

Creating a Virtual Learning Community

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First Ten Community Courses Near Completion

On Monday, July 17, the first ten courses from the Virtual Learning Community will be available for North Carolina's community colleges.

Courses will be previewed at the Distance Learning conference in New Bern on July 12. After that, copies can be requested from Coordinator [Neil Hollands](#).

Requests for a course file should include the course name, college, instructor, and name and email address of the distance learning or server administrator to whom the file will be sent. Courses are designed in Blackboard format, so your college must have access to a CourseInfo server before a transfer can be made.

Developers have donated many hours to produce solid courses for the online environment. Three editors, Rick Lewis of Sandhills CC, and Rhia Crawford and Beth Mitchell of Mayland CC, are fine-tuning courses for the July deadline. Each course includes subject notes, assignments and assessments, any of which can be customized by the instructor. Courses are free for use in North Carolina community colleges.

The First Ten Virtual Learning Community Courses

ART 111 Art Appreciation

BUS 110 Introduction to Business

CIS 110 Introduction to Computers

CIS 120 Spreadsheets I

CIS 172 Introduction to Internet

ECO 251 Principles of Microeconomics

ENG 111 Expository Writing

HIS 121 Western Civilization I

PSY 150 General Psychology

SOC 210 Introduction to Sociology

Distance Learning Alliance Conference Upcoming

On July 12-14, the New Bern Sheraton Grand Hotel will host the Distance Learning Alliance conference, "The ABCs of Distance Learning: Application—Blending—Convergence." The conference features five plenary sessions, 70 con-current sessions, and 20 "roundtable" sessions that allow small group discussions.

Plenary sessions include:

"Linking the Webs of the 21st century," by Rick Smyre, a noted futurist.

"Insights into Partnerships and Expectations"—a panel discussion of what colleges can gain in cooperative alliances and what the business world expects of distance learning students.

A presentation by Dr. Cecil Groves, distance educator, entrepreneur, and President of Southwestern Community College.

"Awarding Associate Degrees and Other Credentials by Distance," about how five colleges blend modes of distance learning to award degrees, provide student services and meet SACS requirements by distance.

Retaining Online Students: Suggestions from the Front

In North Carolina community colleges, online students drop courses 5-15% more than their on-campus peers. This gap requires action. Answers are available!

Most of the online retention problem is a temporary condition. Students and instructors have not adjusted to this new environment. Software interfaces are improving along with the availability and quality of hardware. Several colleges report that after a couple

of semesters, retention rates in online courses are as good as or better than face-to-face equivalents.

Eight problems contribute to drops. This article explores ways to combat each:

1. Students have incorrect expectations about online courses.

Some students assume that an online course is an easy "A." Others are not sure what to expect. When the course is not what they anticipated, they make a quick exit.

The most common solution colleges pursue is orientation. This can be done online, face-to-face, or via videotape. No matter how it is done, students must actively engage with and be tested on the information shared. Assessing skills and learning styles up front can identify potential problems. Early on, students should complete activities that preview the web site content and its organization.

2. Instructors are unprepared for their new teaching environment.

No matter how many times you have taught a course in person, online you are a rookie again. Online courses with high drop rates were often translated from on-campus courses without adjustment. Many instructors learn online teaching through trial and error, only getting it right after students have been sacrificed.

Required training for new online faculty can overcome these problems. Training should build technical skills, but also highlight the differences between online and face-to-face pedagogy.

Veteran staff should approve course sites before students arrive. Instructors should try an online class themselves to gain the student perspective. Finally, student load should be kept low in new online courses.

3. The student and instructor don't make a connection.

Distance doesn't prevent students from knowing instructors. Many instructors get to know online students better than classroom students.

Expert online instructors establish contact quickly with a personal message (not just group messages) to each student via email or telephone. They selectively reveal personal information so students get a feel for their personality. They use humor to quell fears that the course will be dry. They convey excitement about the subject and put special attention into fast response at the start of a course, when students need

help most.

4. Students miss the social aspects of learning.

Students get help from others and measure progress by comparing themselves with peers. Personal relationships motivate learning. Good online courses recognize this and emphasize interaction. Students create personal web pages. Instructors use email to introduce students with common interests and goals to each other.

Group activities and discussion forums are used heavily. Interactive options like chat and on-campus study groups are often present. Assignments encourage sharing of opinions and experiences, not just fact memorization. Instructors highlight student contributions to the class.

5. Students don't get help when they encounter difficulties.

Make sure in advance that students have at least three resources when they need help. A "peer partner" is a good start, as many students are more comfortable asking questions of classmates.

