying to tell my kids to go to college, and I wanted to set a good example."

With her eldest son's encouragement, Streeks decided to give it a shot.

"I was petrified," she said with a laugh. But after a false start at another institution, Streeks found her footing at Fitchburg State.

The whole experience changed my life.
You can do this. There's no excuse.

"It had been at least 20 years since I was in a classroom," she said. When she arrived at Fitchburg State, Streeks found encouragement at every corner. "There was always somebody willing to help," she said. "You really aren't all alone."

The online bachelor of science in nursing was attractive to Streeks, who was looking to balance her studies with the hectic schedule of her sons' active athletic calendars.

"I have learned every Wi-Fi spot in every school," she said with a laugh, recounting games and practices where she would cheer on her son between posting assignments. "Being able to do work online was a tremendous help to me. Even if it was 2 a.m., I could get things done."

Streeks was also able to keep in close contact with her professors and instructors, who made time to speak with her by phone or email. That created a comfort level that

made it easier to keep moving forward. "I felt like I was valued here, I was encouraged here," she said.

To broaden her experiences Streeks also enrolled in some on-campus classes. The encouragement she received online extended to the campus, inspiring her to minor in English.

"Did I ever think I would graduate magna cum laude? Never," she said. But she did.

Now, as Streeks ponders a return to the workforce as her own sons head off on their own higher education journeys, she finds herself spreading the enthusiasm and support she received as a student.

"The whole experience changed my life," she said. "I promised God I would talk to every young person I see and tell them, 'You can do this. There's no excuse.'"

The university offered its first online courses in 1998, with 12 courses offered online. In the five years following, offerings were very limited while the university considered and tested course learning management systems and approaches to course development. The first online offerings used Lotus Notes, with development and course hosting assistance from an outside firm, with whom the university partnered from 1996 to 1998. In 1999, the university purchased Blackboard (at that time called CourseInfo) for our learning management system, and still uses Blackboard today. Between 2004 and 2006, the university again tested partnering with an outside firm, to further investigate infrastructure approaches to distance learning. These courses were in addition to those developed and hosted through Blackboard.

As of spring 2014 there have been 374 unique courses developed, approved and offered online by the university.
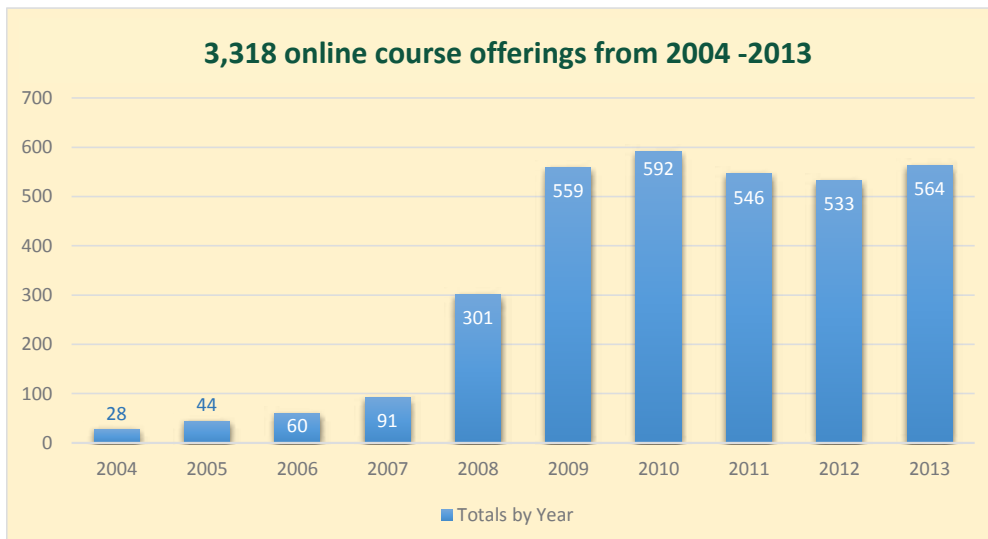
In 2006 there was significant growth with 60 courses offered online. The following year there were 91 courses offered online. Through this exploration, we discovered that we had the content specialists (our faculty) and the learning management system that worked, but needed an additional staff person to oversee the process and provide additional support. To help support the interest and growth in online offerings, the University hired a part-time distance education coordinator whose main responsibilities were to support faculty in course design, provide faculty training and oversee a process to ensure quality. It quickly became evident that this position was vital to the university's online future, and the position became full-time in 2007.

As of spring 2014 there have been 374 unique courses developed, approved and offered online by the university.

