Who Uses the Internet for Educational Purposes?
A National Demographic Study in the United States

Xiaoli Cao, Ph.D., Kenneth Gray D.Ed.,
Workforce Education and Development, College of Education,
Penn State University, State College, PA, 16802, USA,
gty@psu.edu

Abstract
The purpose of this study was to determine the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of adults, ages 19-60, that use the Internet to take educational courses or to do research at home for traditional classroom courses. Results suggest that the Internet is not expanding the education market but simply segmenting the traditional market.

Background
Among the various types of educational media, the Internet is perhaps the most often touted. The ability to take educational courses "on line" or use the web to conduct research for formal education is alleged to be altering the way degree programs are delivered and instruction is conducted. Importantly, many institutions of higher education are now investing significant resources in the development of "world campuses" in hopes of tapping new markets of non-traditional students thus expanding enrollments.

While the Internet has made it technically possible to take courses and do research at home, it does not automatically follow that it will attract a new group of non-traditional students. The Price Waterhouse Coopers' 1999 Consumer Technology survey found, for example, that 48 percent of US users polled said they went online for email but only 28 percent said they went online to do research of any kind. Importantly in 1998, those figures were the exact opposite suggesting that perhaps that the demand for Internet based formal education may be overstated or not growing as anticipated.

The purpose of this study was first to investigate the degree of Internet use to take educational courses or to do research at home for traditional classroom courses and second to determine the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of these users.

Methodology
The data for this study was extracted from The Current Population Survey (CPS), a US government funded monthly survey of about 50,000 households conducted by the Bureau of the Census for the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The sample is scientifically selected to represent the civilian non-institutional population. Data collection involves face to face interviews. The data for this study came from the December 1998 Current Population Survey (CPS) in which interviewers asked supplementary questions regarding
Computer and Internet use. A dichotomous logistic regression model was used to determine characteristics that differentiate those who use the Internet for educational purposes from Internet users in general.

Findings and Conclusions

There were 18,003 adults (age 16-60) Internet users in the final data set of which 3,620 or 20% reported that they used the Internet for educational purposes. This data suggests that among all those who reported using the Internet at home, about one in five use it for academic course taking.

Being unmarried, younger, having some higher education, income lower relative to other Internet users, employed in managerial professional occupations, and working part-time, were all associated with using the Internet for education purposes. Race, gender, citizenship, and geographic region of the respondents had no practical significant relationship to using the Internet for education purposes at home. The characteristics of these users mirror traditional college students. Specifically they tend to be young, single adults, who - if employed - are in professional occupations, and who are either college graduates or trying to finish a college degree.

These findings suggest that the use of Internet based education is significant among traditional college students but not widespread among other segments of the population. While the data used in this study is now two years old, findings suggest it is valid to suspect that the Internet might be only segmenting the traditional higher education market and not making inroads in expanding the market to non-traditional students as hoped or prophesized.