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Creating a Virtual Learning Community

Winter 2000 - Volume 2, Issue 2

Online Courses in Community Colleges Continue to Multiply

The number of different courses offered online by community colleges in North Carolina has more than doubled in the last year. A three-year count of online courses found 1354 courses, up from 608 courses located last year.

Online courses include 508 titles in 108 subject headings (up from 250 titles in 68 subjects). The most popular online course is CIS 110, which 43 North Carolina Community colleges offer online. ENG 111 is second, offered by 40 colleges. Online enrollments grew over 80% in 1999-2000 and are expected to continue to grow at a similar rate this year.

The Virtual Learning Community has greatly contributed to growth in online learning. Each of the courses developed last year is now offered online by at least ten more colleges than were offering that course last year.

Pitt CC leads the way with 113 different online titles offered in the last three years. Other colleges in the top ten are Fayetteville Technical CC, Central Piedmont CC, Guilford Technical CC, Catawba Valley CC, Western Piedmont CC, Caldwell CC & TI, and Forsyth Technical CC. Some of the most exciting growth, however, is among smaller colleges that had not previously offered online courses. Many now have several available with more planned for the near future.

A count of online continuing education courses is not complete, but when available, will raise numbers by several hundred again.

System Gets New Director of Distance Learning

Ken Farmer became Director of Distance Learning for the North Carolina Community College System on January 1. Here is his greeting to educators around the System!

It will be difficult to fill the shoes of Fred Manley but I will try very hard to learn this position and fulfill the duties to be best of my ability.

I come to this position with sincere appreciation and knowledge of the work done at community

colleges. I have served as Director of Fire and Rescue Programs at the System Office since 1985. In the last three years, I have also served as a Program Coordinator in this office, working in both curriculum and continuing education. As a former instructor, I understand and relate to the many needs you have in the field.

Distance learning is the most exciting area of the North Carolina Community College System. We are on the edge of major transformation in the ways we provide access to learners. I see great opportunities to expand this important area.

Projects to expand distance learning funding, develop the Virtual Learning Community and dynamically expand online offerings are just a part of the issues that show the potential of and commitment to distance learning in our system.

I hope to interact with distance learning leaders at colleges and Virtual Learning Community centers during the coming year and look forward to working together to make the NC Community College System the leader in distance education in the United States.

Put Online Courses in the FOLDER

Every distance learning course taught by North Carolina community colleges can now be listed in one convenient online database. FOLDER, a web-based application originally developed at Mayland CC, has been adapted for use throughout the System. FOLDER is located on the North Carolina Community College System web site at http://www.ncccs.cc.nc.us/folder. All colleges are strongly encouraged to list their online offerings and link to the database from their distance learning web site.

Through searching FOLDER, students can find courses they need. Instructors can locate other versions of courses they teach, making contacts and sharing techniques and content. System wide use of FOLDER will increase online enrollments throughout all of North Carolina's community colleges.

FOLDER, however, will only be as valuable as the number of courses it contains and number of colleges that advertise it. So far, only a fraction of the distance learning courses offered in North Carolina are listed. Failure to advertise in FOLDER puts colleges without listings at relative disadvantage. A full FOLDER will enable North Carolina to advertise community college courses to students around the world.

Distance learning administrators from each college have been given passwords that allow them to list courses in FOLDER. For more information, or to reestablish the password for your college, contact Director of Distance Learning Ken Farmer at farmerk@ncccs.cc.nc.us.

Course Development Teams

Get to Work

Since November fifty-one teams have been building online courses that will be available for use or adaptation by instructors around the North Carolina Community College System. Efforts are led by Development Centers at Pitt CC, Craven CC, Central Piedmont CC, Catawba Valley CC, Fayetteville Technical CC, and Forsyth Technical CC. Courses will be available by July 15.

Some of the teams are understaffed. If you are an instructor in the North Carolina System and are interested in helping with any course listed with two or fewer developers, contact coordinator Neil Hollands at hollandsn@ncccs.cc.nc.us.

The template used by the teams, which gives a head start in filling in the course site and provides advice in how to complete content development, is available for instructors independently developing courses at their colleges. The template can be transferred to any Blackboard server. Send requests to Neil Hollands.

Although the instructors listed below receive some compensation for their involvement, it is difficult to fund rewards equivalent to the value they are giving to online learning in our system. Please tell them thanks when you see them!

