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## *Creating a Virtual Learning Community*

December 1999 - Volume 1, Issue 2

### *Planning Nears Completion; Construction Begins on Community*

Work teams continue to add detail to plans for the Virtual Learning Community. In fact, the blueprint for our Community is nearly ready. This issue features an update on the work each of the five teams has been doing. Also, you'll find out about jobs in the Community and how you can prepare to "move in."

### *Team 1 Installs a Blackboard*

Work Team 1, led by Dr. Don Altieri, went through a rigorous process to determine the best software for the construction and delivery of Virtual Learning Community courses. They rated 14 different applications in 57 different categories. Two finalists emerged. Full presentations were made on each. As the team's final report states:

"The recommendation to use Blackboard CourseInfo as the common delivery system stems from a concern to provide the majority of new online course developers/users with a delivery system that can accommodate the widest variety of needs. This common delivery system will also lend itself to ease of collaboration and exchange of information on a statewide basis."

Special thanks to Pat Pohar of South Piedmont CC and John Davies of Randolph CC for their hard work in setting up the comparison of different software.

### **The Virtual Learning Community at a Glance**

The Community is a collaboration between all 58 North Carolina community colleges, sharing resources and expertise to expand student access to quality online courses and support services. By Fall 2000, the benefits available to colleges will include:

- A library of online credit and non-credit courses that can be offered as-is or adapted to local needs
- Access to the Blackboard CourseInfo software to develop online courses or course support materials
- Online and face-to-face training for faculty and staff
- A collection of tips for effective delivery of online courses
- Help materials for online students
- Online student support services

- A central web site that advertises online offerings from each college, providing links back to local web sites
- Newsletters, online discussion forums, and mailing lists to spur communication about online learning
- Evaluation materials for online courses

## *About Blackboard CourseInfo*

Blackboard's CourseInfo software can be used to build full or partial courses, support either online or face-to-face learning, and serve the needs of both beginning and experienced online instructors. The Virtual Learning Community is negotiating pricing and coordinating purchase of CourseInfo by the colleges. This software will give the style of Community courses a common look and feel while allowing a variety of course content.

To use a Community-developed course, download the course archive from the "development" server, provided through a partnership with LearnNC. After making necessary adaptations, you will offer the course from a second "delivery" server. You'll also be able to develop your own course materials with this software.

CourseInfo allows you to build in syllabi, calendars, assignment lists, instructor information, announcements, and external links. Communication can occur through email ex-change, asynchronous discussion forums, chat boards, assignment drop boxes, and small group collaboration. The software also features a versatile test-building tool with security features, an online gradebook, ways to track student access to different parts of the site, and capability for students to build a web page within the site. To create courses, users fill in template boxes and click a few buttons; more advanced developers can import HTML, JavaScript, applets, graphics, multimedia, or other file types.

Blackboard offers a variety of online documentation and technical support. The company does not, however, claim rights to any of the content developed with their software.

Discussion is underway as to whether CourseInfo should be placed on local servers, regional servers, or outsourced. Once that decision is made, Blackboard will be available as quickly as possible. CourseInfo will probably be available by Spring 2000 and definitely in place by Fall. Interested persons may try the software for free at their web site, [www.blackboard.com](http://www.blackboard.com). This online version creates the course on Blackboard's server, but the materials developed there can later be transferred to a local server when the software becomes available.

## *Team 2 Charts Ten Courses*

Dr. Desna Wallin's Work Team 2 has been busy. One subcommittee picked the first ten courses to be built for the Community. Narrowing the choice was difficult. The group sought a diverse set of high-demand courses taught by most of the colleges. They looked for courses well suited for Internet delivery that have been tried online by some colleges. They wanted courses useful to both associate degree programs and continuing education. These courses made the cut:

- 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

The other Team 2 subcommittee is forging a template that defines what will be included in courses. Community courses must be useful to those who want a complete class with everything ready to go, those who desire an excellent example they can modify to their own style and local circumstances, or those who seek modular activities to add to existing online or face-to-face classes. To meet these needs, courses will include:

- A syllabus
- A course calendar
- A "How this Course Works" document
- An overview for potential instructors
- Hints for teaching online in the context of the particular subject
- Flexible textbook recommendations
- Icebreaker activities
- Detailed instructions for all assignments
- Peer group activities
- Discussion forum prompts and activities
- Lecture notes
- Study guides
- Assessment devices
- Subject specific links
- Bibliographic resources

Teams will develop these courses and materials. They'll also identify Master Course list offerings that correspond with the courses, developing both credit and non-credit courses. Teams of instructors and continuing education directors are forming now from nominations submitted by each of the colleges. We'll announce the teams in our next issue. Course development kicks off with a group meeting on January 21. Team members will then build the courses through online collaboration. Most of the work will be completed by March 31.