Students should know multiple ways to contact the instructor: by email, telephone, or on campus. Encourage counselors, technical staff, and other specialists to initiate contact before trouble begins. Provide links to useful web sites. Overwhelm online students with sources of help.

When students first solicit help, make them feel they have a good question, not like they have put you out. Share the answers with the class, adjusting the course site to reflect the solution.

6. Procrastination spirals out of control.

Because online learning requires self-pacing, it is critical to help students find a rhythm early in a course. Assignments in the first week should begin this pattern. Weekly work should follow.

Try frequent small assignments instead of occasional large ones. Use regular, required interaction to check which students are active, then contact the missing before they get too far behind. Send class-wide messages daily to remind students of deadlines, provide motivation, share resources, or compliment good work.

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7. The online class is just too dull.

Materials that work in a traditional classroom may seem lifeless when used in an online course. Online teaching is a new environment, the perfect place to try new activities. Try something unusual early on to get students' attention.

Administer assignments consistently, but infuse content with variety and creativity. Consider learning styles and multiple intelligence theory during course design for activities that appeal to a variety of students. Mix web sites, textbooks and other media to vary content presentation.

8. Students lack the academic skill to survive online.

This problem is difficult to address after a course starts. The reading-and-writing intensive online environment is difficult for students with a shortage of basic skills.

Require that online students take the same basic skills courses that other students complete and conversely, include information about online study in those courses.

Make sure online students have access to the resources available to other at-risk students.

Training Efforts Unify Colleges

In May, faculty and staff from North Carolina's community colleges began collecting and sharing online learning expertise. Two kinds of training, offered in nine separate events, were the first of many Virtual Learning Community-sponsored workshops to follow.

At six statewide sites, participants learned about online instruction and CourseInfo. Trainers developed support materials for re-use by colleges as they train their own faculty. Participants will repeat training on their home campuses. Some local events have already occurred. Bambi Edwards of Craven Community College noted, "Our training seems to have gone splendidly! I will gladly share the format and materials we used."

In other training, network and distance learning administrators visited Guilford Tech CC to learn to administer Blackboard CourseInfo on local servers. Alamance CC donated server access for the event. Almost 50 North Carolina community colleges have purchased CourseInfo, so interest was high. Common adoption of this software will allow administrators to share solutions to common problems.

Online courses in online instruction are in development. These will provide in-depth semester-long preparation and training for instructors who want first-hand knowledge of what taking online courses is like. Central Piedmont CC and Fayetteville Tech CC already offer similar programs that are open to instructors from around the state. As these opportunities become available, we'll provide more information. Contact participants from your college to find out about upcoming local workshops.

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Redefining Online Teaching and Learning

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The phrase "online class" is no longer sufficient. It intimidates instructors who might enjoy online elements in their classes yet do not want to conduct an entirely "online class." It confuses students who ask: "Do I come to class or not?"

For some time, educators have spoken of "online" and "traditional" courses as two parallel tracks that never intersect. This is wrong. Today students expect, and many instructors deliver, course materials over the web. Unfortunately, our lexicon fails to recognize the continuum within the conceptual space between "online" and "traditional" class. An instructor may post a syllabus on the web, but that doesn't make it an "online class." But if not online, what is it? Alternatively, an instructor may post assignments, use a discussion board, and yet still require students to attend labs. My point is this: we need to define "online" endeavors to recognize how instructors teach and adhere to a modicum of truth-in-advertising when marketing courses.

We can begin re-defining our endeavors by replacing the overworked phrase "online class" with three distinct phrases: "**Web-Presence,**" "**Web-Enhanced,**" and "**Web-Centered.**"

"**Web-Presence**" indicates that a web page is maintained for the class. This HTML page includes a class description, syllabus, calendar, and Frequently Asked Question list—the very elements included in student orientation to a "Web-Centered" course. Soon each instructor will be expected to maintain a web-presence for each class they teach. When that becomes accepted practice, no special designation will be required.

"**Web-Enhanced**" courses use a web site to enhance the face-to-face course. "Web-Enhanced" courses go beyond a simple web presence, but **most instruction is still accomplished in a dedicated classroom.** Some reduction of in-class time may be permitted depending on the course content and instructor. Moreover, these web sites

employ pages which students may print and complete offline (much like a correspondence course) without ongoing access to a computer or Internet connection.

A "**Web-Centered**" course is actively led and monitored on the Internet. It is interactive such that **most, perhaps all, instruction occurs on the Internet**. Physical attendance is considerably reduced, **eliminating need for a dedicated classroom**. Online "attendance" requirements are detailed in the course orientation. Because of the interactivity of a "Web-Centered" course, access to the Internet and ongoing participation are required for satisfactory completion.

