

Sharpen the Focus – Spring/Winter 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 Padriac Shinville – Heartland Community College, Emily Vescogni – Illinois Valley Community College, Robert Sterling – Joliet Junior College, Julian Schienbuks – Chicago State University, and Melissa Eichelberger – Lewis 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?

Heartland Community College (HCC) – The most important trend we are experiencing is the shift to alternative learning. We are offering more and more hybrid courses. In fact, the number of hybrid course sections has surpassed the number of online course sections. This may be due to the fact that approximately 75% of our online students are also on campus students.

Illinois Valley Community College (IVCC) – We are seeing a movement toward blended or hybrid courses. In the past, we took a slow, cautious approach to online courses, and the faculty would approach us if they wanted to teach online. We are now taking a strategic approach to hybrid courses to attract students and faculty. The strategy is to build enrollments to assure faculty that students will attend the courses they create in the online technologies.

Joliet Junior College (JJC) – The two most important trends at JJC are the rapid growth of our blended/hybrid course offerings and our Quality Online Course Initiative (QOCI) launched in partnership with Illinois Online Network. Using the QOCI Rubric developed by ION, all of our online courses have been evaluated, and we are working with distance education faculty to implement recommendations for course improvement.

Chicago State University (CSU) – Most importantly, we are seeing more faculty using the course management system and technology to enhance their instruction. The large majority of our online students are also taking courses on campus. We have found that the retention rates for both types of courses (online and face-to-face) are similar. We are currently investigating the creation of a complete online Master’s degree program in Technology and Education.

Lewis University (LU) – Distance education at Lewis University consists of three types of courses – totally online, blended, and Web-enhanced. Approximately two-thirds of the courses offered per semester are considered Web-enhanced with some instruction being offered through the course management system. Another trend for us is the large number of courses being offered online during the summer semester. As more faculty are off-campus, more online courses are offered. We average 40 totally online courses each spring and fall and 60 in the summer.

How many new distance education students does your institution have the capacity to enroll for the Fall 2006 term?

HCC – Our average number of students per semester is currently 678. We have the capacity to enroll upwards of 750 into our hybrid and online courses.

IVCC – We can accept another 400 online students. That would double our current enrollment of 379.

JJC – In the Fall of 2006, JJC will have the capacity to enroll 2763 distance education students, which represents an increase of 1050 students (61%) over the Fall 2005 semester. This increase is distributed as follows: Telecourses: 162 additional students (34% increase); Blended Classes: 193 additional students (74% increase); and Online Classes: 695 additional students (71% increase).

CSU – We offer 40 to 50 sections of online courses with a maximum enrollment of 25 students per section. Our summer enrollment included 30 sections, and that number will increase to at least 50 for Fall 2006.

LU – With our approach to distance education that includes Web-enhanced courses, we could presumably include our entire student body. Every student has an account in the course management system so they would all have access to the materials. As far as totally online courses, the limitation is set by the number of faculty willing and trained to teach online. Currently one-fourth of the faculty are teaching online.

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

HCC – Online students have been demanding more online services such as college email, instant messaging, and access to the software available in the computer labs. Due to this demand, we are creating a portal system for students to be piloted in Fall 2007. Current online services include registration and library services.

IVCC – IVCC offers most services online already, so both on-campus and online students have them available. These services include registration, library services, orientation to online learning, and online counseling done through email.

JJC – Although the line separating distance education students from traditional students is not always clearly visible, it appears that students in distance education classes are especially interested in support services in the following areas: online counseling, online bookstore services, proctored exams in the Distance Education Testing Center, online tutoring, and 24/7 technical support for classes.

CSU – Our distance education students also attend classes on campus, so all the services they seek may be found on campus with a few available online. Tuition and fees may be paid online. Starting in the Fall 2006, registration will only be available online. Our bookstore does offer a

Website. However, students with financial aid must purchase books face-to-face in the bookstore due to a requirement set in their aid package. Within the next year, we are working to implement a university wide ID card system that will allow for more services to be accessed remotely.

LU – We do not offer any degree program completely online. All programs require an on-campus presence. We do offer quite a few of our services online, including registration, library services, bill payment, access to grades, tutoring, and technical support.

Does your institution plan to expand its distance education offerings in the near future? If so, in what way?

HCC – In the Fall 2007 semester, we will pilot an on-track model using hybrid courses that will guarantee a schedule for evening students. The program will offer a two-year degree in two years. It will be run in a cohort of 24 students and we have capacity to run 6 cohorts simultaneously.

IVCC – We anticipate a constant gradual expansion of our distance education offerings. We do not have a faculty requirement for online teaching, so there is no expectation for faculty to teach online until they are properly prepared. Our focus is on assuring that growth is quality driven.

JJC – Annually, we solicit proposals from faculty members, both full-time and adjunct, and select about 15 new online and blended courses for grant-funded development. Courses may also be developed apart from grant funding. We currently have 17 new distance education courses under development.

CSU – We are constantly looking to expand. Our faculty are represented by a union contract and the contract provides that online teaching is to be strictly voluntary. The contract also stipulates that contractual employees will be given the first right of refusal to teach a course and this limits our use of adjunct instructors. We do offer incentives for online instruction with 3 units of release time being offered to faculty for the creation of an online course and 1 unit for course maintenance each semester they are taught.

LU – We have contracted with an outside entity to help train our faculty in online teaching and developing online courses in the General Education area.

What additional information about enrollment at your institution is significant?

HCC – Four years ago we instituted a Faculty Certification Program for faculty who want to teach online or hybrid courses. This is paid training for both full and part time faculty. The training consists of 3 levels with 12 hours of instruction per level. Faculty have to complete this certification to teach online or hybrid courses, and to date over 130 faculty members are certified. This leads to a set layout and standards for our courses that helps students avoid having to adjust to a new or different course design before beginning the course work.

IVCC – We have a new institutional research office and they are still learning about the college and collecting data so we do not have a lot of detail available yet to see trends. We have had

many students vocalize the trend toward online learning due to the current gas prices.

JJC – During the 2006 Fiscal Year, JJC enrolled 5191 distance education students, which is an increase of 1008 students, or 24%, over the previous year. This increase is distributed as follows: Telecourses: 99 fewer students (7% decrease); Blended Classes: 468 additional students (390% increase); Online Classes: 639 additional students (24% increase).

CSU – The growth and development of our Web-enhanced courses has been significant. Approximately 20% of the course sections offered university-wide across all disciplines are Web-enhanced. Over 140 faculty members are currently using the course management system to teach web enhanced courses.

LU – Our course management system has been in place long enough for the faculty to become accustomed to the layout and maintenance of their courses. The faculty are trained initially in instructional design and pedagogy. After that, they usually come back for training only after updates to the system or to learn about additional features they wish to use.