

CHALLENGES IN THE CREATION OF AN ONLINE PROGRAM AT SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

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In 1996, Syracuse University's Continuing Education Division received a grant from the Office of the Chancellor to develop the institution's first series of fully online courses. The intent of this new university-wide initiative was never to offer entire degree programs online, but to increase the range of options for students pursuing Syracuse degrees through daytime or evening study, and to meet the needs of a broader audience for individual courses in certain subject areas. The first three online courses were launched in the fall of 1977, with a total enrollment of 40 students, and current fall 1999 enrollment in 16 courses has reached 260.

To date, the bulk of the online courses have come from the College of Arts and Sciences, but individual courses have also been offered by the School of Management, the School of Engineering and Computer Science, the College of Visual and Performing Arts, The College for Human Development, and the School of Architecture; the College of Law will offer its first online course this coming spring. On the noncredit side, courses have been offered in Investing and Trading, Grant Writing, and Sports Psychology, and we expect this area to grow as well.

While the program has so far been generally successful, the following issues have arisen in the course of our efforts to foster its further growth and stability.

TECHNOLOGY ISSUES

Initially, we decided to create our own web-based course delivery system, which included template-based content creation, secure student access and management tools, personalized coursework options, threaded discussion groups, a robust e-mail system, and a testing facility. The system functioned fairly well for a time, but sporadic system crashes led us to look for a commercial product that would afford greater stability and vendor support. Finally, we chose WBT Systems' TopClass, which had a design architecture remarkably close to our existing system, and could be installed and configured with a minimum of effort. TopClass allows us to support all standard web functions in the class materials, and gives us the flexibility to keep up with the latest web technology.

Having now been online 24 hours a day for seven days a week since January of this year, our uptime has approached 100%. Most faculty and students report having minimal connectivity or navigation problems over the past two terms, and 74% of the students responding to evaluations have rated their overall satisfaction with the software as "good" or "excellent."

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As with all off-the-shelf systems, there are tradeoffs. Since TopClass uses a browser interface, it requires navigation through several "pages" to get to a particular function. Some users find the icon buttons confusing, the current e-mail system is rather primitive, and the management of graphic files has proven to be awkward. In addition, we have had to change the 'front-end' pages to make them more consistent with our own web site, and write our own help manuals to replace the vendor's more obscure versions.

Syracuse's recent conversion to a University-wide PeopleSoft student records system has created two additional problems for the online program. First, the initial version of PeopleSoft does not allow for first-time students to register online, which is a disincentive for potential new customers who find us on the Web. We expect that PeopleSoft will add that capability within the coming year. Also, the registration functions of PeopleSoft and TopClass cannot be coupled, so additional manual steps must be taken to provide students with passwords and faculty with class lists, often creating frustration during the crucial first week of classes. We hope that a new UNIX-based version of TopClass will correct this problem, but then we'll have a new set of problems associated with acquiring and running a UNIX server.

FACULTY ISSUES

It is a challenge to attract the best University faculty to teach in the online program. The ultimate goal is to develop organized clusters of courses that could evolve into certificate programs, or serve as concentrations in degree programs. In its early stages, however, the program has necessarily evolved course by course, thanks to a small cadre of senior faculty who have agreed to devote the necessary time to this effort. Since the available course development money would not by itself entice them, we have had to identify professors who are interested in online instruction for intrinsic reasons, committed to reaching out to new populations, or simply fascinated by the technical challenges.

The courses have so far been offered on an overload basis, and budget limitations have necessitated a sliding scale of compensation based on enrollment, which is never a popular arrangement for faculty. Given the scarcity of full-time faculty available for the online effort, departments sometimes assign qualified adjuncts or graduate students to teach a particular course, but the long-range credibility of the program requires that the majority of the online teachers be "regular" professors. If the program is to prosper over time, departments will have to provide more creative incentive options, such as load relief, and the traditional university reward structure should ideally be broadened to include recognition for online curriculum development and teaching.

Senior faculty who have taught online are satisfied with the software's two-way asynchronous communication capability, and they like the flexibility of teaching from almost anywhere: a summer home in Maine, a "cyber-cafe" in Siberia, or a wife's hospital room. Some faculty are doing research on the differences between traditional and online student performance, and others have been able to use some of the skills learned in the online experience to improve their campus offerings. As the word about positive experiences gradually spreads, other faculty will hopefully be induced to join the effort, and departments will build more online courses into their strategic plans.

STUDENT ISSUES

Assuming students have the right equipment, are comfortable with Internet navigation, and have the required discipline, online courses can help them successfully surmount a variety of obstacles to conventional study. Evaluations from the summer show that 90% of the respondents were pleased with their online experience and would be willing to take another online course. These results may be misleading, however, in that the roughly 50% who returned the evaluation form are probably those who had the most positive experience.

Despite our attempts to publish clear equipment specifications, some students continue to register without properly functioning computers, even at times without Internet access. Others may have all the right equipment, but lack of technical proficiency results in their dropping the course within the first week. Those who take the initiative to contact our "help desk" can usually be salvaged, but sometimes students disappear without a trace, and faculty and staff efforts to reach them go unanswered as well. Others are able to master the technical difficulties, but drop out because of frustrations stemming from isolation and lack of in-person interaction.

Full-time, main campus students are increasingly drawn to the online option, especially those who wish to enroll in summer courses while travelling or working elsewhere. However, some campus students find that they lack the discipline to keep up with weekly online assignments, and some have even admitted that they see online courses as easier alternatives to regular courses. We are now imposing certain restrictions on campus students' enrollment, and trying to communicate more effectively to the campus community that online courses are no less rigorous, despite their flexibility.

Syracuse's online program has so far provided a valuable service for a certain segment of the university population, and each semester of operation teaches us a bit more about how to improve retention by minimizing some of the frustrations mentioned above. Our primary marketing challenge for the future is to attract more true "distance" students to the program, thus making a greater contribution to the institution's aggregate enrollment base.