

Sharpen the Focus - Summer 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 Darryl Todd – City Colleges of Chicago, Terry Lucas – Southeastern Illinois College, Marilyn McConachie – Northern Illinois University, and Lauri Buckley – Midstate College. 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?

City Colleges of Chicago (CCC) – We are experiencing several important trends at City Colleges of Chicago. One is the integration of synchronous technology such as Skype, Blackboard Chat and Elluminate into our online courses which constitutes an effective way of creating a better synergy in our online courses. The use of this means of communication will assist in reducing students’ anxiety in taking online courses and increase the students’ learning outcomes.

We have added a part time staff of Instructional Designers to the Center for Distance Learning (CDL) to assist faculty with course design and development issues, course organization and course management support. CDL Instructional Designers are available to consult with faculty on how they can help meet their learning objectives by integrating appropriate technology into their online curriculum.

Finally, there is a growing demand from city agencies to develop partnerships with CCC to assist them with the development of online and blended training courses. CDL recently partnered with Harold Washington College’s Public Agency and Special Programs Department and the Chicago Fire Department to design a blended training program for Fire Safety Directors. This program was designed to train and certify designated personnel in Chicago high rise buildings on emergency preparedness procedures.

Southeastern Illinois College (SIC) – Online courses are the primary distance education delivery mode at Southeastern Illinois College. Interactive video course enrollment has leveled, while telecourse enrollment has declined. The trend in online education is moving toward more multi-media components such as streaming audio and video. Also, live audio chat has been incorporated into some classes as a synchronous method of instruction. Although we always look for innovative ways to deliver instruction, we feel that pedagogy should drive the technology rather than the technology driving the pedagogy.

Northern Illinois University (NIU) – An increased number of online courses and steadily rising enrollments present many challenges and are stimulating discussion about quality standards, assessment, media management infrastructure, definitions of online course and online student, and other policy issues.

Midstate College (MC) – The most important trend in distance education for Midstate College is increasing student demand for more online courses in all programs. Most importantly, we continue to work with faculty and students to ensure the quality of our online courses remain the same as our face-to-face courses. Since Winter 2004, we have had an average of 85% online students successfully completing a term.

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

CCC – For Fall 2006 semester, CCC enrolled 3531 students in online courses. This was an increase of 791 students across our seven campuses when compared to the Fall 2005 semester. Our current capacity is approximately 4500 students per semester; however, we have an excellent pool of instructors which would allow CCC to open additional sections to cover any increase in demand.

SIC – We have a capacity for 1060 students in online courses for Fall 2006 and currently have 821 students enrolled in these courses. We have a capacity to enroll 90 in telecourses and have an enrollment of 47. Interactive video courses have a capacity of 354 and an enrollment of 198.

NIU – This is hard to determine, since each college sets different limits on sizes of online classes. The range of capacity would be approximately 750-1000 students.

MC – For the Fall 2006 term, we enrolled 77 new students for online courses. We had a record total for eLearning for the Fall 2006 term where we enrolled 344 students taking 627 courses online, for an average of 1.8 courses per student. Midstate College currently has the capacity to enroll 519 more online students. However, if the need arises, we will not hesitate to increase the accounts available in the Learning Management System.

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

CCC – Many of our online students are characteristically independent learners and have a tendency to be more familiar with the technology; therefore, we see a large population of online students utilizing the online registration process. We do have a stipulation that all first time students must come to one of the seven CCC campuses for their initial enrollment for completion of general placement testing and advisement.

SIC – Southeastern Illinois College provides the same support services to distance education students as it does for on-campus students. Typically, support service needs for online students do not differ from on-campus students with one exception. Online students may require technical support for computer and course management system related issues. To support students in this area, Southeastern has developed a series of multi-media and text/graphic-based tutorials. A sample online course is available for students to use to practice and explore. Also, students are given the option to attend on-campus online course orientations. They may also schedule an individual appointment for one-on-one assistance. Email and telephone support are also provided.

NIU – Distance education students seek services that are entirely online. Some university offices are still making the transition to fully online services. We provide www.niuonline.niu.edu with links to all student resources available online or by phone. In addition, we give speedy service to students seeking help online or by telephone from the NIU Outreach office. Sometimes, distance education students need to talk to a person, and we help them to do just that.

MC – Our online students have the same support services via the Web as the on-campus students. Our learning management system has a section called "In the News." Midstate utilizes this section to keep online students informed of school news and functions the same as on-campus students. Midstate College provides direct Technical Support for students 8:00 am to 9:00 pm Monday through Friday. In

addition, Technical Support is available after hours through use of cell phones and a support email address which is sent to six employees. Our eLearning students have two online libraries offering over 25,000 books online as well as numerous database links. Within the next few months, Midstate College will begin utilizing a portal to enhance the existing services to meet students' growing needs for flexibility in student services.

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

CCC – We will develop additional courses and course sections as student and faculty demand dictates. We are developing a process for requesting the design of online courses. We have recently experienced an increase in the number of requests for courses development which has required us to review our current processes for these services.

SIC – Southeastern Illinois College plans to continue to expand course offerings each semester. We are in the process of requesting broad approval from the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association to offer online degrees. One of our goals is to develop additional hybrid lab science and mathematics courses.

NIU – The number of online courses NIU offers is expanding every semester. Students in our region are demanding more online courses and more online components in regular courses. We are responding to the demand and to faculty interest by developing high quality online courses, focused first on degree completion and then on certificate programs.

MC – Midstate College plans to expand its distance education course and program offerings in the near future. We currently have approval to offer the majority of our programs online, and we are in the process of requesting approval to offer all programs online from the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association. Each term we develop an average of 3 new courses. Also, we have plans to begin offering a 2+2 program with Huntington Junior College in North Carolina for Realtime Reporters.

What additional information about enrollment at your institution is significant?

CCC – Academic advisors play a significant role in guiding students towards their academic achievement. Providing campus advisors with information concerning online courses allows them to answer pertinent questions about distance learning and assist students in determining whether an online course is the right decision for them. CDL provides ongoing information and support to ensure that our campus advisors have the necessary information concerning our processes and procedures. This partnership has been one of the factors that is attributed to our current increase in student enrollment.

SIC – Online course enrollment is a significant percentage of our overall unduplicated head count. For example, fall 2006 unduplicated head count in online courses is 545 and the overall unduplicated headcount is 2,020. Online enrollment represents approximately 27% of our overall enrollment. Interactive video enrollment remains fairly stable while our telecourse enrollment continues to decline.

MC – Midstate College has implemented a process which helps students succeed in eLearning. Before students can be enrolled in an online course, they are asked a series of questions to determine whether

they have the potential to succeed in online courses. Next, the students complete two competency tests which allow the eLearning Coordinator to assess the students' abilities to complete online courses. The results of the competency tests are used to place the students in the appropriate eLearning orientation. There are three levels of orientation. They are basic, intermediate and advanced. At orientation, students are given a step-by-step guide book written specifically for the Learning Management System Midstate College utilizes. This year, Midstate College hired an eLearning Support Representative. The position has provided online students with additional support. The eLearning Support Representative trains and supports Midstate College students as well as works in partnership with the Computing Services Department as the need arises, and makes sure the students' needs are handled in a friendly, professional and efficient manner. The Support Representative makes courtesy calls to all new eLearning students during the first week of each term making sure the students understand what is expected of them and to make sure all their needs are met early in the term. So far, this change has proven to be a successful addition to our eLearning staff.