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CURRENT ISSUE

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Going the Distance

As distance learning proliferates, IT and administrators must ensure that faculty and students take full advantage of the tools and technologies.

Karen J. Bannan

Biomedical engineering students at the University of Southern California (USC) Los Angeles take several lab courses designed to help them learn about and troubleshoot medical equipment. One course, Applied Electrophysiology, requires students to attach medical equipment to sensors that measure output, which is then entered into a computer program.

Ten years ago, if students couldn't come to campus, they couldn't take the course. These days, students from all over the country connect to the lab via a Web conference link that lets them watch the process and receive data and output electronically in real time.

"They can't physically hook up the wires, but they can get all the benefits of the course by partnering with another in-classroom student," explains Binh Tran, the university's director of instructional technology. "That's important because, for a lot of distance learning classes out there, students are exempt from the labs, and their overall course experience isn't the same as an on-campus student."

USC is one of many pioneers in online education, according to the Sloan Consortium, a Needham, Mass.-based association of educational institutions. More than 53 percent of the 1,100 colleges and universities surveyed in Sloan's 2003-2004 study said online education is critical to their long-term campus strategy.

Students are echoing these sentiments with their tuition dollars, according to Boston-based Eduventures, an educational research firm. Its recent report, *Online Distance Education Market Update 2005: Growth in the Age of Competition*, says the online distance education market grew 34 percent last year, and the number of students enrolled in a fully online program approached 936,000 by December 31.

That number is expected to climb to 1.2 million by the end of this year, accounting for 7 percent of all students enrolled in postsecondary degree programs, according to the Eduventures report. That percentage has more than tripled since 2001, and Eduventures estimates that one out of every 10 students will be an online-only student by early 2008.

The growth comes from local students who need flexibility in their schedules and from national degree candidates in search of a specific degree or school cachet. This increase translates into a need for new courses and programs. And success hinges on the use of best practices, an integrated IT infrastructure and high-quality course design. (See "[Lessons Learned](#)" on page 63.)

A WORLD OF CHANGE

Transitioning from planning and writing a traditional classroom syllabus to writing, coding and posting an online syllabus—not to mention online quizzes, review materials and communication threads—is an exercise in change management, and one that starts with people, not PCs.

"The content in the academic area dictates what goes into an online course," says Pete Rubba, senior director of World Campus, the online distance education program of Pennsylvania State University, in University Park, Pa., which has 23 campuses. "While the World Campus is a

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Smart Quotes

“Using e-mails to communicate with students, and even faculty, on a consistent basis just doesn't work. Digital signage gives us the opportunity to keep students up to date.

— Vic Jabrassian, IT director at Southern California Institute of Architecture

delivery unit, the academic authority continues to reside with the academic units,” he says.

The first step is to consider how a topic can translate to the Web. This may mean borrowing a page from Hollywood and storyboarding the course. Educators and online designers should work together on this, says Philip DiSalvio, director of Seton World Wide, the online campus of Seton Hall University in South Orange, N.J.

“A solid course is one that constantly generates feedback and fosters students working together in a way that’s meaningful to them,” says DiSalvio, who adds that educators should plot key learning objectives so designers can marry interactive content with them. “It’s not just about posting a textbook online.”

Since every student will navigate a course differently, learning interactions take on another form when courses move online, explains Josh Baron, director of academic technology and e-learning at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, N. Y. “In a traditional lecture, the faculty can tailor lessons based on the interactions with students without consciously realizing it,” Baron says. “[When] I teach, I stop and backtrack when I see a confused look on a student’s face.”

Baron suggests building in additional information—such as links to outside definitions, activities or information—whenever possible. “This lets students pick their own path through materials,” he says.

STAYING CONNECTED

Seán O’Donnell, a director of distance education at Villanova University in Villanova, Pa., says his program provides two-way audio and video conferencing. Instead of writing on a blackboard, teachers use Tablet PCs to write freehand. A portal houses e-mail, chat and bulletin boards, and the program also uses rich-media Web broadcasting and archiving. Everything—Tablet PC activity, video and audio—is digitized and archived for future use by online and offline students, he explains.

Still, some things can’t be done online, such as midterms and finals. Carolyn Suckow, director of student and corporate affairs for USC’s Viterbi School of Engineering, suggests partnering with local community colleges that can handle proctoring exams.