Center One—Pitt CC Computer Programming and Maintenance

Coordinator Elaine Seeman

CIS 115

Introduction to Programming & Logic

Charlotte Ellis Wilson Tech CC

Stan Grady Forsyth Tech CC

Walt Person Central Carolina CC

Dan Walker Craven CC

CIS 215

Hardware Installation/Maintenance

Connie Ivey Robeson CC

Gerry Kearns Forsyth Tech CC

Jim Tart Vance-Granville CC

CIS 216

Software Installation/Management

Tina Farmer Pitt CC

Wendy Riemenschneider Sandhills CC

Eman Sundquist Wake Tech CC

CIS 286

Systems Analysis

Diane Innes Sandhills CC

Sheila Shelton Surry CC

CSC 134

C++ Programming

Ed Carr Davidson County CC

Kate Parks Pitt CC

CSC 139

Visual Basic Programming

Gail Elmore Mitchell CC

Merrill Gordon Forsyth Tech CC

Phil Reid Cleveland CC

CSC 148

Java Programming

Bob Husson Craven CC

Witold Sieradzan Wake Tech CC

Bill Sypawka Pitt CC

NET 110

Data Communications/Networking

Fred Bisel Craven CC

Tenette Petelinkar Robeson CC

Ruth Parker Rowan-Cabarrus CC

Center 2—Craven CC Accounting and Mathematics

Coordinator Vicky Koonce

ACC 120

Principles of Accounting I

Vickie Campbell Cape Fear CC

Brenda Fowler Alamance CC

Cheryl Fries Guilford Tech CC

Brenda Mattison Robeson CC

Norma Ramirez Central Carolina CC

ACC 121

Principles of Accounting II

Star Brown Western Piedmont CC

Joy Bruce Gaston College

Michele Burleson McDowell Tech CC

Abbie Covington Richmond CC

ACC 150

Computerized General Ledger

Matilda Davis Richmond CC

Jim Hale Vance-Granville CC

Norma Ramirez Central Carolina CC

BUS 225

Business Finance

Dan Reavis Guilford Tech CC

Trish Welfare Sampson CC

Jim Wheeler Vance-Granville CC

CIS 165

Desktop Publishing I

Rosanna Hartley Western Piedmont CC

Charlene West Durham Tech CC

ECO 252

Principles of Macroeconomics

Kathy Crump Catawba Valley CC

Frank Lee Pitt CC

Dan Reavis Guilford Tech CC

Marisa Sudano Isothermal CC

MAT 115

Mathematical Models

Ruth Daniel Blue Ridge CC

Valerie Hampson Sandhills CC

MAT 151

Statistics I

Kelly Fowler Gaston College

Cathy Johnson Alamance CC

Jeanette Staley Catawba Valley CC

MAT 161

College Algebra

Annette Hawkins Wayne CC

David Ross Carteret CC

Paula Schlesinger Mayland CC

Center 3—Central Piedmont CC Arts and Humanities

Coordinator Savannah Clay

ACA 111

College Student Success

Sarah Altman Southwestern CC

Ann Russell Bladen CC

John Wester Richmond CC

BUS 260

Business Communications

Joyce Boone Halifax CC

Barbara Whitt Central Piedmont CC

Gloria Rembert Mitchell CC

COM 110

Introduction to Communication

Katie Fields Guilford Tech CC

Faye Maclaga Wilson Tech CC

Karen Staten Wilkes CC

ENG 112

Argument-Based Research

Nolan Belk Wilkes CC

Tom Beverage Coastal Carolina CC

Harry Phillips Central Piedmont CC

ENG 113

Literature-Based Research

Pat Baldwin Pitt CC

Patricia Kennedy Central Piedmont CC

Janet Palmer Caldwell CC

Kristin Redfield Forsyth Tech CC

ENG 114

Professional Research & Reporting

Betty Cochran Beaufort County CC

Cathy Horne Wilson Tech CC

Patsy Pridgen Nash CC

Nancy Risch Caldwell CC

Rita Rogers Halifax CC

ENG 131

Introduction to Literature

Patrice Brazell Craven CC

Lanita Kirby Rowan-Cabarrus CC

HUM 115

Critical Thinking

Joe Bryant Halifax CC

Terina Roberson Central Piedmont CC

Nick Way Guilford Tech CC

MUS 110

Music Appreciation

Elizabeth Black Fayetteville Tech CC

Reeves Shulstad Forsyth Tech CC

Mark Wheeler Guilford Tech CC

Center 4—Catawba Valley CC Computer Applications

Coordinator KC Irwin

