

Online nutrition courses: Fad or growing trend?

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Most of us have heard of Phoenix, no, not the mystical bird or the capital of Arizona, but the online university. According to the Babson Survey Research Group, enrollment in online courses is growing faster than overall higher education offerings due to various reasons like the economic downturn. With the increase in demand for online education, a study in the March/April 2011 issue of the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* explores nine online nutrition courses.

Since nutrition courses meet general education science requirements and professional education needs in dietetics, medical, nursing, and other allied health curricula, nutrition is among the many postsecondary subjects commonly taught online. Investigators from the University of Massachusetts reviewed published literature concerning online [nutrition education](#) courses. Findings from this study revealed four quasi-experimental studies that indicated no differences in nutrition knowledge or achievement between online and face-to-face learners. Results were inconclusive regarding student satisfaction, motivation, or perceptions.

This study documents that although many components of nutrition education have been successfully included in online courses, there are still some areas that need improvement. Dr. Nancy Cohen, professor at the University of Massachusetts states, "Students can gain knowledge in online as well as in face to face nutrition courses, but satisfaction is mixed. Online learning has advantages such as overcoming time and distance barriers, capacity to share resources among colleges and universities to wide audiences, and the ability to use innovative

multimedia and virtual instructional methods. However, if online courses are designed in such a way that traditional face to face methods like textbook readings, lectures, and examinations are published on the Internet without considering social isolation, de-individualized instruction, and using technology for the sake of technology, effective learning may not occur."

Unfortunately, there is limited research about the effectiveness of nutrition education online courses. With the increase in demand for online courses, this is an area of research that has to be investigated to ensure that we effectively educate college students, especially since this is a population that often has poor diet habits. A college credit course affords an excellent . opportunity to reach this population. The researchers, which also included Drs. Elena Carbone and Patricia Beffa-Negrini, registered dietitians and professors at the University of Massachusetts, agree that "more up-to-date investigations on effective practices are warranted, using theories to identify factors that enhance student outcomes, addressing emerging technologies, and documenting online nutrition education courses marketing, management, and delivery."

The article emphasizes the importance of presenting and publishing experiences with online courses in general, not just nutrition education courses, to build the knowledge base in this growing field.

More information: "The Design, Implementation, and Evaluation of On-line Credit Nutrition Courses: A Systematic Review" by Nancy L. Cohen, PhD, RD, LDN; Elena T. Carbone, DrPH, RD, LDN; Patricia A. Beffa-Negrini, PhD, RD. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, Volume 43, Issue 2 (March/April 2011)

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