## **General Online Learning Materials**

Another team will develop:

- Resources and information about online learning theory for instructors
- A course evaluation form for students
- An instructor course evaluation form, to be completed at the end of each course.
- Help materials for working in Blackboard.
- Instructions on how to adjust Community courses to fit local circumstances after downloading them.
- Materials for student orientation to online learning, including self-tests and skill-building modules to ensure students are prepared for online learning experiences.
- A variety of technical help documents.
- Materials about administrative support of online learning and support services.
- A collection of general online reference links for all online students.
- A collection of links about online learning and instructional methods.

## **What If the Course I Need isn't Among the First Ten?**

The Virtual Learning Community can still help if your course isn't on the list! Once the process is refined by our first ten attempts, we plan to develop 50 courses during 2000-2001.

General online learning materials are being built to help any online class. Also, a variety of Community training will show not only how to use Community courses, but how to adapt existing online courses or design your own. You can even build online support for face-to-face courses.

Finally, we'll provide modes of communication to help you get in touch with other instructors who teach your subject online.

### *Team 3 Finds Solutions for Student Access*

Directed by President Ray Bailey, Team 3 has one foot in the future and one in the present. Currently, team 3 is looking for good short-term student solutions. Thanks to their efforts, more of the common community college forms will be available online. Communication tools will be developed to inform students about how to handle financial aid and tuition when they are cross-enrolled. Resources to improve student support services at a distance will be shared. Work will be carried out to increase online library access and complete the lending agreements made between community colleges.

The Team is also preparing long-term solutions. They're watching a project to select and install Management Information System soft-ware that will store information about every North Carolina community college student in the same database. That system will allow vast improvements to online student services. Work on it is just underway and scheduled for implementation at every college by 2003. Use the next page to identify online student support services your college may be lacking.

### **Online Support Services Self-Test**

Take this quick quiz to assess your college's current online student support services.

1. Generally, is your student support services staff ready and willing to deal with online learners?
2. Is your catalog online? Is it current?
3. Is the upcoming schedule online?
4. Is your academic calendar available online and current?
5. Does online learning have an easy-to-find presence on your college web site? Does it include an orientation to online learning? Does it include minimum computer requirements?
6. Can students explore any materials for online classes before registering or are all such materials hidden or blocked by passwords?
7. Is contact information for student support services staff listed on your web site?
8. Is faculty contact information listed online? Is such information minimal, or does it encourage contact?
9. Are faculty, staff and students at your college aware of online student service options?
10. Is online application available at your college? If not, will your college accept the common online application that has been developed at the system level?
11. Do your students know to notify the registrar if they take online courses from other colleges?
12. Do your registrar and business office know how to handle tuition and financial aid for students who notify them of cross registration?
13. Is your college offering or preparing to offer online registration?
14. Do students on campus have access to the Internet? Are locations and times for such access on your web site?
15. Is the Learning Resources Center online?
16. Do students know about online library access such as NCLive? Do they use it?
17. Does your college participate in inter-college lending agreements so students can use the library closest to them when they take distant classes?
18. Does your college maintain or point to a collection of reference links on its site? Is the collection adequate and current?
19. Is your disability coordinator available online? Does your site meet standards for Internet access by the disabled?
20. Is your career center online? Is career counseling available online?
21. Does your bookstore have an online presence? Can students purchase books and materials at a distance?

22. Is academic advising available via email for students?
23. Are other important support services such as veteran's benefits and scholarship opportunities available online?
24. Are program requirements, graduation requirements, university transfer options and other important regulations posted online to aid student planning?
25. In the long term, is your college working on online transcripts, tuition and fee submission, placement testing, and other advanced online record keeping?
26. Do students at your college know how to get email addresses? Does your school collect and maintain a student email list?
27. Does your college have a process to evaluate the quality of online support services?

## Rating Scale

If you answered yes to:

- 25-27 Your college is a model for others in providing full online support services.
- 21-24 Students at your school are well served for the present.
- 16-20 You're getting close! Keep adding more services.
- 11-15 You've got a good start but have significant holes to fill.
- 10-14 Online students at your school need more help!
- 1-9 Find some student service solutions before expanding online programs.