In the ten years from 2004 through 2013, Fitchburg State University offered a total of 3,318 courses online. In 2012-2013 alone, the university offered more than 550 online/hybrid courses.
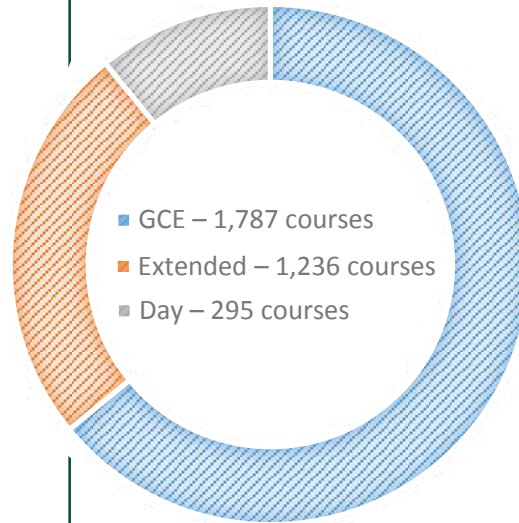
3,318 online course offerings from 2004 -2013

Year	Totals by Year
2004	28
2005	44
2006	60
2007	91
2008	301
2009	559
2010	592
2011	546
2012	533
2013	564

Online courses by discipline/subject

DISTANCE LEARNING POPULATION

- GCE – 1,787 courses
- Extended – 1,236 courses
- Day – 295 courses

Graduate and Continuing Education
Extended Campus Programs
Day Division

"I think the strength of our online offerings is a direct reflection of the strength of our faculty and the institution itself as the development and delivery of online courses mirror that of the traditional face-to-face courses. The requests for courses start within the department and the process comes full circle with review and approval completed in the academic departments."

— **MICHAEL B. LEAMY**
Director of Distance Education

The Process

The process to develop a course begins and ends within the academic departments. Both the instructor and the course must be approved by the chair and appropriate dean to be developed for delivery as either an online or hybrid course. Once approved, the instructor will develop the course with as much or as little assistance from the director of distance education as he or she desires. Four weeks prior to the start of the course it is reviewed by the department or program chair and the appropriate dean. Once all parties agree the course meets the standards of the university, it is approved for delivery. This commitment to quality and academic rigor has helped Fitchburg State University to achieve a high level of success and student satisfaction with our online courses and degree programs.

Training & Support

Technical assistance and training for students and faculty support the quality of distance learning offerings. There is a physical helpdesk on campus with regular operating hours and an additional 24/7 outsourced system to ensure that all campus users have access to support through the dedicated support line. This 24/7 support system was implemented in 2008 to support the launch of our first two fully online degree programs.

"We deliver support of our online programs in multiple ways because we try to match what would be most effective for each individual student and instructor. From group and one-on-one in-person sessions to having electronic resources and even a 365x24x7 call center with a toll-free number, we try to make getting help as easy as possible for our students and faculty. We offer weekend hours on campus and even route calls directly to Blackboard for support via the call center, so that the best help can be provided. This gives our students and faculty options to get help in person, via the web, through a chat message system or through email. There's very few other colleges, regardless of size, that offer this many avenues for support and it helps make our faculty and students successful. The technology shouldn't get in the way of learning."

— **STEPHEN SWARTZ**
Chief Information Officer

■ FOR FACULTY ON CAMPUS

Through the collaborative efforts of Distance Education, Graduate and Continuing Education, the Center for Teaching and Learning, and the Information Technology department, more than fifty training sessions are offered annually in a variety of formats, including hands-on sessions, group discussions, and sharing best practices.

■ FOR FACULTY ONLINE

All faculty members have access to online resources where they can receive on-demand training for most topics and tools needed for teaching online. Blackboard instructions and tutorials are provided in a textual format and as a video "walk through." In 2014, a new web site was launched consolidating and expanding online teaching resources for faculty. This website includes comprehensive tutorials along with many additional resources including best practices tips. This central repository of online resources provides faculty with easy access and continued support. View this web site at: *fitchburgstate.edu/onlineteaching*.

■ FOR STUDENTS ONLINE

Every student that registers for an online course is automatically enrolled in our student introductory course. Students learn how to navigate Blackboard with the goal of becoming familiar with the technology, allowing them to focus on the academic content once enrolled in an online course.

Prospective students are able to test an online course before committing to online learning through the university's "Demo" course. This is available to anyone that is interested.

I was very hesitant to take an online course as I am not technologically savvy, but this demo course was great! It allowed me to get familiar with the technology in an online class. I could do it at my own pace and whenever I had questions there were resources there to answer all my questions. It really made me feel like I could do it and that I had the support if I needed it.

