

How Online Courses Are Changing Education

Introducing a Series from HUC, JTS, and YU on the online learning experience

By Chip Edelsberg and Dawne Bear Novicoff

We are only beginning to understand the potential of online education. A 2010 U.S. Department of Education study concluded that “students who took all or part of their classes online performed better, on average, than those taking the same course through traditional face-to-face instruction.” It is clear that this medium presents vast, new opportunities to engage students in effective learning experiences.

The explosion of online learning in the past few years coincides with the Jim Joseph Foundation awarding three major grants of \$15 million each to support graduate programs of education at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR), Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), and Yeshiva University (YU).

To date, the grants have helped to establish 13 new degree and certification programs across the three institutions. 528 students have received Jewish education degrees or certification since spring of 2010. 419 students are currently enrolled in degree and graduate programs of certification. Beyond these numbers, the grants have led to significant developments in each institution’s online education.

New online courses are now offered by HUC-JIR, JTS, and YU to Jewish educators from around the country. Both students and teachers are helping the Foundation gather important lessons about this medium. Students, among other positive feedback about online learning experiences, are excited to share diverse opinions and ideas not only with their classmates but among an array of experts whose insights they can bring to bear via the various online tools available to them. Faculty report *increased* engagement with their students in their online courses as compared to traditional courses.

The institutions recognize their unique position to capitalize on online learning – and the need to train their educators to be effective in this new environment. Two weeks ago, HUC-JIR, JTS, and YU together launched the inter-institutional [eLearning Faculty Fellowship](#), which is part of the Jim Joseph Foundation – funded Inter-Institutional eLearning Collaborative. On May 7th, twenty faculty members of Cohort 1 participated in the first of five live sessions to learn strategies, tools, and approaches for using educational technologies to improve student engagement and learning. All five live sessions and five additional online workshops have been created and will be led by the Columbia Center for New Media Teaching and Learning (CCNMTL) at Columbia University.

We know that higher education is moving rapidly to adapt to a changed world of teaching and learning. The [Parthenon Group](#) recently held conversations with more than “100 post-secondary institutions that deem online learning strategies a top priority.” Parthenon notes that important points to bear in mind include: 1) Students are demanding online courses; the majority of institutions have responded to this demand; 2) Online

enrollments are highest for graduate students, but there are two million bachelor's students expected to swell the undergraduate online presence over the next eight years; and 3) Online students need fundamentally different support services than on-campus students.

While there is obviously still much to learn, we at the Foundation are excited about the early feedback from students and faculty from HUC-JIR, JTS, and YU. We are making their reflections on online teaching and learning available to you because we believe their ruminations are worthy of consideration by all those who care about Jewish education and the future of online learning.

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