

Every year, millions of students take online classes. And every year, that number grows. As of last year, the number had reached 30 percent of all high school students, up from ten percent just five years before. But even as online enrollment reached an all-time high across the nation last year, the numbers at 10600 Preston Road were next to nothing. As the administration prepares to discontinue the course offerings from Global Online Academy (GOA) next year, they are faced with a glaring fact: only five students out of almost 400 enrolled in upper school have taken a GOA course in the past two years. Now, while online high schools and course offerings take off across the country, there is one burning question to ask. What went wrong with GOA? It is a question followed by many others. In the digital age of inevitable online interaction, what is the best way to learn? Can the value of face-to-face interactions be replicated through a screen? Does online education signal the end of brick and mortar schools, or can they coexist?



A LOOK AT THE FUTURE Many believe that education will shift toward online learning, yet at St. Mark's, enrollment in online courses is extremely low, and next year the courses will not be offered at all.

How will we learn?

Although the opportunity to offer online classes through GOA seemed promising, hardly any students enrolled in the classes — less than two percent. According to Dean of the Campus and Provost Scott Gonzalez, much of this has to do with the student body's reluctance to stray away from AP courses. "Students here often want to go for what I would call a 'known course,'" Gonzalez said, "or something that will bolster their résumé to get them into a specific college or university. And more often than not, that particular course has 'AP' in front of it." Likewise, Director of Academic Information Systems Paul Miakar believes students were not informed or incentivized enough to truly consider online courses as an option in comparison to the typical AP course load. The school didn't sell it. And the students didn't buy it. "We have to look at it as if this is just a different way of learning," he said. "This is a different opportunity, but it's not any less valuable than what we're doing at St. Mark's. It has to be looked at as equal, not subordinate. I think we have to give credit to it. We have to say, 'If you're going to do a course on this, it has to replace something else,' and maybe more than just an elective course."



Lucas Porter
Student at SOHS



Scott Gonzalez
Led effort with GOA

The skills required for learning online are very different from learning in a classroom. In a school community that "prides itself on procrastination," as Miakar puts it, he believes online classes are often unsuitable for students, especially those who have trouble remaining constantly organized and up-to-date with their work. "If you're in my class, I'm prodding you," Miakar said. "You better do your homework, or if you're behind you better get caught up, or if you have a task coming up you better get started. You may not have that prodding from a GOA teacher. Deadline hits, and if you've missed the deadline, you may not have the flexibility you do with a face to face teacher." The personal responsibility involved with an online class, however, can also translate into a growth in self-reliance and individual pursuits, which GOA Executive Director Michael Nachbar emphasizes. "GOA classes emphasize interaction, perspective sharing and taking a personal approach to teaching and learning," Nachbar said. "Each of our classes is taught by an educator from one of our member schools who is nominated as a teacher leader from her/his respective school. There are a lot of programs today that emphasize personalized learning, which in many cases means students learning on their own."

For others, the benefits of an online class system are more apparent, as is the case for Lucas Porter. After leaving St. Mark's after the 2012-2013 school year — his freshman

