

Sharpen the Focus - Fall 2006

The Illinois Virtual Campus (IVC) provides an additional enrollment reporting procedure to help institutions better understand the trends of distance education. This procedure involves phone interviews with administrators from select colleges and universities who can provide a “snapshot” of distance education enrollments at their institution. This term, interviews were conducted with Sarah Stark – Harper College, Brett Coup – Parkland College, Rodger Souders – Waubonsee Community College, Richard Carter – Western Illinois University, and Holli Pryor-Harris – Illinois Institute of Technology. The interview consisted of five questions. The questions and individual responses are listed below.

Why were your distance education programs created? Student demand? Institutional initiative? Does your institution plan to expand its distance education offerings in the near future?

Harper College (Harper) – In 1997, the Technology Plan Coordination Task Force was created. This group met with all campus constituencies between 1997-2000 to determine interest in use of hardware, software, the Internet, and development of distance learning at Harper College. In 2000, the coordinated development of distance learning was initialized by the Instructional Technology Committee which created the College's first Instructional Technology Plan.

From that point, courses were created by faculty interested in trying these delivery modalities. This interest has continued to grow on campus, and enrollment in distance courses has accelerated each year. Because of this faculty and student interest, the institution requested accreditation for all distance degrees offered at Harper College from the Higher Learning Commission (NCA) and was granted accreditation in February, 2006. Currently, we offer 21 certificates and 2 degrees, with at least 3 additional degrees scheduled for delivery in the fall, 2007.

Parkland College (Parkland) – Faculty innovation was the main impetus behind the creation of our distance learning program. It quickly became clear that there was a significant need we could meet with online courses, and it became an institutional priority.

We are continually expanding our online offerings. We're now focused on offering degree and certificate programs entirely online.

Waubonsee Community College (WCC) – Our distance education degrees were created so all students in the area can receive good quality education. We have a lot of non-traditional students who are interested in obtaining degrees in Psychology, Business, Computer Science, and these degrees are for those people.

Waubonsee plans to add other AS and AA degrees. Education is one option that we are thinking about starting up in the near future. Currently, we have close to 200 online courses at WCC.

Western Illinois University (WIU) – The Board of Trustees Bachelor of Arts (BOT/BA) degree program was created to serve the educational needs of non-traditional students.

WIU plans to increase its online course offerings.

Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) – Initially, the demand was student driven. The response was to make our programs as broadly available as possible. In 1976, IIT began broadcasting live interactive televised lectures so that employees could participate at their work place or from convenient locations in the far suburban areas. These students viewed the broadcasts in real time, and interacted with the classroom by telephone. In the mid-1990s our first internet program, the Masters in Analytical Chemistry, was offered asynchronously.

We will continue to offer programs as they are developed and can be effectively delivered online. Our newest online programs include the Masters in Biomedical Engineering, Imaging and Signals, Masters in Manufacturing Engineering, Masters in Power Engineering, and Masters in VLSI and Microelectronics.

How many students will you be able to enroll for the Fall 2007 term?

Harper – Fall enrollment of distance students has increased over 17% between 2004 and 2006. If all distance courses were filled to capacity for the fall 2007 semester, more than 3,500 students could potentially be served.

Parkland – We anticipate approximately 3,000 individuals will enroll in over 4,000 seats in distance education courses.

WCC – We will try to enroll around 1500 students the Fall semester 2007. Our enrollment has been increasing every semester. Normally, we have around 1000 to 1500 students a semester.

WIU – We anticipate approximately 1350 available enrollments for Fall 2007.

IIT – Enrollments have steadily increased each academic year. In Fall 2006, we had 1,605 enrollments. We do not have a cap on the number of students that can enroll. The only restriction is on the number of students enrolled per course section, which is typically 30 students per section.

What kind of marketing do you do for your distance education programs?

Harper – Marketing of distance programs is handled collaboratively at the institutional, division and department levels. Information is shared via face-to-face open house and high school outreach events, via US postal mailings to district homes, via print in institutional reports provided to the wider community, the printed credit course schedule and posters hung across campus, and via the Internet through the Learning Life e-newsletter, the Harper College Web site <http://www.harpercollege.edu>, the Internet Course Exchange (ICE) and the Illinois Virtual Campus (IVC).

Parkland – The IVC and our online website: <http://online.parkland.edu> serve as our chief sources of marketing.

WCC – We work extensively with our Marketing department to push our online programs. Every semester flyers are sent out to let area people know about our online programs. Also, we do put updates on our home webpage letting students know what new programs we will be offering online.

WIU – Flyers, attendance at educational fairs, partnerships, and the web site are tools for marketing the BOT/BA degree program.

IIT – The Illinois Virtual Campus is the cornerstone of our online marketing efforts. We focus most of our marketing initiatives on the institution and degree programs, not on distance learning as an entity. IIT online students come from targeted professional and technical communities.

Describe your typical distance education student ?

Harper – Our typical distance education student is a female of white non-hispanic ethnicity that is between the ages of 22 and 39.

Parkland – The majority of the distance education enrollment occurred in Internet courses (87%). This population can be characterized as 61% female, 16% minority, and 60% were aged 24 and younger. Twenty-three percent were non-degree students, 75% were Associate's and 2% were Certificate degree students. The median age of distance education students was 23, and the average age was 27.

WCC – Our typical online student would be a non-traditional student. Usually a student who has been out of school for some time, but may have credits from another college they attended but never finished. Though, I will say that we are having a lot more traditional students start our online program due to the fact that many of them work full time.

WIU– The average age is 39, works full time, and pursues educational goals part time.

IIT – Our typical online student is a working professional between the ages of 25 and 40. This student is usually studying part-time and is employed in work related to the field of study or is pursuing a degree in an area he/she wishes to enter.

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

Harper – The two most important distance education trends at Harper College at this time are the significant increase in blended (hybrid) course development and the use of Elluminate Live! as a synchronous teaching tool.

Parkland – Within the courses, the use of video, audio and other rich media has been the most noticeable trend over the past few semesters. More broadly, the push to offer complete degrees online.

WCC – A new trend is that we are starting more online courses later in the semester. This has helped students so they are able to register for a course all throughout the year. Each semester

we are offering more options for those students. Normally, those courses will start in late February. They will run about 12 weeks. If the courses start later, they will run 16 weeks just like all semester courses run. What WCC is trying to do is to allow students to take online courses all year long.

WIU – An important trend at WIU is reducing correspondence courses while increasing online courses

IIT – Increased and improved interaction between students and instructors is the current trend. We utilize Blackboard to facilitate information exchange and some instructors have implemented chat rooms for asynchronous discussions. We are developing and experimenting with podcasts and audio conferencing to enhance instruction. These technologies have not been broadly instituted to date.