

COMMUNITY COLLEGE TIMES

Science programs find a home online

BY GARRY BOULARD, *Published May 25, 2009*

Perhaps the biggest surprise when Ocean County College (OCC) in New Jersey decided to launch its initial online courses was how quickly the two-year college's students responded.

"We started out with a couple of nursing classes," says James Brown, as associate professor of science at OCC. "They proved to be a huge hit for us practically overnight. People started to tell other students about it. Plus the fact that the courses were online caused others to notice, too."

But perhaps the most stunning thing was that the college began to get students from other states, including as far as Alaska, continues Brown, who is also the former dean of science, engineering, health sciences and human performance at OCC.

Now up and running for two years, OCC's extensive online offerings total more than a dozen courses in such subjects as anatomy, astronomy, biology, chemistry, microbiology, nature science and sociology, making the community college one of the most comprehensive online two-year institutions in the country.



Ocean County College offers home-based lab kits, which allow students taking online science classes to participate in a hands-on lab experience.

“Right now in any given semester, we easily have more than 1,000 students taking online sciences courses,” says Brown, who notes that an online oceanography class is in the making for the fall.

“If we didn’t know it when we started all of this, we very much know now that there is a tremendous need out there for this sort of thing,” continues Brown. “And that is particularly true for parents who are working and don’t have the time that is required to drive to a campus and sit in a class.”

That same convenience factor is driving the growth of many community college online courses across the U.S. At Lake Tahoe Community College (LTCC) in California, students are now being offered online courses in anthropology, art history, digital imaging, business law, office procedures and history, among other subjects.

“And the demand for even more offerings just continues to grow,” says Sandi Jorgensen, an administrative assistant at LTCC. “Obviously, convenience has a lot to do with our success.”

The college is located in a somewhat isolated area, so students are interested in taking classes that won’t require them to travel long distances several times a week, Jorgensen says. Plus, the interactive features of LTCC’s online offerings help to replicate the feel of a classroom, she adds.

“They may go to a chatroom with their instructor and talk about what they are studying just as they would if they were on campus in a classroom,” Jorgensen says.

But Jorgensen, who notes that many of LTCC's online courses have as many as 35 to 40 students each, thinks the popularity of such learning is also fed by the large number of younger students who are comfortable with all things online.

“The youngest students have grown up with the Internet, so for many of them, this is a totally natural thing to do,” she says.

Yet not all young students are academically successful online. Students in the 18 to 24 age range are very comfortable with things like e-mail and sending attachments, which are components of most online course, says Susan Peterson, chair of the business department at Scottsdale Community College (Arizona).

“But a lot depends on how disciplined such students are personally,” Peterson notes. “Online courses are particularly good for self-disciplined persons of any age. But some students just don’t do very well if they don’t have those constant reminders about their work that they might get from sitting in an actual classroom or talking with their fellow students. That’s something that has to be taken into consideration.”

Also to be taken into consideration are the potential burdens posed by popular online courses on instructors.

“When a teacher is teaching an online course, they may not have to do all of the same prep work that they would for a traditional classroom course, but they do have to do a lot of grading,” explains Peterson, who notes that SCC limits such courses to 25 students. “There are more assignments in an online course to make up for the class discussions, so we limit the number of students in order that the instructors won’t have a ridiculous amount of grading to do.”

Other colleges are upgrading their online technology in an attempt to replicate the actual classroom experience as much as possible.

“Our courses are no longer just static online courses,” says Jamie Green, the interim director of e-learning and outreach at North Idaho College (NIC). “We have incorporated technologies that allow for synchronized sessions that give us the ability to replace the face-to-face environment using audio or video or constant sharing.”

With online courses in accounting, anthropology, biology, communications and nursing, among other subjects, NIC’s distance learning has seen growth not only in the number of students taking such classes but also in the disciplines offered.

However, despite the diversity of offerings, not all classes at NIC are totally online, Green says.

“We also have to have hybrid courses where the course is taught both online and in a classroom,” Green says. “With a biology class, for example, instructors have discovered that they can put lecture material online, but that the lab work still has to be done in person.”

The same mix is offered at OCC in New Jersey.

“Every one of our online classes has a twin that is totally hands-on and face-to-face, so the student has the option of going face-to-face or online,” says Brown. “But we also have onsite-online hybrid classes where the online is the didactic portion and the on-site is in the lab.”

The continuing growth and expansion of community college online courses is coming at a time when many two-year colleges are experiencing significant enrollment increases, a factor that may lead to the development of even more online course offerings in the near future.

“That’s why we are right now looking into having additional disciplines online,” says NIC’s Green. “The demand is there, and as a community college, we respond to such demands.”

That demand may also significantly ease a financial challenge that continues to burden many community colleges—expanding facilities in order to accommodate new student growth.

“It’s what they call ‘bricks versus clicks,’” says OCC’s Brown. “We were looking at a \$12 million nursing building, which we ended up not having to build. We grew our nursing program by one-third because of our online courses, but we did not have to expand our classroom space. This has saved us millions of dollars that we would have otherwise had to spend on new buildings.”