year — to attend Stanford Online High School (SOHS), Porter opened up his possibilities as an international equestrian show jumper. "I started taking classes from Stanford Online High School," Porter said, "because I was starting to ride competitively a lot more and travel a lot more, so going to St. Mark's was getting harder and harder because I was missing more and more school. So in order to still get a good education, my parents looked into homeschooling and online school, and they came across this program." Stanford Online High School is different from most other online schools in that there are scheduled classes every day, while many online schools are self-paced. As he travelled around the world for show jumping in horseback-riding competitions, Porter discovered online classes allowed him to continue school as normal no matter where he was, making it incredibly more efficient than a brick-and-mortar school like the one he attended for so long. "For example, I was in three consecutive shows, three different shows," Porter said, "that lasted three weeks in Pennsylvania, Washington, D.C. and Lexington, KY. And I could attend those three weeks of school from those three different hotel rooms. And I didn't get behind at all because I could just do the work after the competition, attend school during the day, and compete in competitions at night." However, online education suffers from key issues as well. One of the greatest issues with Stanford Online High School and other schools of its kind is a lack of social interaction. While SOHS promotes face-to-face interaction through clubs and summer sessions, Porter still feels the school falters in this area. "I find that St. Mark's kind of brings you out of your shell," Porter said. "It encourages you to interact with other kids, interact with teachers, and I find that it makes you feel like a part of a community. Whereas at SOHS, given that it is an online school, it is obviously super difficult to maintain that feeling of a community." Headmaster David Dini expresses similar concerns with the online setting, and feels the lack of face to face interaction is one of the key reasons brick-and-mortar schools won't be going away. "You can only replace some of the information transfer," Dini said. "You can't replace the human interaction online. You can create certain elements of it through Skype, but obviously the human dimension and the relationships we believe are fundamental to the experience here will always be critical." But while the online scene may not make brick and mortar schools obsolete, faculty and students alike feel certain aspects of traditional learning will change in the coming years. "Online education is not a fad that is going away," Nachbar said. "Schools need to find effective ways to blend online and on-campus learning so that students are skilled learners in both domains." Having experienced both the online and physical setting, Porter echoes Nachbar's

Enrollment in online school has never been higher, but it's not just the quantity that is on the rise. The quality of online education has increased as well, transforming online learning into a legitimate educational resource.

sentiments and is confident in the future of a cooperation between the two options. "Although a lot of schools are being created online," Porter said, "I think that the idea of a brick and mortar is not flawed at all. If anything, this combination of brick and mortar and online will be dominant, but I definitely don't think brick and mortar schools will be nonexistent." Claire Goldsmith, SOHS director of admission and external relations, also emphasizes the potential for harmony between physical and online schools and feels students should take advantage of the opportunity to combine face-to-face classes with online ones. "There are many ways online schools can cooperate with brick and mortar schools," Goldsmith said. "Sometimes, brick and mortar schools aren't able to offer a particular subject, or level of a subject, and an online provider can meet that need so that the school does not have to hire an additional teacher." Likewise, Gonzalez urges faculty to consider the goal of synthesis between the online and learning environment, as he feels that a lack of faculty enthusiasm was one of the contributing factors to GOAs short tenure on campus. "I think that there are some of my colleagues who fear that their employment is in jeopardy," Gonzalez said. "That could not be further from the truth. We are not going to do away with brick and mortar schools, at least in the philosophical and missional aspect of this institution."

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LUCAS PORTER

Nachbar also believes that campus based schools are not broken, but they are not complete either. "It's incumbent upon leading independent schools," Nachbar said, "to find ways to offer their students opportunities to develop the skills needed to be modern learners, and to expect their faculty to teach in modern ways." But whatever the reasons for the GOAs disappointing results in the past two years, Miakar, and all the faculty, rest assured that the online scene will make a return. "I think it was an exciting opportunity for kids that maybe we just didn't sell hard enough as an opportunity for them," Miakar said. "I think it's an ongoing, to be continued discussion, and I'm glad that we're not moving away from it entirely and never coming back to it. We're taking a year off, a year hiatus, and when it's over we'll see where we go from there."

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Q & A

The ReMarker sat down with two of the five students to take classes from GOA, juniors Matthew Lawson and Bill Dannenmaier.

What is some general info about your experience?
Bill: I took Game Theory and Micro-Econ. I took Micro-Econ from fall to the mid-winter, so basically a semester class, and then I had a bit of a break between that and Game Theory.

Why did you decide to take a GOA course?
Bill: When it was first offered, economics sort of interested me, but I didn't really want to do AP Econ. So I was like 'Oh, I could take this, it's a new thing, I'll test it out to see what it was like.' And then Game Theory. They were both very math-y classes. I did them both to see how it was, and I did them for the class. I didn't do it for the experience, honestly, but the experience was an added bonus, just to see how the setup was.

