

2009

Critical mass

Michael Simonson

Nova Southeastern University, simsmich@nova.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://nsuworks.nova.edu/fse_facarticles

 Part of the [Education Commons](#)

NSUWorks Citation

Simonson, Michael, "Critical mass" (2009). *Fischler College of Education: Faculty Articles*. 84.
https://nsuworks.nova.edu/fse_facarticles/84

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Abraham S. Fischler College of Education at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Fischler College of Education: Faculty Articles by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.

Critical Mass

Michael Simonson

Everett Rogers (2003) defined critical mass in his classic work, *Diffusion of Innovations* (5th ed.), as a crucial concept in understanding the nature of the diffusion process. Critical mass occurs at the point at which enough individuals have adopted an innovation so that the innovation's further rate of adoption becomes self-sustaining. In other words, the innovation becomes so widely accepted and used that there is little need to convince nonusers to adopt; it is only a matter of time until the vast majority

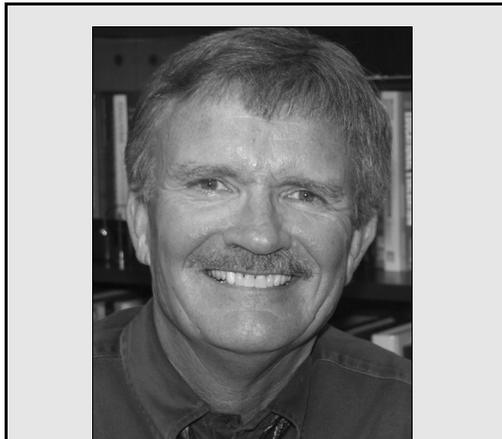
become users. According to Rogers, an innovation is an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption.

To many, distance education is a new idea, sometimes misunderstood but often unknown, until recently. According to the latest Sloan Consortium report titled *Staying the Course, Online Education in the United States, 2008* (Allen & Seaman, 2008), distance education has become better known, widely practiced, and even politically mandated.

Staying the Course is must reading for those interested in the increasing impact of distance education in higher education in the United States. One statistic jumps out of the document—almost 22% of higher education students enrolled in an online course in the last year; a doubling of enrollment over the 5 years since the first Sloan Consortium report about online learning. Almost 4 million higher education students took an online course in 2008.

Critical mass is an important concept for distance educators because it is at this point in the diffusion of a new idea when it “takes off on its own” with little or no need for advocacy by change agents—those with a responsibility to promote the idea. Historically, critical mass of a new idea, such as the adoption of cell phones or the use of the Internet for e-mail, occurs when between 15% and 35% of potential users

... continues on page 71



Michael Simonson, Editor, *Distance Learning*, and Program Professor, Programs in Instructional Technology and Distance Education, Fischler School of Education, Nova Southeastern University, 1750 NE 167 St., North Miami Beach, FL 33162. Telephone: (954) 262-8563. E-mail: simsmich@nsu.nova.edu

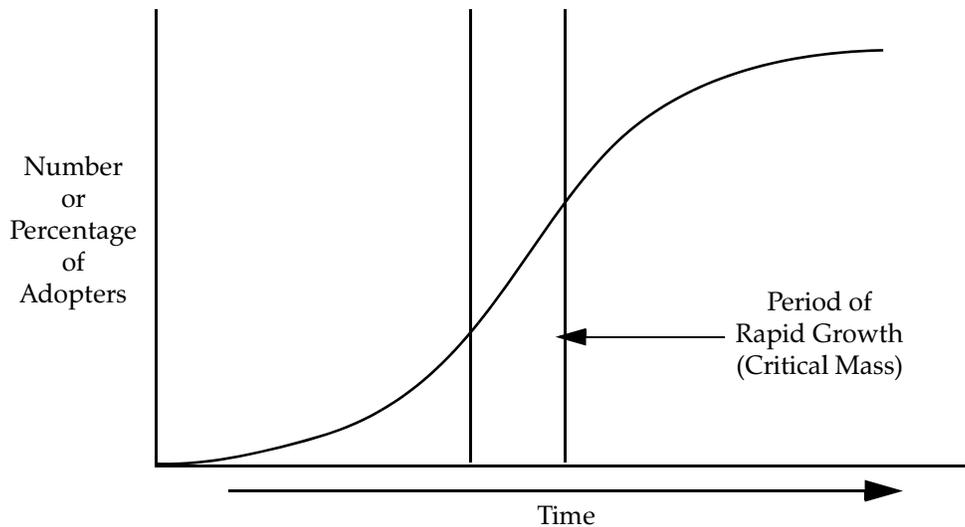


Figure 1. S-shaped adoption curve for an innovation.

adopt the idea. In 2007-08, 22% of college students were distant learners; it is likely that distance education has “arrived.”

The game changes for distance learning leaders at this point; instead of convincing, informing, and persuading, the distance educator will now manage, support, and evaluate. After years of efforts trying to convince whomever would listen that distance education, distance learning, online learning, or virtual schooling were effective ways provide education, it will in the future be important to explain how to administer, how to improve, and to how to revise. The literature of the field will change, the ideas that support the field will evolve, and the impact of the field will increase.

And finally, critical mass is also defined as the smallest amount of fissile material needed for a sustained nuclear chain reaction. If distance educators do not want things to “blow up in their faces,” then careful and unbiased guidelines and best practices will need to be made available; grandiose promises about saving education must be avoided and realistic, practical, and reasoned advice should be given.

REFERENCES

- Allen, I. E., & Seaman J. (2008). *Staying the course: Online education in the United States, 2008*. Needham MA: Sloan Consortium.
- Rogers, E. (2003). *Diffusion of innovations* (5th ed.). New York: Simon & Schuster.