FDU’S DISTANCE LEARNING VISION:
A UNIVERSITY-WIDE INITIATIVE ENCOMPASSING STUDENTS
FROM UNDERGRADUATE TO WORKING ADULTS

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ABSTRACT
This paper presents an overview of the online and global education initiatives which are being instituted and developed at Fairleigh Dickinson University, a private comprehensive liberal arts university with campuses in New Jersey and the UK. It focuses both on the distance learning and global education initiatives at the University as a whole, as well as focusing on the specific programs which are being developed for a wide range of students, from undergraduates, all the way to older, experienced adult learners. These programs include distance learning (web-based and hybrid courses) which are being offered at the university, the DL course requirements, the Global Business Management program for adult learners, and the emphasis on globalization (including a Global Virtual Faculty program). The paper concludes with some details and prospects on the future of the online/global perspective at FDU.

Keywords: distance learning, hybrid distance learning, global learning, web-based learning.

INTRODUCTION

Fairleigh Dickinson University (FDU) is a comprehensive private university, with programs ranging from baccalaureate to doctoral, in a wide range of subject areas. The University, originally founded in 1942 in Rutherford NJ, and currently with campuses in Madison NJ, Teaneck/Hackensack NJ, as well as Wroxtion England, currently enrolls in the neighborhood of 10,000 students (both full and part-time), and is the largest private university in New Jersey. Among the colleges which comprise the university are the Becton College of Arts and Sciences, New College of General and Continuing Studies, University College, and the Silberman College of Business.

At FDU, the support for DL originated from the Office of the President. In his inauguration speech, President J. Michael Adams stated, “Effective with the incoming freshman class of 2001, Fairleigh Dickinson University will be the first university in the world to recognize the Internet as a fundamental learning tool by requiring every undergraduate to participate in a distance learning course each year." (1).
DISTANCE LEARNING: WHAT IS IT?

Distance learning (DL) is identified to be a learning situation where teachers and learners are not located in the same place (2), and where media allows for the geographic separation of the teaching and learning processes (3). With the prevalence and accessibility of the Internet, the ability to deliver courses “anywhere, anyplace, anytime” has been a very attractive proposition (4, 5, 6). However, the educational community has in the past relegated it to a lower, inferior status compared with face-to-face instruction (7; 8), claiming that technology could not effectively bridge the gap between instructors and students (9). However, supporters have made strong arguments and cases for advocating the effectiveness of web-based distance learning (10, 11).

Regardless of the controversy and arguments pro and con, overall, the response from many universities has been a positive move towards implementing courses using distance learning. In fact, it was predicted back in 1999 that by 2004, 84% of the 4-year colleges would have some form of on-line courses through the Internet (12), and indeed, the American Distance Learning Consortium has confirmed that technology is being widely implemented as part of the American college experience (13). The focus of this paper is on the experiences that Fairleigh Dickinson University has had, in terms of its initiative to bring about global and distance learning on a university-wide basis.

FDU ONLINE LEARNING INITIATIVES

One foundation of Fairleigh Dickinson University’s venture in distance learning, is the undergraduate DL course requirement. Effective with the Fall 2001 incoming freshmen class, every undergraduate student is required to enroll in one distance-learning course for each year of study during his or her baccalaureate career. One of the primary reasons for this requirement is the University's commitment to global education and the need to use distance learning to bring the world to FDU students.

Online (web-based course) learning is one of the cornerstones of the online course curriculum at FDU, as there are on-line education requirements and options for students enrolled in the University. On the undergraduate level, the requirement is that all undergraduates must enroll in and complete at least one global on-line course during each of their four years in the University. The courses in this category include those conducted online using the Webcampus portal (a Blackboard-based system), as well as those which include classroom sessions as part of a “hybrid” teaching approach. Courses are coded as being intended for delivery to students in each of the four years of the typical undergraduate curriculum (DL1, DL2, DL3, DL4).