The Web-Enhanced Classroom: Ten Starting Points

Are you interested in bringing technology into your classroom-based course? Here are some ways to begin tapping the power of the Internet.

Use the Internet as a Course Document Library

Save time and photocopy budgets by posting course documents (schedules, syllabi, course calendars, assignments) to the Internet. Students will learn they can access and print the course materials they need. You'll save the clutter and the hassle of document preparation.

Create a Course FAQ

Fielding a few "frequently-asked questions" over and over? Post the answers to the Internet and give students the address. The preparation time you invest will pay off for as long as you teach the course.

Raise Interaction with Discussion Groups

Many students are too intimidated to participate in face-to-face discussion. Send the class online for discussion assignments, where students can think carefully before posting an answer. Soon, you'll see the wallflowers blossom and participation grow.

Jumpstart Student Research

In libraries, some students are lost and the rest compete for a few copies of the same resources. Collect lists of subject-area links, reference tools, and textbook enhancements. Include appropriate links with each assignment and save the full collection in an online archive. Encourage students to share the online resources they find with the instructor and other students.

Consider Online Assignment Exchange

Tired of piles of paper and writer's cramp? Collect assignments through email or CourseInfo's Digital Dropbox. Make comments or suggest revisions with a keyboard instead of handwriting. Save critical assignments and return student work with a few clicks. Students can critique each other's work without worry of lost papers.

Bring Experts into your Classroom

A variety of voices enhance learning. Borrow a video projector and set up online chat sessions with experts from around the world or point students to one of the Internet's many "ask-an-expert" sites.

Try Online Grading Options

Software like Blackboard CourseInfo (and other titles) features secure online gradebooks where students can access their scores without taking instructor time. Even better, the software grades some kinds of quizzes and other assignments.

Access Online Textbook Supplements

Almost every textbook published now has a companion web site (usually free with purchase of the book) with a variety of extra materials and activities. In the future, students may buy access to these sites and pass on the book altogether.

Save Archives of Exemplary Work

Want to recognize exemplary performance? Save well-done assignments as examples for future classes? Ask permission from the student first, but then use the Internet as both a showcase and archive.

Use Online Technology to Personalize Instruction

Email is a quick, powerful tool for sending reminders, thank you messages, and encouragement. Use the vast amount of content on the web to find extra learning opportunities for students interested in more information about topics that the course only brushes.

Best Practices for Student Services in Development

Work Team 3 of the Virtual Learning Community, led by President Ray Bailey of Asheville-Buncombe Tech CC, is working diligently to gather existing best practices in online student services. The goal is to offer a compilation of basic services that colleges can implement in Fall 2000 to complement the ten courses offered by the Community. A template to collect best practices has been agreed to by Team 3. Categories to be examined include:

Admissions/recruiting

Placement testing

Payment and fees

Registration and records (EDI/concurrent enrollment)

Financial aid

Library services

Academic advising

Personal counseling

Career counseling

Disability services

Veterans services

Preparation of students for online learning

Technical support of online students

Bookstores

International students services

College orientation

Academic standing

Student activities

Retention programs

Job placement

A committee of college personnel with significant experience in developing web-based student services initiatives will complete the review and selection process by August 1, 2000. While not all of the areas listed above may appear in the first release, subsequent releases will add model pages and software to accomplish the goal of offering students in Internet courses a set of services comparable to those which on-campus students receive.

A special focus of this team will be the usability of web sites by individuals with disabilities. Software called "Bobby" that measures such accessibility was demonstrated by Mayland Community College at the 1999 Distance Learning Association conference. Bobby, available for free at <http://www.cast.org/bobby>, is used to analyze web pages for accessibility to people with disabilities.

The Community at a Glance

The Virtual Learning Community is a collaborative effort of all 58 North Carolina community colleges, sharing resources and expertise to expand access to quality online courses and support services. Benefits to colleges include:

A library of online credit and non-credit courses that can be offered as-is or adapted to local needs;

Access to Blackboard CourseInfo for development or delivery of online courses or support materials;

Online and face-to-face faculty training;

Tips for effective online course delivery;

Help materials for online students;

Online student support services;

A web listing of online offerings from each college, with links back to local

web sites;

Newsletters, online discussion, and mailing lists to spur communication;

Evaluation materials for online courses.

In the Next Issue

Virtual Learning Community course development for 2000-2001

Hints for working in Blackboard CourseInfo

Timesaving techniques for online instructors

The latest Community developments

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