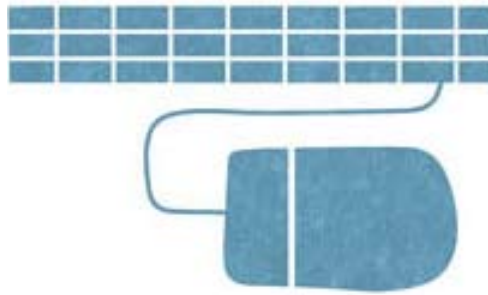




Online Degrees

Evolving to meet new demands



BY JAN BALTZER

MANY COMMUNITY COLLEGES HAVE LEVERAGED ONLINE learning technologies to offer hybrid models of instruction, in which students come to campus for some of their learning and at other times interact with their teachers, peers, and information online. Some colleges are now taking the approach a step further by providing complete degree programs online in order to attract new populations beyond their traditional enrollment base.

Taking Occupational Safety Online

San Juan College (SJC) in Farmington, N.M., for example, identified occupational safety as an underserved need in the workforce and recognized that many potential learners would not be able to physically attend classes on campus. In response, SJC began offering an online associate's degree program. Enrollment increased from 105 in four course selections in fall 2008 to 398 in 18 course sections the following spring.

"Having these courses online is especially important because people in this profession typically work two weeks on, two weeks off, with 16-hour days," explains SunGard Higher

Education's David Penrose, who serves as manager of online services and senior instructional designer at SJC. "They wouldn't be able to stick to a regular 16-week course schedule."

SJC's articulation agreement allows graduates to transfer credits and earn a bachelor's degree in occupational safety from Texas A&M University Commerce. This increasingly popular program allows qualified safety professionals who already hold a TEEK Certified Safety & Health Official (CSHO) certificate to earn a college degree while holding down a full-time job.

San Juan created the online program with help and guidance from SunGard Higher Education Academic Services. The year-round program takes a year and a half to complete, with every course available twice during each enrollment cycle.

"It's a real revenue maker," says Penrose. "We can't produce the classes fast enough to meet demand."

Another way SJC is accommodating its students' schedules is through "micro lectures" – recorded video lectures that last from 60 seconds to three minutes. The condensed lectures make it possible for students to listen to them in a short amount of time,

as often as they would like. After watching and listening to the lecture, students are given their reading and other assignments. Online courses also focus on problem-based learning with a heavy emphasis on writing. SunGard Higher Education developed a graphic organizer to help subject matter experts create their lectures.

“Our online courses are as rigorous and academically challenging as any in-classroom course,” Penrose says. “Making them available online helps us meet the needs of our students while generating new income for the college.”

Building on Successful Hybrid Programs

Similarly, Ocean County College (OCC) in Toms River, N.J., is in the process of creating complete online programs for select associate’s degrees.

“Our goal is to serve all our stakeholders in the ways that best meet their needs,” says Richard Strada, OCC’s interim vice president of academic affairs. “Already, many of our courses are available as hybrids in which students get a mix of online studies and face-to-face, in-classroom interaction. Because we have already created many online courses, it is not too much more of a stretch to offer complete associate’s degree programs online.”

Strada expects that the college will have online associate’s degree programs available for general studies, including education and technology, within a year. In addition to meeting the harried lifestyles of existing learners, the courses are expected to attract new learners and new revenue for the college, without putting added demand on the college’s facilities.

“Our facilities are almost to capacity,” Strada explains. “Our distance-learning courses will allow us to keep increasing enrollment without adding expensive facilities. And equally important, we can easily decrease programs if needed. Distance learning gives us that flexibility.”

OCC also is exploring ways to capture new enrollment beyond its traditional geographic boundaries. “We are looking at programs that have an increasing workforce demand,” says Strada. For example, the college is exploring programs to meet licensing requirements for alcohol and drug counseling, as well as courses that would enable people working in municipal functions to get certified in areas such as management of resources like landfills and recycling in order to advance their careers.

“We believe that the quality of education provided in a virtual environment can be as effective as that provided in the classroom when it is done properly,” Strada says. “By using the available technology, we are meeting the needs of our learners while generating new income for the college.”

New Degrees of Online Learning

State Fair Community College (SFCC) in Sedalia, Mo., offers online classes to meet the needs of existing learners who want the convenience of taking some courses online. Now the college

is gearing up to offer three complete degree programs online starting this fall. The programs, which are accredited through the Higher Learning Commission, are for business management and an associate’s of arts degree.

“Clearly the market demand for online programming is growing, and in order for any institution to stay competitive, it must be at the forefront of meeting students’ needs and expectations,” says Dr. Marsha Drennon, the college’s president.

SFCC’s online offerings have grown from six classes in 1999 to more than 100 today. The college made the decision to develop and offer complete degree programs online after SunGard Higher Education Academic Services staff conducted research that identified the online programs as potential revenue builders.

“The more we explored the online programs, we realized that they are not just a way of providing convenience to our existing learners, but also a way to create new markets for the college,” said Drennon.

Like OCC, SFCC is looking at online programs that will draw enrollment from outside its traditional geographic area while continuing to offer degree programs on campus that serve its traditional population.

“We try to identify niches in workforce training in which industries need training for their employees in order to remain competitive but can’t afford to free them up for on-campus training,” says Dr. Brent Bates, vice president for educational services at the college.

One possibility is to create an online building materials management program. Another growing area of interest is criminal justice and corrections.

“Although we’ve had a steady increase in enrollment, the population of our state is not growing,” explains Drennon. “So we need to look outside the state for ways to continue growing our enrollment. Technology enables us to expand our region of influence as well as keep our mission alive.”

San Juan College, Ocean County College, and State Fair Community College share three common strategic factors for their successful online degree programs:

- Each began by creating online components to their existing courses before attempting full degree programs.
 - Each identified underserved needs in the workforce.
 - Each adapted their curriculums to fit the technology to ensure that online learning is as effective as learning in the classroom.
- The result is more and better service to underserved populations and new income sources for the colleges.



Jan Baltzer is senior vice president, opportunity management, for SunGard Higher Education.