Since the beginning of higher education in the United States, countless decisions have been made based on the answers to three basic questions. Decisions about student life, about curriculum, about buildings and grounds, hiring decisions, educational delivery methods and many other aspects can be traced to the fundamental questions of what will be studied; who is going to study it; and who is going to pay for it (Cohen & Kisker, 2010)? In this article, let us look at the first question, what will be studied and provide ideas for this author’s preferred delivery method.

Looking to the past, higher education has continually seen changes, but for the last two hundred years the method of providing education has been generally consistent. Education happened in classrooms or in the field by way of a teacher, who was the expert, and students who were there to learn. In the modern era, not only has the content of educational programs continued to change, but with the invention of online education, the method of providing education is seeing its biggest change in history. Yes, correspondence courses have existed in the past for distance education, but the portion of enrollments has been insignificant. In this modern era, online education, as a form of distance education, is making a significant impact based on the number of enrollments and will continue to impact the job market due to this significance. For the foreseeable future, students will continue to seek degrees specifically for employment purposes and online education will play a major role in their educational pursuits. Job readiness knowledge and skills are what should be studied.

Education History and Relevance

In the current era of higher education there is an emphasis on curriculum that prepares students for professional vocations. This emphasis started after the 1850’s when colleges began to define a professional education as having a bachelor’s degree (Geiger, 2005). After 1890 colleges began to offer programs in fields of specialization and after World War I (WWI) colleges and universities focused on educating the public versus only being a place for the elite and privileged. This shift in who was attending college was in direct relation to career preparation. After WWI, schools put energy in to providing programs that led to employment and this emphasis has only increased into the 21st century.

According to Moore (2016), Microsoft Partners in Learning and the Pearson Foundation working with Gallup, created a list of the seven major job skills needed in today’s market, which
are: collaboration, knowledge construction, skilled communication, global awareness, self-regulation, real-world problem solving, and technology used in learning. From this list of needed job skills, real-world problem solving was most closely related to job success and yet most students felt that this skill was only learned after graduation (Moore, 2016). Based on this list of needed job skills and the growth of online education, it is imperative that online education programs focus on curriculum and program offerings that help students obtain jobs after graduation.

Online Education and Job Readiness

In many ways and for most professions, online education can prepare students for jobs after graduation. The biggest challenge for online education will be in helping students make wise decisions about the programs they wish to complete and the jobs they wish to obtain. For many online programs, students are expected to choose a program and then work through the content in the order specified by the school. This method works well for older non-traditional students, but this may not be the best way to reach younger or more novice students. According to Milsom and Coughlin (2015) students chose programs of study after interests emerged from course content in courses taken. In traditional on-ground schools, students often take lower level courses to learn about the field of interest and to learn about future job opportunities. Often students chose a major with little to no exploration and often changed majors throughout their time at school (Milsom & Coughlin, 2015). In most online programs, this type of exploration and changes in major do not easily happen. In this author's opinion, online programs need to find ways to help students explore degree options and there needs to be more overlap between programs, making changes in major a smoother process. Online schools need to offer a larger variety of programs and majors. Going forward, for all schools, online programs will need to be even more transparent and more flexible for students and families when making job preparation decisions.

Not only do students need to experience different courses and learn about different fields to choose a major, it is important for their families to be involved in the process. Workman (2015) stated that students in the major and career decision making process, viewed their parents as being a very positive influence. This influence came in many forms, but the influence was undeniable. Parents who attended college had influence over choice of schools and had input on the types of majors for their children. Even for first generation college students, their parents had suggestions and influence that the children listened to about future careers and the type of schooling they should pursue (Workman, 2015). It is important for online schools to be aware of the influence parents have. Because online education is still relatively new in the industry, online schools need to be able to educate parents and students about the curriculum, the programs offered and the future job potential once the degree is completed.

Impact on Higher Education

It is undeniable that online education has already had a significant impact on higher education. However, in many ways, online education needs to emulate some of the advantages of traditional on-ground education as its influence continues to grow. Online education has the advantage of being able to be completed at a distance. Online education can be more efficient
and take less time to complete degrees. Online education can prepare students for the job market, but to compete with traditional education delivery methods, online education will need to have the advantages of traditional education combined with the benefits of being online to truly prepare students for jobs after graduation. It is still true today that there are many more students attending traditional on ground schools than there are attending online only programs or online only schools (McFarland et al., 2017). However, going beyond competition for enrollments, as an example from the labor market of why there needs to be changes; according to Grossman and Johnson (2016), studying employers of those who hire graduates with an accounting degree, they found that employers give preference to those who graduated from traditional or hybrid programs. Although, those with an online degree were given interviews, because of fear over rigor in their program or for lack of reputation, employers still hired those with traditional degrees at an increased rate over those with an online degree. Online schools need to help students choose the right major and the content needs to prepare them with real-world skills for the job market. Carver and Kosloski (2015) demonstrated that both online and on-ground courses could have the same amount of instructor support and responsiveness to help students learn the content and learn about the field. Moore (2016) showed that online programs can develop curriculum that incorporated effective group collaboration which, is a great way to help develop real world problem solving skills. Schools can offer programs that let students explore career fields and they can make it easier to change majors. These are only some of the examples of how online programs can take what they already do well and incorporate the advantages of traditional on-ground programs to help students make wise decisions about majors and to prepare students for jobs after graduation. This change in online education will allow online programs to compete more with all educational institutions.

**Conclusion**

The trend to attend college specifically to get better jobs will continue. Online education has grown significantly, but to compete with all the schools that exist in the industry, online education programs will need to continue to evolve. Online schools need to offer programs that prepare students for careers, but online schools also need take what they already do well and incorporate some of the advantages of traditional on-ground education offerings. This evolution will help students and families to wisely choose a major or degree path and will better prepare students with the necessary skills to efficiently compete in all aspects of the job market.
References


