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**New Study: Over Six Million Students Now Enrolled in Distance Education**

*Distance education enrollment growth continues, even as overall higher education enrollments decline*

(Wellesley, MA) – The Distance Education Enrollment Report 2017, conducted by the new Digital Learning Compass organization, reveals the number of higher education students taking at least one distance education course in 2015 now tops six million. Growth, however, was uneven; private non-profit institutions grew by 11.4 percent while private for-profit institutions saw their distance enrollments decline by 9.4 percent. These and other findings were published today in a report titled, [“Digital Learning Compass: Distance Education Enrollment Report 2017.”](#)

This report is the first in a series of publications from Digital Learning Compass, a new research partnership of the Babson Survey Research Group, e-Literate, and WCET. Digital Learning Compass partnered with the Online Learning Consortium (OLC), Pearson, and Tyton Partners to produce this first report, which examines the trends and patterns of distance education enrollments among U.S. degree-granting higher education institutions. Additional publications in the Digital Learning Compass series will provide a detailed look at multiple facets of U.S. distance education.

“The study’s findings highlight yet another year of consecutive growth in the number of students taking courses at a distance,” said study co-author Jeff Seaman, co-director of the Babson Survey Research Group. “This study and earlier reports from the Babson Survey Research Group have shown that distance education growth has a momentum that has continued, even as overall higher education enrollments have been declining.”

Key report findings include:

- A year-to-year increase of 226,375 distance education students, a 3.9 percent increase, up over rates recorded the previous two years.
- More than one in four students (29.7 percent) now take at least one distance education course (a total of 6,022,105 students).
- The total of 6 million for fall 2015 distance education students is composed of 2.9 million taking all of their courses at a distance and 3.1 million taking some, but not all, distance courses.
- Public institutions command the largest portion of distance education students, with 67.8 percent of all distance students.

- Large enrollment drops among for-profit institutions were driven by a few of the largest institutions; the majority of for-profits grew their distance enrollments.
- The number of students studying on a campus has dropped by almost one million (931,317) between 2012 and 2015.

"Distance learning continues to grow, demonstrating that institutions remain committed to expanding programs that meet the needs of today's students. Distance learning offers flexible, yet rigorous education opportunities that provide individuals with access to the in-demand skills needed to achieve their career goals," said David Daniels, managing director, Higher Education Services, Pearson.

"The overall higher education environment is changing," said Jill Buban, PhD, senior director of research and innovation for the Online Learning Consortium. "The total pool of postsecondary students has been shrinking for each of the last three years. At the same time, the demographics are shifting to a student community primarily comprised of adult and other contemporary learners, for whom distance learning often provides the best path to a post-secondary education. As schools compete for students in this environment, distance learning programs become essential to their ability to succeed."

"As distance learning matures, Digital Learning Compass maps the changing landscape. Later this year, we will release additional reports providing in-depth insights on particular areas of focus. In the future, the Compass partners will expand into additional surveys and research in the strategic use of digital technologies," said Russ Poulin, Director, Policy & Analysis, WCET.

The complete survey report, "Distance Education Enrollment Report 2017" is available at [digitallearningcompass.org](http://digitallearningcompass.org)

## Partners

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The **Online Learning Consortium** (OLC) is the leading professional organization devoted to advancing the quality of online learning worldwide. The member-sustained organization offers an extensive set of resources for professional development and institutional advancement of online learning. Visit [onlinelearningconsortium.org](http://onlinelearningconsortium.org) for more information.

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**e-Literate** is a weblog about educational technology and related topics that is co-published by Michael Feldstein and Phil Hill, who are also partners at MindWires, an educational technology analyst and consulting firm. It covers a broad range of topics related to trends in education—particularly teaching and learning in higher education—that are impacted by technology. [mfeldstein.com](http://mfeldstein.com).

**WCET** is the leader in the practice, policy, & advocacy of technology-enhanced learning in higher education. WCET is a national, member-driven, non-profit which brings together colleges and

universities, higher education organizations and companies to collectively improve the quality and reach of e-learning programs. Visit [wcet.wiche.edu](http://wcet.wiche.edu).

The **Babson Survey Research Group** at Babson College conducts regional, national, and international research projects, including survey design, sampling methodology, data integrity, statistical analyses and reporting. Visit [www.onlinelearningsurvey.com](http://www.onlinelearningsurvey.com).

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