BUS 121

Business Math

James Hobbs Alamance CC

Cynthia McKoy Bladen CC

Ray Roy Brunswick CC

BUS 238

Integrated Management

Joy Przestwor McDowell Tech CC

CIS 111

Basic PC Literacy

Lana Mason Wayne CC

Annelle Pegg Catawba Valley CC

Joe Sherrill Martin CC

CIS 130

Survey of Operating Systems

Annette Hall Forsyth Tech CC

Karen Hicks Nash CC

Cindy Luttrell Sandhills CC

Margaret Moore Coastal Carolina CC

CIS 147

Operating System—Windows

Ann Behar Vance-Granville CC

Jeff Benfield Mitchell CC

Mary Harbison Wake Tech CC

CIS 152

Database Concepts & Applications

Roy Bonnett Blue Ridge CC

Chris Pearce Forsyth Tech CC

Barbara Watkins Wake Tech CC

MED 121 and 122 (teams combined)

Medical Terminology I & II

Kaye Acton Alamance CC

Wanda Card Pitt CC

Polly Decker Brunswick CC

Bonni Staples Central Piedmont CC

Valeria Truitt Craven CC

Kathy Wood Catawba Valley CC

OST 136 and 236 (teams combined)

Word/Information Processing

Katie Canty Cape Fear CC

Glenda Greene Rowan-Cabarrus CC

Kathy Hall Alamance CC

Rebecca Jones Bladen CC

Lynn Judy Carteret CC

Linda Talbott Southwestern CC

Center 5—Fayetteville Tech CC Business Management and Marketing

Coordinator Joe Brum

BUS 137

Principles of Management

Jewel Cherry Forsyth Tech CC

Leatrice Freer Pitt CC

Deborah Friedman Sampson CC

Ken Wallace Craven CC

BUS 153

Human Resource Management

Paul Dellinger Western Piedmont CC

Bambi Edwards Craven CC

BUS 230

Small Business Management

Bob Ericksen Craven CC

Bill Kirchman Fayetteville Tech CC

Walter Purvis Coastal Carolina CC

BUS 239

Business Applications Seminar

Paul Hayes Coastal Carolina CC

CIS 169

Business Presentations

Ken Digby Fayetteville Tech CC

Debra Pressley Blue Ridge CC

MKT 120

Principles of Marketing

Mary Emily Cooke Surry CC

Judy Snipes Alamance CC

MKT 123

Fundamentals of Selling

Bill Copeland Fayetteville Tech CC

Pat West Central Piedmont CC

MKT 220

Advertising & Sales Promotion

Paul Edwards Blue Ridge CC

Center 6—Forsyth Tech CC Applied Social Sciences

Coordinator Dorothy Cattle

BUS 115 & 116 (teams combined)

Business Law I & II

Luann Brown Coastal Carolina CC

Jennifer Labosky Davidson County CC

Russ Meade Catawba Valley CC

Spence Mehl Coastal Carolina CC

Wilborn Rives Surry CC

David Whisenant Gaston College

CJC 111

Introduction to Criminal Justice

Michael Drew Nash CC

Duane Everhart Wayne CC

Mike Randleman Gaston College

Keith Ross Wilson Tech CC

CJC 121

Law Enforcement Operations

Monte Clampett Asheville-Buncombe Tech CC

Teresa Hall Montgomery CC

Jim Pleszewski Rowan-Cabarrus CC

Larue Ulshafer Piedmont CC

HIS 122

Western Civilization II

David McGee Lenoir CC

Barbara Morrison Bladen CC

David Trask Guilford Tech CC

HUM 110

Technology & Society

Steve Lympany Central Carolina CC

Beth Mitchell Mayland CC

LEX 110

Introduction to Paralegal Study

Lisa Duncan Central Carolina CC

Warren Hodges Forsyth Tech CC

Leslie McKesson Western Piedmont CC

POL 120

American Government

Robert Jones Fayetteville Tech CC

Barbara Walls Guilford Tech CC

Deborah Wilson Sandhills CC

Tips for Evaluating Online Courses

As online learning rapidly grows, it is critical to evaluate the results. Institutions and instructors new to distance education have the most to gain from careful check of the successes and failures of their courses. For online learning to continue developing as a flexible alternative to classroom instruction, we must carefully monitor and document its effectiveness.

