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In Katrina's Wake: Displaced Students Turn to Internet --- Online Learning Emerges As an Educational Option, But Hurdles, Critics Loom

By John Hechinger and Daniel Golden
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Raynard Porter, a junior at Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans, thought he might have to travel to the University of Michigan to complete his communications degree. Instead, he plans to log on to his computer and take math and Spanish classes from his parents' home in Houston.

His parents are happy to have him close by after he fled Hurricane Katrina. And, Mr. Porter says: "It's more convenient. If I want to take classes in my pajamas, I can."

The dislocation of Hurricane Katrina has unleashed interest in a fast-growing but still controversial sector of education: online learning.

Universities, for-profit companies and public school systems are scrambling to use the Internet to teach the 75,000 to 100,000 college students and 135,000 elementary and high-school students displaced by Katrina in greater New Orleans alone.

This week, in response to the hurricane, the Department of Education said it would urge states to relax teacher-certification regulations and other rules to help more children get schooling through the Internet.

Distance-education advocates are pushing to include increased funding for online efforts in emergency legislation before Congress. At the same time, if the efforts are to take off, some states and localities may still need legislative approval to pay the far-flung organizations that could offer online programs in homes and shelters.

Mr. Porter signed up for his online courses through the Sloan Consortium, a group of dozens of universities that advocates online courses. This week, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation provided a \$1.1 million grant to pay for 10,000 "seats" in virtual courses offered by the consortium, with the help of the Southern Regional Education Board, a nonprofit group that has long promoted Internet learning in the South. The courses will be offered free to students affected by Katrina.

Advocates hope that the situation will lead to broader acceptance of online teaching, which already has turned into a \$7 billion industry at the college level.

"It could be a turning point" in the history of online education, says Jeanne Allen, president of the Center for Education Reform in Washington, D.C., which also advocates for educational alternatives such as charter schools and voucher programs.

A teachers' union official accused online providers of seeking to exploit the disaster. Nat LaCour, secretary-general of the American Federation of Teachers and former president of the United Teachers of New Orleans, said a lonely computer screen isn't the answer to Katrina. Students traumatized by the storm "need to be in classrooms with teachers who can provide nurturing experiences," he says. "After what they've been through, they need more structure, more supervision, and they need to see familiar faces.

Using computers, K-12 and college students today can attend "virtual" classes with Webcast lectures and, through email and instant messaging, participate in class discussions and ask questions to professors and classmates around the globe. An estimated 1.1 million students are enrolled in online higher-education programs in the U.S., more than three times the number in 2001, according to Eduventures Inc., a Boston research and consulting firm. A quarter of a million elementary and high-school students use online courses for at least part of their studies, up from virtually none a decade ago.

Ruth Ash, Alabama deputy state superintendent of education for instructional services, predicts the hurricane will lift enrollment at the state's online high school, which opened in 2000 and provides advanced courses for 300 students, mostly in small rural schools with limited curricula. The state has extended the registration deadline to allow students left without schools to sign up.

At the Florida Virtual School, one of the nation's largest online public schools, teachers are volunteering to offer courses without extra pay to about 1,500 displaced students. Julie Young, the school's chief executive, said she hoped the government could offer emergency funding for expansion. "It's going to be an opportunity to show the power of online learning," she says.

Mark Thimmig, president and chief executive of White Hat Ventures LLC, which educates nearly 5,000 students in Ohio and Pennsylvania through distance learning, flew to Baton Rouge, La., this week, hoping to set up programs for schoolchildren in Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi and Texas. He anticipates that White Hat, like local public schools, would receive public money, and said his staff is investigating authorization in those states for public funding of online schools.

Meanwhile, the Bush administration is supporting legislation pending in Congress that would scrap a requirement that colleges offer at least half their instruction face to face and not through distance learning to receive federal funding. That rule had been adopted in part because of concern about low-quality "correspondence courses" and potential for fraud.

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