Technology Purchases

In an effort to ensure the quality of our distance offerings and to give instructors the tools they need to create and deliver dynamic instruction, Fitchburg State has invested in technology tools that facilitate student engagement. Blackboard is used extensively across campus not only for online courses but as a supplement to face-to-face courses.

Technology and tools have evolved in the last decade and the university is committed to providing the necessary tools to ensure rich, rigorous and engaging online offerings with dynamic and meaningful interactions. Two examples which highlight this commitment are Blackboard Collaborate and Camtasia Relay.
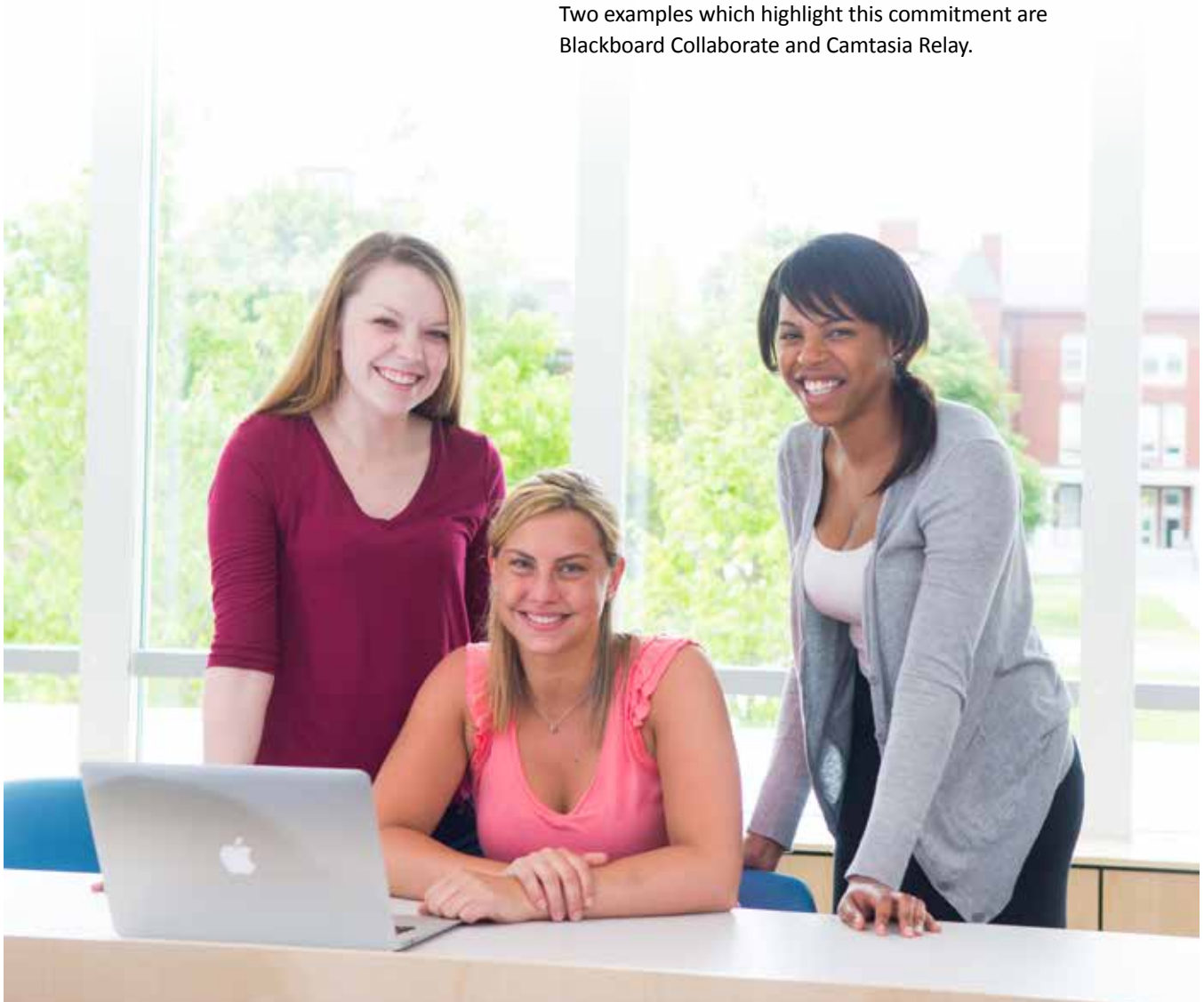
■ **BLACKBOARD COLLABORATE**

Blackboard Collaborate provides a comprehensive online learning and collaboration platform designed specifically for education. This tool is helping thousands of higher education, K-12, professional, corporate, and government organizations worldwide deliver a more effective learning experience through online, blended, and mobile learning. At the core of Blackboard Collaborate, web conferencing gives you the functionality you need to support a 21st century teaching and learning environment, such as two-way VoIP, multi-point video, built-in phone conferencing, interactive whiteboard, application and desktop sharing, rich media, breakout rooms, mobile collaboration, and session recording. Educators and students can engage in the virtual classroom as if they were face-to-face, with equivalent or improved outcomes.

