

## THE PLUS PROGRAM: A HYBRID ON-LINE/CONVENTIONAL APPROACH

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*ABSTRACT: The Plus Program combines on-line and independent learning with the conventional classroom approach. This allows for the maximization of classroom and instructor resources, and also allows both the student and the instructor to spend fifty percent less time in the classroom. The Plus Program is now in its second semester, and has been generally successful. Primary challenges include identifying students that will most benefit from and be successful with this approach, identifying courses that can best be adapted to this approach, and identifying and/or developing appropriate resources for the student to use outside of the classroom.*

### INTRODUCTION

The Plus Program combines on-line learning and independent learning with the conventional classroom approach. Whereas a typical class at International College (IC) meets one day a week for four hours during the semester, the typical Plus course meets one day every other week for four hours during the semester. This allows the more difficult material to be covered in class, supplemented by on-line and individual / independent work during the off weeks.

The birth of the Plus Program was essentially accidental. A ‘push’ was on to identify potential on-line courses within the Computer Information Technology (CIT) department. As each course was reviewed, it seemed as though the answer was always the same: some part(s) of the course would work well in an on-line environment, but other part(s) just did not seem to be tenable without a more conventional lecture approach.

After this rather fortuitous beginning, the Plus Program rapidly took shape and quickly became a reality. We discuss herein its benefits / strong points, the weaknesses / challenges of the approach, and things that we have done to make it work. Finally, we present our conclusions.

### BENEFITS / STRONG POINTS

It was relatively easy to identify potential benefits and strong points of the Plus Program early on, all of which have ‘proven’ to be true.

The Plus Program allows both students and faculty to spend up to fifty percent less time in the classroom. This does not mean, however, that they are spending less time on the course itself. Students have to put in the time and effort during the off weeks to cover the assigned material and complete the assigned projects.

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The instructor has to put in additional time and effort to ensure that appropriate resources are available during the off weeks. This additional time and effort can be done at everyone's convenience, however, since it does not have to be done during scheduled class time. This is especially beneficial to our students, which typically are older more mature students, returning to college to complete their degrees (many of our students have families and full-time jobs, making it difficult to make the scheduled time commitment necessary for a conventional class).

The Plus Program also allows us to capitalize on web-based and computer-based learning technologies, often provided by textbook publishers and third party vendors. Using the conventional classroom approach, these resources are often viewed as 'nice to have' supplements which students can use to enhance the classroom experience. With the Plus Program, these resources are critical, providing the basis for the off-week efforts.

Maximization of classroom and computer resources is another definite benefit. Two classes can now meet in the same classroom, using the same computers, by alternating weeks. This allows the number of computer courses to be doubled without adding any additional classroom resources. This has drastically increased our return on investment (ROI), essentially allowing double booking of our computer classrooms.

While we thought that the Plus Program would be appealing to our students, we have been quite surprised at just how appealing it has been. Our students really appreciate spending less time in the classroom, putting in the additional time at their convenience. They also appreciate having a 'real live' instructor available to help them through the trickier portions of the material, rather than having to rely on e-mail, discussion groups, and phone messages that are typical of on-line courses. Bottom line is that the Plus Program has been quite popular with our students, and also a very successful marketing tool for Admissions.

#### WEAKNESSES / CHALLENGES

An additional strength of the Plus Program is also a challenge. The approach places more responsibility for learning on the student, resulting in 'student centered learning.' The challenge is in ensuring that the student does indeed understand the commitment and put in the additional time and effort required during the off weeks. We find that the approach is most successful with the motivated, self-disciplined student. Unfortunately, it is all too easy for a student to get behind and then struggle through the remainder of the course.

Attendance during regularly scheduled class sessions is particularly important. If a student misses a Plus Program class session, the instructor may not see the student for three weeks. Similarly, the instructor must pay close attention to the overall schedule to ensure that they are indeed covering the 'tougher' portions of the material during in-class lectures, and that appropriate materials are available for the students to use during the off weeks.

The packaging or pairing up of 'complementary' courses is also quite challenging. We have tried to choose pairs of courses that a single instructor could teach to the same group of students. This allows students to take two courses by attending one night each week. It also means that the instructor is immediately available during all of the off weeks since both courses meet at the same time. This has not worked well with courses that are in any way dependent upon one another, but has worked well for courses that have similar levels of challenge (i.e., similar prerequisites), but in different subject areas.

### MAKING IT WORK

In this section we present some lessons learned in making the Plus Program a success. First and foremost is to make sure that the student understands that this is NOT a case of putting in less time for the same amount of credit. Rather, it is a case of putting in the same amount of time, albeit less scheduled time, for the same amount of credit. Again, this approach works best with motivated, self-disciplined students. Including the following statement in the course syllabus helps to reinforce the point:

*Plus courses have been designed to accommodate students where work and/or family obligations limit their ability to attend class. The Plus program is only for that special student that has the discipline to manage his or her time. For many students the freedom to chart their own course is a welcomed learning option. Students can proceed at their own pace only if they manage their time efficiently.*

A strong schedule specifying what the student needs to do during the off weeks is also very important, as are detailed handouts and assignments. One instructor has found complex quizzes given during regular class sessions to be quite helpful. The quizzes include problems that most students cannot complete, generating much classroom discussion with hints from the instructor. The 'unanswerable' questions then form the basis for the student's work during the coming off week. This truly motivates the student to go home and explore the subject.

### CONCLUSIONS

In summary, the Plus Program has been quite successful in its first two semesters. Students and faculty are spending less time in the classroom, yet support for the student and the rapport that is built in the conventional approach are still there. Students do need to have a good understanding of what is expected, and they need to make a firm commitment to doing much of the work on their own. It is imperative that a specific schedule is established and the instructor must push the students to complete all assigned work on time.

Since the Plus Program is relatively new, no firm results are available. However, we have not noted any drop in grades, nor have we seen any problems / weaknesses in follow-on courses. We expect to begin a more formal review of the approach during the coming year.