

Filling Out the Catalog

Online learning's rapid evolution isn't just giving independent schools more course options. It's also redefining expectations for exemplary teaching, according to One Schoolhouse founder Brad Rathgeber.



Brad Rathgeber is head of school and CEO of One Schoolhouse (oneschoolhouse.org), a nonprofit consortium providing online courses and programs for students and adult learners. One Schoolhouse is offering 52 courses for students in the 2018-2019 academic year, 12 online professional development courses, and 16 on-demand programs for educators. Last year, One Schoolhouse worked with 530 schools around the world. Rathgeber founded One Schoolhouse in 2009 as the Online School for Girls, the world's first single-gender online school and the world's first online independent school, after working as a teacher and technology director at the Holton-Arms School. He served on the NBOA Board of Directors from 2011 until 2018.

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Net Assets: It's been nine years since you created your online education company. What kinds of lessons did you learn in the early years of Online School for Girls?

Brad Rathgeber: One of the positive takeaways was that there truly was a market for a new type of online learning — for relational, collaborative and creative online learning — and that the technology existed to connect teachers and students in substantive ways. It was wonderful to realize that it could work, and that there was real interest among schools. In our first year, the Online School for Girls network grew from four schools to 18.

At the same time, we quickly learned that just because someone was a great teacher in a face-to-face classroom, that did not necessarily translate to the online space. This meant we had to figure out how to train faculty members to be equally effective in the online learning space.

Net Assets: What did you learn — how *do* you train teachers to engage effectively online?

Rathgeber: We borrowed from a lot of places, and I think the result has become a real strength of our program. The most important thing is that technological savvy is probably the least important factor. Instead, we start by hiring faculty members who have a growth mindset. Our number-one hiring criteria is, "Is the person ready to learn?" Their content expertise is important, but it's secondary to their willingness to grow and how they think about building relationships with students.

The heart of our actual training is a nine-month program for every new faculty member. This includes a couple of online classes in the spring (before they begin teaching in the fall), along with intensive coaching over the summer with our instructional designer. We very clearly say, "This is what our baseline expectations are for faculty, and this is what exemplary teaching looks like in this space," and we coach them toward these competencies.

On an annual basis, faculty also go through a goal-setting process. We aim for continuous improvement; in fact, we keep moving the goal posts for what we consider exemplary teaching. In other words, what was exemplary a few years ago is now very much baseline.

Finally, teachers are evaluated four times annually — not only by us, but also by their students. At most independent schools, you're lucky if you get one evaluation a year. This ensures that our quality control on classes is stronger than at most schools.

Net Assets: Have you seen any of these practices transfer to the world of brick and mortar independent schools?

Rathgeber: Our teachers often tell us they're bringing these methods back to their classrooms. Many say this is the best professional development they've ever had because they're actually getting the coaching they need in order to find success. In fact, we encourage our schools to send us their top teachers because we know we can help them grow and stretch in ways that their schools often cannot. We can connect them to a community of other teachers from around the country and around the world — other teachers who are in that same space and looking to grow at that same level.

Net Assets: In 2016, Online School for Girls became One Schoolhouse. Why?

Rathgeber: Our name no longer quite matched who we were. I started to find myself at conferences saying, "Hey, I'm Brad. I'm the head of Online School for Girls, but we're not just online, we're not just a school and we're not just for girls." Over the years, we expanded into some face-to-face programming, professional development programs for educators, and programs for boys. And, our girls' schools were looking to create more co-ed opportunities for their students.

We think of ourselves as a partner in innovation to independent schools. That means meeting schools where they are, not where we want them to be. Some of our schools require their students to take an online class with us in order to graduate. Other schools are still dabbling with one, two or three student enrollments every year. My hope is that in the next 10 years, it will become the norm for every independent school to work with an online strategic partner.

Net Assets: What's the strategic case for doing this?



Online School for Girls, which Rathgeber founded in 2009, rebranded as One Schoolhouse in 2016.

Rathgeber: The first part of my answer gets to admissions and enrollment issues. Independent schools are coming around to the idea that universities and colleges have already come around to, which is that you can't offer everything under the sun on your own campus. You may need to think about utilizing online or off-campus study programs, or mentorships within the community, or any number of other options. We also know, thanks to research by the Enrollment Management Association, that parents are less likely to be interested in independent schools that don't have the programs they want. So it really behooves an independent school to offer families an incredible course of study. And strategically, a supplemental online program like One Schoolhouse can help them fill out that catalog.

A second factor is that online learning is becoming a college readiness skill and a lifelong learning skill. In any given year, more than 30 percent of college students will take an online course as part of their program of study. The rates are even higher for graduate students and adult learners.

A third factor is that online learning can be part of a strategic solution in mitigating costs. We know that 70 percent of an independent high school's costs are built into faculty and staff salaries and benefits. We also know that many campuses are still offering courses for a very small number of students, which is usually not the most effective use of their resources. I don't think supplemental online learning is a silver bullet for an independent school's financial challenges, but it can become part of a viable financial solution.

Net Assets: What about the educational process itself — do you feel the online classroom has certain advantages over the face-to-face classroom?

Rathgeber: I'm not somebody who argues that students should have their entire curriculum online. I'm an independent school guy. I love our face-to-face, place-based schools, and I think there's incredible value in our communities. I just don't think they're sufficient in this day and age, when one of the many experiences a student can have is online, where they can engage differently.