"Recently, I had the opportunity to take an online course at Fitchburg State. It was a fantastic learning opportunity! One of the experiences I particularly enjoyed was a live, online session using Blackboard Collaborate. This particular program allowed us as students to interact with the instructor and each other through video, writing, drawing and even sharing our computer screens! Students can be excited about this technology. As an educator myself, it was great to not only use such a tool in our class, but also learn about a new tool to engage our students and make educating them easy!"

— **KAREN McCRILLIS**
Current Student
CAGS/IDIS Counseling/Psychology

■ **CAMTASIA RELAY**

Camtasia Relay allows faculty to create and share knowledge on and off campus. From everyday lectures to detailed video lessons, faculty can capture and share content anytime. Powerful, yet easy-to-use, Camtasia allows faculty to create professional videos without the user having to be a video pro.

"I recently took an online course in which the professor used screen capture technology. I was concerned about learning how to navigate some of the online tools without the professor there in person to help, but the screen capture technology was in some ways better. The professor guided me through the website as he narrated about what he was doing. Then, at the end I could go back and rewind it as many times as I needed to!"

— **JOHANNA GOEWEY**
Current Graduate Student, Education

Online Programs and Certificates

In the fall of 2008, the University launched its first two fully online programs: the Master of Science in Forensic Nursing and the Master of Business Administration. A campus wide committee of staff and faculty designed, developed and implemented a successful launch of these programs.

The University proposal to the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) to offer its first online degree programs was not only approved, but received strong accolades for the quality of the programs and the approach to development and planning, including market research, allocation of resources, and collaboration across departments. Four years later, as part of NEASC's 10 year accreditation visit of Fitchburg State, the university was again applauded for appropriate attention to online offerings, noting that "the self-study and team report provided evidence of the University's effective oversight of programs offered off-campus and through distance education" (NEASC, November 19, 2012).

- In 2013, there were 7,841 enrollments in online courses
- Over 250 graduate students accepted into online programs, with more applying daily
- Over 400 undergraduates in online nursing, business and web development programs

"My great experience during my undergraduate program brought me back to Fitchburg to consider graduate studies. My career requires frequent travel and flexibility, so the convenience of building my studies around personal and professional responsibilities in an accelerated program, and getting great quality for an amazing value, convinced me that Fitchburg's online MBA was the right choice."

— **CHRISTOPHER HOULE**
Current online MBA student

In fall 2014, all graduate degrees in special education transitioned to an online and low-residency/hybrid format, making our programs available to a wider audience of prospective students. A dedicated collaborative team worked for over two years to ensure that the courses, program design, faculty training, student orientation and support are of the highest caliber, and that the quality of the programs and instruction will be maintained and strengthened.

"Our newly formatted online/hybrid programs allow us to offer our high quality education to students beyond central Massachusetts. We're providing an interactive program that's conducive to our students' active lifestyles."

— **NANCY L. MURRAY ED.D**
Chair of the Graduate Program
in Moderate Disabilities

Current Online Programs

CERTIFICATE OF ADVANCED GRADUATE STUDIES

- CAGS in Interdisciplinary Studies - Reading Specialist

GRADUATE DEGREES

- MBA - Human Resources Management Concentration
- MBA - Management Concentration
- MS Forensic Nursing
- Special Education: Guided Studies (Individualized Concentration)
- Special Education: Guided Studies (Professional Concentration)
- Special Education: Reading Specialist (Initial Licensure)
- Special Education: Reading Specialist (Non-Licensure)
- Special Education: Teacher of Students with Moderate Disabilities (Initial Licensure)
- Special Education: Teacher of Students with Severe Disabilities (Initial Licensure)

UNDERGRADUATE DEGREES

- RN to BSN
- Business Administration (Management Concentration)

CERTIFICATES

- Forensic Nursing Certificate
- Web Development Certificate
- Business Certificate
- Behavior Analyst
- Reading Specialist (Initial Licensure)

Predicted Trends

According to the Babson Survey Research Group (2014), the number of students taking at least one online course continues to grow at a rate in excess of overall enrollments. The proportion of higher education students taking at least one online class is at an all-time high of 33.5 percent.