Freshmen, many of them in their first semester in college, are introduced to distance learning through the DL1 course, The Global Challenge. This first required distance learning course, prepares students to think globally. Delivered via online learning and taken within the first two semesters, the course demonstrates the global dimensions of several crucial contemporary issues including the problems of global conflict, the global environment, and health and population concerns. It also emphasizes the necessity of an interdisciplinary approach to understanding these issues.
The second phase of the distance learning initiative began in Fall 2002, and new online courses in each of the University's four colleges were introduced for sophomores. The courses include:

Becton College of Arts and Sciences: Environmental Biology, Introduction to Psychology, Nobel Literature

Silberman College of Business: Macroeconomics

New College of General and Continuing Studies: Introduction to Computers, Career Women in Literature and Film

University College: Arts • Sciences • Professional Studies: The Life of the Mind (philosophy)

To help support the requirement of online courses, there are Internet-equipped computers in labs throughout the campuses, together with links to the network and Internet provided in campus dorm rooms. The interaction is supported by web-based e-mail (Webmail), a Blackboard–based FDU course portal called Webcampus.

An important difference between FDU’s initiative and those of other universities is in the fact that while some programs are targeted to attracting students from outside the university’s geographic area, FDU’s initiative is more focused towards introducing its own campus-based students to the Internet, online learning, and the ability to reach out globally through computer networking (14).

FDU: GLOBALIZING DISTANCE LEARNING

Aside from the goal to have students become comfortable working and communicating in cyberspace through the Internet and computer communications, the ability to recognize the global realm and reach of business (and the world and society as a whole) is also an important focus of FDU’s initiatives.

This “global perspective” emphasizes, and takes into account, not only the Western, American, or established viewpoints, but also those which integrate the new global economy and “global village” orientations, which are playing a key role in the 21st Century. As a result, courses which are delivered online use a unique global component, that being the on-line presence and participation of Global Virtual Faculty.

Global Virtual Faculty (GVF)

The primary role of a global virtual adjunct faculty member (GVF) is to bring a global dimension to the learning experience by offering different perspectives and observations to students on the issues under study. For example, GVF may be involved through participating in a threaded discussion on a course topic, presenting relevant narrative material or case studies, or directing students to useful web sites within the Global Virtual Faculty member's area of expertise (14). Each Global Virtual Faculty member is assigned a campus-based partner, who helps shape and design his or her participation. The campus-based faculty member is responsible for the syllabus,
primary material, assignments, and evaluation. All communication and participation is web-based, with the Global Virtual Faculty member remaining in his or her home environment (14).

Nomination and Selection

FDU global virtual faculty are nominated by a member of the FDU faculty and/or by another Global Virtual Faculty member. Specific opportunities for participation are discussed with each nominee. GVF appointments are made after review and approval of the relevant academic department and/or dean and administered by the Office of Interdisciplinary, Distributed and Global Learning (14).

Training, Preparation and Evaluation

Global virtual faculty members participate in an on-line training program that familiarizes them with the pedagogical details and expectations of the program. The GVF collaborate with the FDU course instructor, whenever possible, in planning the delivery of a specific course. Continuation as a GVF is contingent upon achieving consistently strong evaluations. (14).

Some of the GVF which have participated in FDU courses include professors and industry professionals from India, Malaysia, Chile, Romania, Slovakia, and Belgium. Examples of these GVF include Tomas Chuaqui, a political scientist in Chile, Norval Edwards, lecturer at the department of literatures in English at the University of West Indies in Jamaica, Cheng Ming Yu, head of the economics unit of the faculty of management at the Multimedia University in Malaysia, Kumar Ketkar, an editor/reporter for The Times of India, and Anna Varkonyi, a Hungarian environmentalist.

BUSINESS COURSES AND ONLINE/GLOBAL EDUCATION

The Silberman College of Business is actively involved in the FDU online/global education initiative. The Global Challenge and Macroeconomics are courses which would be used to fulfill the first two years’ requirements. From the third year on, a variety of courses are being developed, or in the planning stage.