Experts from around the NC Community College System were asked to share practices and ideas about evaluation of online courses. Their responses were combined in the following tips.

1. Aim to evaluate specific courses, not online learning in general.

Online courses can be done well or poorly, just like face-to-face courses. Don’t think of evaluation data

as the measure of all online learning. Think of it as a measure of how well your college offered a specific course. By beginning with this mindset, your evaluations can become a tool for specific improvement.

At the same time, use consistent means of evaluation so you can compare online courses with each other and their face-to-face counterparts.

2. Don't use the same evaluation survey used for face-to-face courses.

While all evaluations should contain some common questions for purpose of comparison, don't use the exact same form. Because delivery of material, methods of interaction, and other aspects of the course differ in the online setting, all of the same questions are not applicable. By re-using the same old form, you signal to online students that your college is not serious about understanding their experience.

3. Use multiple evaluation methods at multiple times.

One student questionnaire at the end of the course is not sufficient. Because both instructors and students are new to online teaching and learning techniques, evaluation should be an ongoing event that occurs throughout the course. In this way, adjustments can be made before avoidable problems are exacerbated.

A good approach is to precede qualitative evaluation with quantitative evaluation. Ask students, faculty, support staff (or others) about opinions or preferences and then build a quantitative instrument with such components imbedded in the instrument. That way the quantitative instrument has qualitative justification directly related to the concerns of the population served.

Use multiple evaluation techniques. Try face-to-face meetings with a few students. Make occasional phone calls. Ask simple questions which confirm understanding or elicit feedback through email. By letting online students know that the online course is a work in progress, you will expand their empathy and patience.

4. Ask questions that isolate different variables in the online learning equation.

Overbroad evaluation questions are problematic. They leave you without indications of how to make specific adjustments in the course. Try to phrase questions in ways that produce specific feedback on specific parts of the course.

Online learning has many components, any of which can work well or poorly in a given course. Don't forget that SACS requires evaluation of the support services for online students as well as the courses themselves.

Surveys can evaluate technologies used, technical support, course format, course atmosphere, student-instructor interaction, student interaction, instructional methods, course resources, assignments, tests, support services, student achievement, student attitude, pacing, or course difficulty. In a context of specific questions, overarching queries like "Would you recommend this course to others?" become more meaningful.

5. Maintain anonymity when possible.

Anonymous evaluations can be difficult in the online environment. Both course software and email programs attach an identifier to student submissions. Consider having evaluations sent to a third-party who compiles the results or at least strips off student identifiers before passing evaluation data along to instructors and others. Alternatively, use the online surveys listed below that allow for anonymous evaluations.

6. Share evaluation results with all those involved in online learning.

The instructor should not be alone in presenting and improving an online class. Distance learning administrators, technical support staff, librarians, student support staff, and others should all be kept involved. To encourage such involvement and enable everyone to do their part of the job, share the results of evaluations broadly.

7. Remember to include elements of student self-evaluation.

Student effort and participation are critical to the success of online learning. The rest of the evaluation gains meaning when we are aware of the effort that the student brought to the course in question. Self-evaluation also leads to the kind of introspection that enables a student to improve his or her overall approach to education. Self-evaluation encourages self-responsibility.

8. Take advantage of free online survey software.

Several free online survey packages allow one to post surveys online. After students take the surveys, you can view their compiled results. For instance, consider http://www.zoomerang.com, http://freeonlinesurveys.com, or http://intercom.virginia.edu/SurveySuite.

9. Use industry certifications and other standard measures when available.

Evaluation results mean more when they can be put in the larger picture of results from other colleges and training programs. By using certifications and other recognized measures, you test not just satisfaction but also student success. Results can then be shared professionally in meaningful ways, legitimizing programs and enabling student placement in the work world.

10. Collect data in formats that are easy to work with in the digital environment.

On the practical level, think ahead when collecting evaluation data. Designing an evaluation that feeds into a database may take more time up front, but the time saved compiling data will more than compensate. These results can then be stored, combined with later evaluations, or explored for new statistical insight with comparative ease.