Do you get any credit at all for a GOA course?
Bill: It acts sort of like a trimester high school course. We get two grades on it for the transcript: the grade from the first semester and the grade from the second semester. Normally you take two GOA classes a year. I only ended up taking one. But yes, it shows up on our transcript as a legitimate class.

Which graduation requirements does it add to?
Bill: It's a full-on elective class. I took two of them, so it would fulfill my elective requirement.

Is taking a GOA class worth it as far as class credit and the experience?
Bill: It's definitely worth it for the learning experience. If you're really interested in a specific field, I think GOA is a great way to go and learn a more specific and early reach into where you want to go as a scholar. I think that if someone can really handle it, and they're not loaded down, I think a GOA course is absolutely worth it. It is really good for participating in groups, even though it's online.

Any suggestions to administration regarding program?
Bill: About the class itself, one of the problems is that we aren't reminded constantly about it. You have to log into the website, and you have to check when your assignments are due.

Do you think online classes haven't been popular here?
Bill: You don't have the direct contact you do at a physical school, and you have to text or email, and then get a response. You can't really converse as well as you can in natural face-to-face contact. The video chat can kind of emulate that, but not as well.

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What are some differences between classroom and online learning?
Bill: In that same vein, another reason I ended up dropping the second semester of it is that I'm obviously not a fan of the online learning environment. Having gone to St. Mark's since first grade, I'm way too wired to be in a classroom with my friends and other very intelligent people, and be able to talk and learn about a topic. Learn, see, write and all that. I'm very much a classroom learner because of how long I've been here and because of how good the classroom environment is at St. Mark's.

What are some differences between classroom and online learning?
Bill: Honestly, an online learning experience is different — I think it's still very good — but it's different in a manner that I didn't really like because I can get a more hands-on and personal learning experience here at St. Mark's. The difference between the St. Mark's learning environment and the online learning environment is that online, the diversity of courses is ridiculous. There must be 50 different courses on GOA, and they are all electives, they are all specifically geared towards a specific profession or specific kind of literature. There will be history courses on GOA about just the Middle-East, or just south-east Asia and that's all really interesting and really great, because I don't think class diversity is something St. Mark's does very well.

BRICKS VS. CLICKS

Ranking on a list of best private schools in America according to *Business Insider*.

8

St. Mark's

6

Stanford Online High School

39%

High School

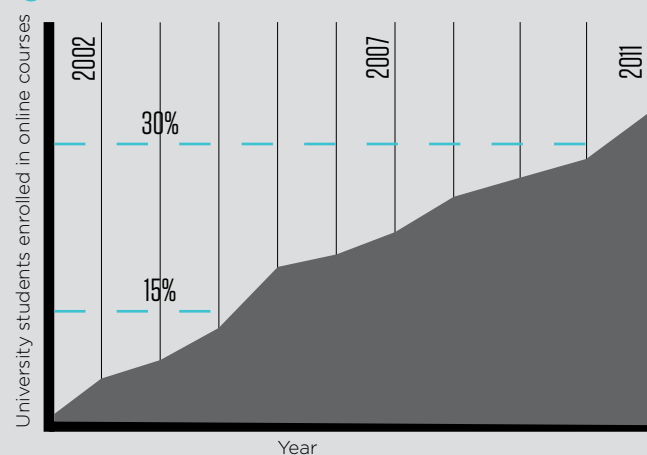
33%

Higher Education

2%

St. Mark's

Percentage of students enrolled in online courses in 2013-2014



Online learning is not one size fits all. Here we've defined several common types of online learning.

Massive Open Online Course (MOOC)
— These classes usually have thousands of students, are often free and are often sponsored by universities.

Self paced learning
— Similar to GOA. There are weekly or monthly assignments and access to lectures on a regular basis.

DEFINITIONS

Real time learning
— Similar to SOHS. With daily classes via programs similar to Skype, this type of learning simulates a traditional classroom.

Third party programs
— This includes programs such as Khan Academy, which posts learning materials for everyone to access.