Sometimes, the addition of new technology requires additional support staff, points out Sue Day-Perroots, dean of extended learning at West Virginia University in Morgantown, W.V. Day-Perroots, who oversees a program with more than 35,000 online seats, says her school’s online program required new hardware—migrating from a single server to a multimillion dollar hardware investment—and software integration with its existing applications.

“We had people shifting roles because we changed the technical configuration, and we hired additional staff,” she says. “We had two months to make the migration, so every morning at 8 a.m. we set up a triage room where everyone met.” This included points of contact from each of the university’s colleges and departments. They then went back and trained colleagues and instructors.

Nora Reynolds, assistant dean at the University of North Carolina in Greensboro, N.C., says her institution evolved quickly during the past six years by hiring a production team that customizes each of the school’s courses.

Once the content is set, selecting a distribution model is almost intuitive, says Villanova’s O’Donnell. Since 1997, he and his staff have spent about \$350,000 on courseware and equipment, such as Tablet PCs, rear projection screens and broadcast cameras, for its distance learning project, which includes three classrooms. The payoff was almost immediate, O’Donnell says.

“This year alone, we grossed \$500,000, and that’s \$500,000 that came into the university that was never here before,” he says. “The program is obviously working.”

CREATING ONLINE COURSES

Creating an online course is analogous to creating a textbook, says Nora Reynolds, assistant dean at the University of North Carolina in Greensboro, N.C. It takes a lot of time and effort, and getting professors to put in that time may take a little arm-twisting.

Start by pointing out the benefits of online teaching, such as flexibility. True online courses let

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instructors log on at 2 a.m. just like the students do. And online courses can generate even more discussion than offline courses, since feedback is often a requirement. (This is a plus, since many students in a classroom rarely contribute to discussions.)

In addition, once a course is designed and posted, it can be reused. If none of those inducements work, Sean Gallagher, senior analyst with the Boston-based research firm Eduventures, recommends cash incentives to instructors, especially if the university charges an online course fee.

“Most colleges offering online courses have been teaching face to face for decades or centuries and have hired professors based on that model,” Gallagher explains. “In some cases, that’s a barrier that’s nearly impossible to overcome, so many colleges are taking the compensation approach.”

6 TIPS FOR SUCCESS

Here are some guidelines for starting a distance learning program:

1. Make sure student needs top the list when planning new courses.
2. Give teachers incentives whenever possible.
3. Archive content and make it available for future use.
4. Provide orientation for students and faculty.
5. If possible, start planning courses at least one year in advance. Determine whether you will use original content or purchase it from another institution or third party.
6. Consider hiring a production team to customize courses.

LESSONS LEARNED

The iMBA program at Syracuse University, Syracuse, N.Y., is consistently rated one of the top online MBA programs in the country. Andy Covell, director of information technology at Syracuse’s Martin J. Whitman School of Management, spoke with Karen Bannan about best practices in online learning.

Q: What is the biggest mistake when planning an online course?

A: The biggest mistake is structuring online resources and interactions so that students are overly dependent on instructor input. The students need to learn in a variety of ways and engage faculty as a part of the process. They also need to learn from each other.

Faculty who put themselves at the center of all resources and interactions get burned out quickly. On the flip side, faculty who run from interaction for fear of being overburdened typically provide a less-than-optimal experience for students. The trick is to find the right balance.

Q: How can we help students and educators get the most out of online learning?

A: We need to design online learning experiences that are more than attempts to replicate what happens in a “real” classroom. We need to take a fresh look at the learning objectives, the tools and resources available, and then fashion new interactions and experiences that optimize learning in this new environment. If we do this creatively and correctly, we can ensure a quality learning experience for all.

Once some workable models are in place—ones that do not unduly burden the instructor—the learning experience can be fantastic. The key is to increase faculty awareness on the importance of thinking in new ways about student learning in a distance course context. Once the faculty understand that, they are able to move forward in a productive fashion given the right support structure.

Q: What best practices are imperative to success?

A: I think the hybrid approach, which provides some face-to-face interaction and uses technology to complement that experience, is very effective. This is a critical part of the success of our program. Having students engaged in multiple levels with the faculty, with

other students and with the university—including access to the broadest range of university resources possible—is crucial.

Enabling faculty to choose among a number of modes of technology-based instruction and interaction is also important. Different courses and different faculty must be able to customize the experience to fit the course content and the personality and style of the faculty member.

Karen J. Bannan is a New York-based freelance writer.

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