Ideas in this article came from:

Katie Canty Cape Fear CC

Kim Gelsinger Gaston College

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Dennis Keough Southwestern CC

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Ida Rogers Blue Ridge CC

Elaine Seeman Pitt CC

Penny Sermons Beaufort County CC

Jeanne Whisnant Mayland CC

Fayetteville Technical CC Wins Army Contract

Fayetteville Technical CC college credit courses will be among those used by Pricewaterhouse-Coopers' online learning portal. On December 15, the US Army selected this course collection to provide soldiers with convenient and easy access to higher education degrees and advanced training certifications. Congratulations to FTCC!

If your college achieves something notable in online learning, send us information for inclusion in the next newsletter.

CourseInfo Corner

Blackboard CourseInfo is the software platform of the Virtual Learning Community. If you have a question or concern about the software, submit it to hollandsn@ncccs.cc.nc.us for consideration in our next newsletter.

For instructors, what are the basic differences between Blackboard version 4 and version 5?

Some community colleges in the North Carolina System use version 4 while others have upgraded to 5. Most of the changes between these versions focused on the movement of CourseInfo toward becoming a full-service online learning portal. Differences for instructors and students in the courseware itself are not extreme.

Improvements between versions include a revised interface for each account, which is clearer and emphasizes a new collection of "Academic Web Resources" put together by Blackboard.

For instructors, the Control Panel has been rearranged, giving easier access to tools such as the "Digital Dropbox," "Virtual Classroom" (chat), and discussion forums. A new content area lists books (the course text and other print resources) more distinctly. Instructors also have increased ability to manage the appearance and structure of the course site, as well as when and how students and guests can access parts of the site. Finally, instructors can now access "course cartridges," free course materials built by textbook companies to accompany their books. The number of these cartridges that are available will grow in the future.

Blackboard's latest release schedule lists Black-board 5.5 as available in Summer 2001 and Blackboard 6, which promises major enhancements to the teaching and learning interface, following in Spring 2002.

Technical support from Blackboard has not been as good as it should be. How can we get good

service from them? Are improvements in the works?

Each college that purchases Blackboard is allowed technical support for two contacts designated with Blackboard. To begin, confirm that the appropriate people on campus have this access and others who work with Blackboard know to filter questions through these contacts.

Answers to some questions can be found at the support site http://support.blackboard.com. Before calling Blackboard, you are encouraged to review this documentation. Other help is located at either http://trainingcenter.blackboard.com or http://instructors.blackboard.com.

If direct help is needed, designated contacts can call Blackboard technical support at 1-(888)-788-5264 or send email to support@blackboard.com. Whether contacting a person directly or leaving a message, provide information about the version of Blackboard used, the server on which it runs, and a detailed problem description. Information about remedies attempted and other applications on the server will also be useful.

When Blackboard is not run on a server with appropriate specifications, or shares a server with other applications, complications can ensue. Be careful when troubleshooting not to jump to conclusions about what is causing the problem. The problem may be caused by flaws or limitations in the setup of the server, not problems inherent to the Blackboard software itself.

If a problem has brought the server down, is related to installation or upgrade, or prevents access to several courses, you get higher priority from Blackboard, so indicate if this is the case. Problems of this kind should receive attention in two to eight hours (depending on severity).

If you haven't heard from Blackboard within the allotted time, resubmit your request. Ideally, this would not be necessary, but in the real world, some repeat contacts are required. Less severe problems should receive a response in 24 hours. If you must contact Blackboard again because of lack of response, send a duplicate message to the customer relations manager for this region, Jessica Bernhardt, jbernhardt@blackboard.com.

Blackboard admits to (and apologizes for) breakdowns in technical support in the past and is working to solve the problems. They are committed to increasing staff numbers and expertise. An improved support database is being implemented that will allow users to track queries and will identify the most common problems with the software. Answers to more of these problems will then be posted on the Blackboard web site.

Contacts at other North Carolina community colleges who run Blackboard on the same kind of server as your college does are available from Neil Hollands at hollandsn@ncccs.cc.nc.us.

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

- Internet resources for online learning
- More hints for working in Blackboard
- Design advice for online courses

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