

Sharpen the Focus – Fall 2004

The Illinois Virtual Campus (IVC) has initiated an additional enrollment reporting procedure to help institutions better understand the trends of distance education. This new procedure involves phone interviews with select colleges and universities who can provide a “snapshot” of distance education enrollments at their institution. Interviews were conducted with Annette Haggray, Dean of Academic Alternatives and Instructional Support at College of DuPage, Janice Kinsinger, Director of Instructional Innovation at Illinois Central College, Alex Cline, Director of Information and Communication Technology at Illinois Eastern Community Colleges, Ray Schroeder, Director of Office of Technology Enhanced Learning at University of Illinois at Springfield, and Suzanne Dumbleton, Dean of The School for New Learning at DePaul University. The interview consisted of five questions. The questions and individual responses are listed below.

What is the most important trend in distance education at your institution?

College of DuPage (COD) – The most important trend we are seeing is the continued growth in online courses over the last 5 or 6 years. We are continually adding new courses each semester and they are filling fast. More and more sections are being added to answer student demand.

Illinois Central College (ICC) – For ICC the trend shows that online learning enrollment is still increasing from semester to semester. The growth is slowing in the number of courses but the popularity in these courses is increasing and these courses fill very rapidly. In Spring 2003, we offered 82 sections of online courses and Spring 2005 the number has increased to 115.

Illinois Eastern Community Colleges (IECC) - We have an increasing number of students who have begun utilizing online learning. Aside from those enrolling in online courses, we have many traditional students utilizing online technology for class notes, grades, etc.

University of Illinois at Springfield (UIS) - Our growth has been steady and strong. We have found that the vast majority of our online degree majors are located outside of our immediate area. Though more than 70% of our online degree-seeking students reside in Illinois, only about 12% live within 20 miles of campus. Students are enrolled as online degree majors from 39 of the states plus the District of Columbia as well as a number of foreign countries.

DePaul University – We have two colleges going full steam ahead – The School of Computer Science, Telecommunications, and Information Systems (CTI) and the School for New Learning (SNL). CTI is utilizing “Smart Classroom” technology and SNL offers highly interactive and highly individualized courses for their students. Both programs have been experiencing intense WebBoard usage for course discussions and postings.

What programs and subject areas generate the most distance education enrollments?

COD – For our online courses, the subject areas are Business and Technology, Social and Behavior Sciences. Our video course subjects that are most popular are Communications, English, and Business and Technology.

ICC – The general education courses are very popular – English, Literature, Fine Arts, and Social Sciences. For program-specific transferable courses, the most enrollments are generated by Economics, Statistics, Business Management, and Basic Nutrition. The programs that generate large enrollments are Nursing and Allied Health, Medical Laboratory Technician, Criminal Justice, and Web Development and Designer certificates.

IECC – General education courses are always filled – Communications, Composition, Math and History.

UIS - Our online master's degree in Teacher Leadership is the largest graduate program, enrolling hundreds of teachers around the state of Illinois and even some from other states and countries. At the undergraduate level, the Liberal Studies baccalaureate degree is the most popular with hundreds of majors around Illinois and beyond. Among our newer degree programs, History and English draw many out of state students. And, our Computer Science, Math and Philosophy degrees are generating a lot of interest both in-state and out-of-state.

DePaul – The School of Computer Science, Telecommunications, and Information Systems (CTI) graduate and undergraduate areas are generating strong enrollment numbers. The undergraduate program is showing a 100% growth from last year to this year, and the graduate program, which is twice the size of the undergraduate program, experienced a 65% growth this year. Other areas such as Education and Business are continuing to attract students, however these areas do not have the active faculty of CTI and The School for New Learning (SNL).

How do students enrolled in your distance education courses differ from traditional students in the support services they seek?

COD – The distance education students are self-motivated and tend to find their way to the student services. We offer an online advisor for online students. The distance student wants flexible, accessible options and the ability to work their learning options around their lifestyles. These students tend to find the services they need when they need them.

ICC - The majority of our online students are also on campus students. They may seek additional advisement and support. The support is mainly in the reading and writing skills areas as the online student may need assistance to become more self-motivated.

IECC – We are seeing a transition from face to face to online communication with our students. Since we have 4 colleges, students may not wish to travel to a particular school if they have questions. We offer an online help-desk through the district office that can filter the questions and direct the students to the right person at the right college.

UIS - On the technical side, we find that our online students are very much like our on campus students. About the same percentage have questions about software and hardware. In student services, the on campus students seem to seek more support than the online students who seem to be more independent.

DePaul – The online student has their course work available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. They tend to forget that some student services are still set to “brick and mortar” staff work hours. Technical help is available for students if their technology is not working, but more traditional services such as financial aid, student accounts, and admissions are not available on the 24/7 schedule of the online student.

If your institution currently offers distance education courses in delivery modes other than the Internet (such as correspondence courses or Broadcast TV), what are your plans for continuing to offer them? What segment of the student population enrolls in these courses?

COD – We will continue to offer courses as long as students enroll. The self-paced course enrollments have not gone down as a result of the increase in online enrollments.

ICC – Our Interactive video enrollments have been decreasing. In Spring 2003, we offered 57 courses and this Spring the number is down to 32 courses. The correspondence course enrollments have remained stable.

IECC – We offer some telecourses. The enrollment numbers are low but we will continue to offer these courses as long as the licenses are still viable.

UIS – Our offerings are Internet based only.

DePaul – We offer Internet courses only.

What additional information about enrollment at your institution is significant?

COD – We see a continued interest in online learning. The challenge we face is to identify the market and respond in a timely way. We offer approximately 90 courses online and will focus new course development in our content areas that are already utilizing online instruction.

ICC – Our online students tend to be on campus students looking for a little flexibility in their schedules. Students in general are more tech savvy and are expecting technology integration in their face to face classrooms as well. Faculty members are responding to

the student demand for technology integration. Online learning and teaching is improving our instruction in the traditional classroom as well.

IECC – Our faculty want to use online support for their face to face courses as well and this leads to more technology use in all courses. Student enrollment is increasing with Spring 2004 at 792 online enrollments and this Spring with 890 online enrollments.

UIS - We have found that our online undergraduate students are about five years older on average than our on campus students. Ethnically and in terms of gender distribution both groups are quite similar. Our graduate online student body has a higher percentage of women than on campus, though that may be due to the large number of teachers (predominantly women) who are enrolled in the online master's degree in Teacher Leadership.

Another important factor in our online enrollments is that online degree majors at UIS pay "e-tuition" that is tuition that is the same as on-campus tuition.

Since its inception some 35 years ago, UIS has served the older professional, the non-traditional student. Our faculty members are attuned to the needs and interests of those returning students who are seeking degree completion or advanced degrees. As a result, our classes are rigorous, but relevant; challenging, yet engaging. The online classes carry the quality of the University of Illinois directly to the homes and offices of the students as they pursue advancement in their careers and professions.

DePaul – We are focusing on three key areas – Success, Courtesy, and Structure and Flexibility.

Success comes where we have faculty buy-in and manageable expectations. The students must have manageable expectations of instructors and themselves, and the faculty must have the same for themselves and the students.

Courtesy – Our online students may not know DePaul University, the online instructors and help personnel may be the only source for these students. We expect them to be courteous and take the extra time to help these students.

Structure and Flexibility – There is a fine line between these two. Students need structure to direct them; however every one needs some flexibility in their learning environment. The key is to find the right blend of the two.