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
■ Millions	2.3	3.1	3.4	3.9	4.6	5.5	6.1	6.7	7.1
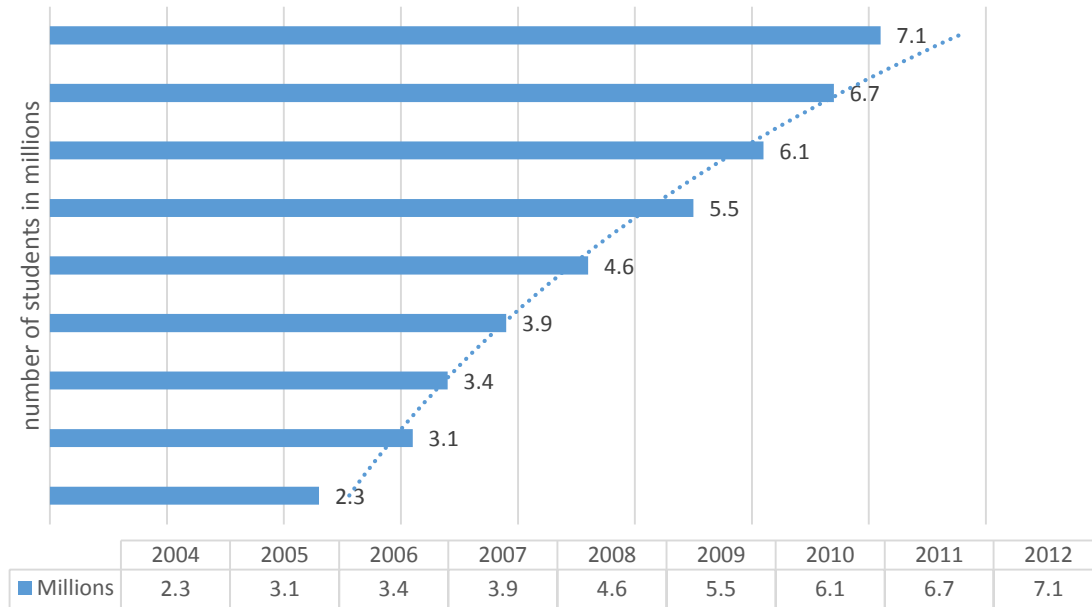
Allen, E., Seaman, J. (2014)

74% of academic leaders say that learning outcomes in online courses are the same or superior to face-to-face.

66% of academic leaders say that online learning is critical to their long term strategy.

— Allen, E., Seaman, J. (2014)

Future Projections

According to Ambient Insight Research (2012), by 2016, there will be more full time online students than students that take all of their classes in a physical location.

Fitchburg State is responding to this expected continued growth in online learning through our current internal strategic planning initiative, which recognizes the essential role that online learning plays for the future of higher education and at Fitchburg State. We are also dedicated to active participation in the field of online learning through our work with various associations and committees including Massachusetts Colleges Online (MCO), University Professional & Continuing Education Association (UPCEA), New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE), and the United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA).

State Authorization & Reciprocity (SARA)

In October of 2010, the U.S. Department of Education released modified regulations to the program integrity rules requiring institutions to document that they have the proper authorization/approval to serve students in other states. This caused a great deal of discussion in the distance education community, since it meant that even if one student from another state took one online course, we would have to be authorized by the student's home state to allow access to that student. This requirement placed a great burden on higher education institutions. After much debate and lobbying by numerous parties, the U.S. Department of Education announced in July of 2012 that it will "not enforce the requirements of 600.9(c), although institutions continue to be responsible for complying with all state laws as they relate to distance education."

ifap.ed.gov/dpcletters/GEN1213.html

Stakeholders, including state regulators, state higher education executive officers, accrediting organizations, regional higher education compacts, and institutional leaders representing all sectors of higher education agreed to evaluate a national system of reciprocity at the state level.

The resulting State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement (SARA) among member states, districts and territories establishes comparable national standards for interstate offering of postsecondary distance education courses and programs. Its goal is to provide access for students to online courses and programs offered by degree-granting postsecondary institutions based in another state. SARA is overseen by a National Council and administered the four regional education compacts.

nc-sara.org/content/basic-questions-about-sara

Fitchburg State has been diligent in our responsibility to be compliant; however, the process is costly, time consuming and inefficient. We agree that SARA is an appropriate and reasonable response to the issue of access to distance education programs, and that this solution will best meet the needs of students.