

SUPPORTING FACULTY USERS OF ONLINE COURSE MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

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OVERVIEW

In the fall of 1997, the Innovative Technologies Collaborative (ITC) at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK) was charged with evaluating issues surrounding online teaching and learning. This led to a project to select an online course management system (CMS) that would be purchased through Student Technology Fee funds and supported by the ITC. Because CMS packages offer a multitude of options for sharing course resources, testing online, communicating and collaborating, and managing student information, it was determined that this type of package would be useful for our 1,300 faculty members as they developed and delivered online courses and course components. A twelve-month process of reviewing packages culminated in a faculty focus group, which unanimously selected Blackboard CourseInfo. CourseInfo was purchased and installed on an ITC server in late December 1998.

In January of 1999, twenty-two faculty members (Pilot I) began using CourseInfo. The Pilot I group took responsibility for troubleshooting their own CourseInfo problems and consulted with the ITC when solutions were more difficult to uncover. Midway through the semester the ITC staff began to offer courses for faculty on using CourseInfo. The courses were open to all faculty members and attendance was required in order for faculty to receive access to CourseInfo and support from ITC during the last half of the spring 1999 semester. This provided thirty-six additional faculty members (Pilot II) with the opportunity to use CourseInfo. Full CourseInfo implementation began in June of 1999. From June to August 1999, over one hundred additional faculty members began using CourseInfo. By the end of the fall 1999 semester, it is estimated that approximately two hundred and fifty faculty members will be developing or delivering over five hundred CourseInfo enhanced courses.

SUPPORT STRUCTURE

ITC provides CourseInfo faculty members with instructor led courses, web-based resources, email and phone assistance, a users listserv, and feedback opportunities.

Courses

Several sections of a five-course series are offered each semester. The first course, *Introduction to CourseInfo* is required in order for faculty to receive an account on the CourseInfo server and to have permission to request an unlimited number of CourseInfo course sites. This course provides a broad overview of CourseInfo student features and instructor tools. In addition, policies and procedures for using

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CourseInfo at UTK are shared. The other four courses in the series, *Organizing Course Materials*, *Facilitating Communications*, *Managing Assignments and Grades*, and *Incorporating Visuals*, are optional but highly recommended. While the required course is mainly skills based - how to use CourseInfo - the additional courses focus on strategies for teaching and learning in an online setting as well.

Course participants are provided with a copy of the CourseInfo Instructor's Manual developed by Blackboard. The ITC provides supplemental readings and CourseInfo Quick Start Guides during most sessions. Class sizes are limited to fourteen participants. This small instructor to student ratio enables us to offer more one-on-one assistance to faculty during the courses. Faculty members are given the option to participate in three of the courses in an online setting, which enables the ITC staff to demonstrate online facilitation techniques.

In addition to the regularly scheduled CourseInfo courses, faculty members are encouraged to participate in the Lucky Seven program. If seven or more faculty from a department agree to participate in a course on the same day, at the same time, the ITC conducts special sessions arranged to meet their schedules. Since July of 1999, fifteen courses have been offered as part of this program.

In addition to the CourseInfo offerings, courses in learning strategies, using digital media, authoring multimedia, and using productivity tools are available through the ITC. Faculty members are encouraged to take related courses that will enable them to make the most effective use of CourseInfo.

Web Resources

The GetOnline@utk.edu Web site is a central location where faculty and students can gather information about using CourseInfo, read articles about teaching and learning online, and link to other ways to get online at UTK. In addition to faculty and student guides for using CourseInfo, Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) pages are provided.

Email and Phone Assistance

Faculty members are encouraged to email ITC with questions, problems, or suggestions for improving CourseInfo. Telephone calls are accepted, but email communication is encouraged since problems are easier to archive electronically. Phone and email support is provided from 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Monday through Friday. Questions and answers are archived and moved to the faculty and student FAQs on a regular basis.

Users Listserv

After completing the required course, faculty users are added to the CourseInfo users mailing list. The ITC staff uses the list to notify users of hardware maintenance, software upgrades, and procedural changes. Occasionally the listserv is used to poll faculty about CourseInfo uses and to gather students' reactions to the program.

Feedback Frenzies

Feedback Frenzies are face-to-face gatherings of CourseInfo users and ITC staff members. These meetings give faculty a chance to share their CourseInfo experiences and ITC staff the opportunity to share information about future plans for CourseInfo. These meetings help to build a community of CourseInfo users, while providing the ITC with valuable feedback on ways that this service can be improved.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

UTK faculty members overwhelmingly report that they find CourseInfo very useful for delivering online courses and augmenting face-to-face courses. In addition to the fact that the program is full-featured and easy to use, we feel that part of this satisfaction is due to the support structure ITC provides based on lessons we have learned along the way.

Start slowly. We gained valuable feedback from pilot users that made the full implementation of CourseInfo run smoothly. Faculty members continue to be enlisted as “testers” before any change is implemented system-wide.

Be accessible. We provide faculty members with answers to questions and solutions to problems in a timely manner.

Listen. We implement suggestions from faculty members on ways that we can enhance our services. They also offer excellent suggestions for improving the CourseInfo software, which are often implemented by Blackboard.

Form partnerships. We rely on partnerships with other departments on campus to ensure the successful integration of CourseInfo at all levels.

Look to the future. We have found it crucial to always be thinking ahead, not only to the next semester, but also, to the next year and beyond in anticipation of our faculty member’s needs. Coupled with a good grasp of the University’s vision and the upcoming innovations in technology, we will be armed with the tools to continue to provide faculty with a valuable service well into the future.

RESOURCES

GetOnline@UTK.EDU - <http://itc.utk.edu/getonline/>

ITC’s CourseInfo Overview - <http://online.utk.edu/courses/Overview/>
(username: guest, password: guest)