Let me unpack that. In a face-to-face class, it's often the kids who raise their

hand who get the attention of a faculty member. An asynchronous online classroom is often more reflective and introspective; it allows a student to engage when she's ready to engage. As we know from Susan Cain's presentation at NBOA's Annual Meeting a few years ago, it's not that an introvert doesn't have anything to say — it's that she wants to be able to say it when she's ready to say it. Introverts shine in the online space in a way that can be difficult for them to shine in the face to face space.

From a design perspective, to me this says that face-to-face teachers should be thinking about bringing some of these online tools into their classrooms, especially if they want their introverts to have the types of learning communities that let them shine. And schools, from a macro perspective, should be thinking about the more strategic question of how to engage students differently.

Net Assets: Do schools need advanced technology to participate?

Rathgeber: On the contrary. From the design perspective, we're always asking, "How can we simplify this to create a high quality, relationship-based learning experience for kids? How can we make this easy? How can we make this accessible to a large range of students?" When I was director of technology at Holton-Arms, one thing I learned really fast was that just because you could do something with technology didn't mean you *should* do it. Technology can easily get in the way of learning.

Net Assets: How has online learning evolved over the last 10 years or so?

Rathgeber: There are many more flavors. Back in the day, you might have thought of online learning as more of a correspondence course. Today, there are relational online learning classes, like we offer, but there are

also MOOCs (massive online open courses), lecture-based courses and even courses based on artificial intelligence.

Another thing that didn't exist 10 years ago is a focus on personalization. I believe strongly that every kid learns differently. Traditionally, we've tried to reach different types of learners from a perspective of differentiation. We've taken the teacher-centered approach of saying, "How can I reach Miles in the same way that I reach Jasper and the same way I reach Hannah?" That has required a tremendous amount of work; the faculty member has had to figure out three, four, five different ways to teach the same material.

Technology can flip that thinking on its head, by giving every learner choices in how they learn. Instead of telling the teacher to teach the same thing four or five different ways, you present the student with four or five different ways of learning something. You tell the student, "Let's figure out the methods that are most effective in helping you meet the learning objectives and the competencies that we've set up for you."

Basically, personalized learning is just flipping the idea of the classroom on its head, from teacher-centered to learner-driven. And technology hyper-charges it; instead of learning the quadratic formula from one teacher on the white board, a student can learn from any number of teachers on YouTube, for example.

Net Assets: In theory, at least, technology and independent schools are a great match. Technology allows them to do what they already do well even better.

Rathgeber: I think so, especially for independent school educators who think of themselves as coaches and builders of relationships, who are always thinking about how they can help students get over certain humps. That kind of teacher loves this stuff. But it can be a huge challenge for faculty members who see their worth in content expertise. The person who feels they know how to teach the Civil War better than anybody else struggles with this stuff mightily.

Net Assets: What's the role of business officers in how their school engages with online learning?

Rathgeber: I believe strongly that the academic side of the house must talk to the business side of the house, and vice-versa. Everybody must have a deep understanding of both sides of the equation, particularly with something as interrelated as online learning. Business officers should ask questions about how teaching and learning are happening on campus, in part to learn whether they're using their dollars most effectively for their students. This might include questions like, "What do we do with low-enrollment courses? How are we expanding our curriculum? How can we expand our curriculum and offer more programs for our kids?" If the answer is simply hire more teachers or continue to offer four- or five-student courses, they need to ask more questions.

Likewise, when schools want to expand a program, they've thought the answer is to hire more teachers or to build more buildings for it. There are different ways to do this, including really inexpensive ways that allow them to expand on a per-student basis rather per-program.

Here's an example. We had a school that was looking to engage in more robust STEM programming. They looked at the finances and asked, "Is it better for us to

hire two faculty members, retrofit a couple of classrooms, and have those teachers teach potentially four new courses for us? Or should we pay for all of our girls to take a STEM class online, giving them 12 new STEM courses to choose from?" They chose the second option. They gave their students far more opportunities without incurring more capital costs or hiring new faculty members.

Net Assets: Are there any lingering misperceptions about online learning that you feel need to be addressed?

Rathgeber: I think there are still some traditional independent schools that think of online learning as an all-or-nothing proposition. Instead, I hope they'll begin to think of it as a great supplement to what can happen at a school, even if it's as little as 5 percent of a student's engagement in academic coursework.

Net Assets: What are your concerns overall about traditional independent schools?

Rathgeber: I worry that there are some real challenges coming down the road. I worry about independent schools that are trimming some expenses around the edges without really paying attention to what's happening around them. I worry

they aren't learning lessons from higher education, especially from the liberal arts schools that are closing at an increasing rate. I worry they aren't learning lessons about facility planning, and that they're creating huge new spaces rather than retrofitting old spaces. I worry they're not looking as carefully as they might at the lower-cost competitors coming onto the scene, especially some for-profits, just because these new schools are approaching learning in ways that might not resonate exactly with many parents today. I worry they're spending more time thinking about alternative revenue strategies than about the costs associated with their facilities and full-time staff.

Net Assets: One can imagine that all kinds of factors play into these factors, including tradition, love of those beautiful campuses and human nature — not wanting to hurt anyone by letting them go.

Rathgeber: All good and true, and here's another way to think of it. If a school is hiring a ninth-grade history teacher to fill the exact same role as the ninth-grade history teacher who just retired, the school is missing a huge opportunity to rethink — to ask, "Is there a different way of doing this?" **N**



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