## *Team 4 Teaches You How*

The training work team, led by Dr. Ron Champion, is designing a program of professional development that will prepare you to participate in the Community and online learning. Here's how:

In January, a group of 12 regional trainers will attend training by Blackboard. They will then design training courses. In March, those 12 regional trainers, in three teams of four, will offer training to local trainers from each community college. Each college will be invited to send one or two trainers to this event. Those trainers will then return to their colleges and offer local training in April, May, and throughout the summer. This training will include basic principles and techniques for online teaching, use of Blackboard to support classes, and the use and adaptation of Virtual Community courses.

In addition to face-to-face training, there will also be a variety of more extensive online classes about online instruction. These courses will provide deep exposure to online learning, including experience in what it is like to be an online student.

We'll also be presenting at local conferences and organization meetings. Training will be organized for specific audiences that need to know how to handle online learning in job functions like network administrator, registrar, and others.

If you prefer self-directed learning, a variety of materials will be developed and posted online. There are also existing online courses for those interested in learning how to be an online instructor. For information about one offered at Fayetteville Tech CC, contact Sam Zahran at [zahrans@ftccmail.faytech.cc.nc.us](mailto:zahrans@ftccmail.faytech.cc.nc.us).

## **We're Looking for a Few Good Trainers!**

One of our goals is to place training in online learning at all of the community colleges. Your help in this regard could be critical to the success of your college. If you are interested in learning how to be the trainer and mentor for your college, please let your president know soon! Nominations for trainers will be collected in early January.

## *Team 5 Brings Community News Home to You*

Chaired by Dr. Pat Skinner, the marketing team is working hard to provide this newsletter and other information about the Community. This newsletter will be available monthly. Furthermore, a web site and PowerPoint presentations are in development.

Local discussions about the Community will be held at individual colleges and online discussion forums will be launched early next year. Live presentations about the Community are also available. Presentations have recently been made at the PRIMA conference, the NCCCAEA conference, and at several local colleges.

## *"Moving In" to Our Online Community*

Online teaching is challenging but rewarding. As with any new course one might offer, it takes extra time and thought, but many instructors find online teaching an exciting variation from face-to-face teaching.

Continue reading to discover basic steps you can take to get involved in the Community. There is a place for you whether you are a rookie or veteran in the online world. The Community will develop training materials, communication mechanisms, and online courses to help you take each step along the way.

### **If You Have No Experience**

1. Read this newsletter and other materials available online or in print to gain a basic understanding of the strengths and limitations of online learning.
2. Try taking an online course. Find out about this kind of learning from a student's perspective.
3. Identify and develop technical skills and teaching methods that you will need as an online instructor.
4. Talk with instructional administrators and online learning coordinators at your college to find out about resources available to you. Find out what you will need to do to offer an online course.
5. Select a course to try online. You may want to start by attempting online components of a face-to-face course.
6. Adapt or use a Community course or develop your own course materials.

### **If You Have Online Teaching Experience**

1. Identify skills and techniques that could improve your practice of online instruction and continue your professional development.
2. Compare your course materials to those in Community-built classes or similar courses offered at other community colleges. Make appropriate adjustments.
3. Seek feedback from other online instructors, especially those in your subject.
4. Share online teaching skills with other instructors at your college. Give them honest information about the joys and challenges of online instruction.
5. Volunteer as a course developer, trainer, or local leader for the Virtual Learning Community.

6. Ask your college leaders how you can help improve and increase the local practice of online learning.

## **Did You Know?**

Already, North Carolina's community colleges have offered over 250 different titles from 68 different subject areas in the Common Course Library online. There have been over 600 versions of these 250 online courses. The most popular course is CIS 110 with 32 different versions, followed by ENG 111 with 25 versions. In 1998-99 alone, nearly 10,000 students took our online courses. The Virtual Learning Community will help colleges share all of the fantastic work already occurring.

## *For More Information*

Do you have suggestions for this newsletter? Would you like a presentation on the Virtual Learning Community? Or do you simply want to provide input or get information? Contact [Neil Hollands](#) or read previous newsletters that are archived on the web at [Virtual Learning Community](#).

## *In the Next Issue*

- What the Virtual Learning Community will do for Continuing Education
- Course development teams announced
- Regional trainers announced
- Ten good reasons to try online learning

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