ADULT LEARNERS: GLOBAL BUSINESS MANAGEMENT (GBM) PROGRAM

The Global Business Management Weekender program is designed to allow adult students to pursue and earn a college degree from SCB, through a “hybrid” approach of both face-to-face classes and web-based online class sessions. The program is intensive and requires a great deal of commitment on the part of the students, but has been very successful in allowing highly motivated adult students/learners to complete their degrees, even though they may still be working.

The GBM uses both the hybrid instructional model, and also a program which is geared to the strengths and interests of adult students. The hybrid model is basically a type of distance learning where there are both online web sessions, as well as conventional face-to-face
classroom meetings. The goal is to combine the strengths of both technology and classroom interaction into the course experience. While there is reduced time spent in the classroom compared to a full FTF course, there is an increased emphasis on continuing the interaction and discussions asynchronously after the class period has ended (15, 16). In fact, it has been suggested that adult learners are particularly good candidates for distance learning, because of their self-directed, independent nature, and can benefit from the flexibility of asynchronous learning (17). Moreover, because adult students often tend to exhibit more motivation, discipline, and time management skills than traditional college students, the hybrid instructional model can be very suitable (18).

Challenges Of Teaching Adult Students

Based on previous research, there are several goals and objectives which have been identified with regards to distance learning and adult students (19). These include: Active learning, cooperation, and collaboration; Real-world problems and work-related applications; Solving of problems, decision making, applied experience; Emphasis on practice; Interactive activities, critical thinking, and discussion

As a result, teaching adult learners can be both interesting and challenging. There are a number of differences which come into play when working with adult learners. Some of these characteristics include:

Lectures need to be replaced by dialog.
The entire semester needs to be planned before the first night of class.
Assignments had to be very structured, and completed before coming to class.
Case studies needed to be replaced with “present time” assignments.
Memorization of concepts is replaced with application of concepts.
Project-based assignments replace objective testing in assessing command of material (20).

Adult learners have a preference for single concept, single-theory courses that focus heavily on the application of the concept to relevant problems. Learning has to be applicable to their work or other responsibilities to be of value to them.
In addition, adult learners can draw from an accumulated foundation of life experiences and knowledge that may include work-related activities, family responsibilities, and previous education. There are benefits to connecting learning to this knowledge/experience base (20).

Adults tend to have a problem-centered orientation to learning and generally want to immediately apply new information or skills to current problems or situations. Adults need to be able to integrate new ideas with what they already know if they are going to keep - and use - the new information. Information that conflicts sharply with what is already held to be true, and thus forces a re-evaluation of the old material, is integrated more slowly.

Finally, adults are practical and focus on aspects of a lesson most useful to them in their work. As such, instructors should not take for granted that adult learners are interested in knowledge for its own sake. Therefore, instructors must be able to connect new information to applications that will be useful to the adult student (20).
Guided Independent Learning: The Concept Behind GBM

To meet the needs which have been mentioned in the previous section, the courses developed for the GBM program use the concept of Guided Independent Learning (GIL). This approach attempts to maximize the usefulness of the courses to adult learners/students, with the goal of presenting GIL modules instead of traditional class lectures.

In general, the concept of GIL incorporates a modular approach to course content, the focus is on real-world applications, instructors act as “mentors” and “coaches” rather than lecturing, and evaluation (grading) is based more on application and performance rather than memorizing facts and concepts.

THE FUTURE OF ONLINE/GLOBAL EDUCATION AT FDU

Over the next four to five years, Fairleigh Dickinson will expand the online course offerings to 80 to 90 courses, some common to all students, with others specific to a discipline. The program has been supported by a $3.9-million grant-in-aid from the state of New Jersey, a $100,000 grant from the AT&T Foundation and a $50,000 grant from the Pharmacia Foundation. Throughout the first five years of the program's development, FDU expects to spend approximately $12 million on the distance learning initiative. These monies are being devoted to such areas as instructional design, upgrading the digital infrastructure, course management software and technical support personnel. In addition, FDU is strongly committed to developing new and enhanced methodologies for assessing teaching and learning in an online environment. FDU also continues to explore new teaching pedagogies that maximize the potential of Web-based instruction.

REFERENCES