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USC's Online Teaching Master's Called Cybereducation Milestone

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When a school such as the University of Southern California delivers an online master's degree in teaching, some observers say the message is this: Cyberspace education has arrived.

USC's Rossier School of Education is billing the degree as the first of its kind offered by a "major research university."

"The thing that impresses me is that you have a major elite university like USC, with a certain branding, deciding to aggressively pursue a fully online program at the master's level," said academic and author Alfred Rovai.

USC's program, on track to begin classes in June, is an online version of the Los Angeles university's established K-12 teacher education curriculum.

Students can obtain a teaching credential along with their master's.

Taught by full-time professors, the program includes interactive lectures, streaming video, chat rooms and online conferences with instructors.

Digital Cameras Provided

USC will provide students with digital cameras to record themselves when they do the required student teaching.

Their professors and peers will view the videos, then critique and discuss them.

Students will have mentors from their local community to assist them online and in person throughout the program.

That includes their transition from doing course work to practicing teaching in real K-12 classrooms.

While USC bills its teaching master's as the first of its kind, many colleges, universities and for-profit businesses offer online education nowadays.

"The trend is clear. There continues to be an explosion in this area," said Rovai, a professor at Regent University, a Virginia Beach, Va., Christian university that offers online and on-campus programs.

Karen Symms Gallagher, Rossier's dean, agrees. "For professional degrees at the master's level, this is the future," she said.

Working professionals, career-changers or stay-at-home parents who want to become teachers but can't physically make it to the USC campus can get an education equivalent to their counterparts' studying in classrooms, Gallagher says.

Could Boost Revenue

The online program will cost the same as USC's on-campus program. For this school year, the university's on-campus Master of Arts in Teaching students paid \$1,249 per unit. Students who want multiple subject credentials, and most do, take 30 units, a tab that comes to \$37,470. The 2009-10 tuition hasn't been set yet.

By offering full online degree programs, schools can boost revenue.

"There are a lot of factors that are fueling (the trend in online degree programs), not the least of which is the need for universities to get more students and improve the financial bottom line," Rovai said.

In the past, university graduate programs might have competed with other institutions in their geographic area. Now, any university that offers an equivalent online program is a rival, says Rovai, author of "Distance Learning in Higher Education."

To take the cyberspace step, USC is partnering with 2tor, a New York City-based educational services company founded in 2008.

The company's first revenue-sharing agreement is with USC, founder and CEO John Katzman says. He is also the founder of **Princeton Review**, ([REVU](#)) a big provider of test preparation and college guidance materials.

"Our feeling was that the world was ready for a high-end, high-quality, branded degree program online," Katzman said.

Besides providing technology and logistical support, 2tor will help recruit students, he says.

Different Type Of Learning

Online education differs from on-campus education in many ways, including how students learn and teachers teach, says James Rowley, an education professor and executive director of the Institute for Technology-Enhanced Learning at the University of Dayton. The Catholic institution is Ohio's largest private university.

"The real challenge for professors is they have to change the way they work," Rowley said. "So many professors historically have relied on personal interaction with students."

Online, teachers have to think differently about how they get ideas across, he says.

"A lot of emphasis now is on course design that hopefully puts students at the center of the process," Rowley said.

Sometimes students resist online learning, saying they prefer face-to-face contact with teachers and interaction with other students.

They also doubt their tech skills, particularly if they're new to online learning, Rowley says.

"But if the course is well designed," he said, "a lot of those fears go away."