



print article

email a friend

categories  
Advanced Materials and  
Manufacturing Systems

Agriculture, Food and  
Environmental Sciences

Bio-based Products and Services

Biotechnology, Bioengineering  
and Life Sciences

Funding Sources

Information Technology

Innovate Arkansas Clients

Intellectual Property

Tips and Advice

Transportation / Logistics

University Research

Venture Capital Firms

Innovate Arkansas E-newsletter

Enter your e-mail address to receive our free monthly e-newsletter.

About IA Our Clients Our Services News INOV8 Blog Resources Contact Us

Program Partners ARKANSAS WINROCK Facebook Twitter Search

# Traditional Colleges Embrace Online Classrooms

You are currently viewing: >> home // resources //

By [Eric Francis](#), 6/25/2012 12:00:00 AM

Perched on top of a ridge in North Little Rock, Pulaski Technical College was fit to burst its seams last fall with an enrollment of nearly 12,000 students.

The thing is, a fifth of those students might not even set foot on campus during their two-year pursuit of an associate's degree.

Pulaski Tech had 2,554 students taking only online courses last fall, and that number increased by almost 100 for the spring semester of this year.

"Accessibility is one of the paramount priorities for a community college, and I think the distance education is a very important part of that," said Tim Jones, the director of public relations for the school. "You don't get much more accessible than being able to do your coursework with a laptop at midnight."

Considering that Pulaski Tech is the state's largest and fastest-growing two-year college, being able to teach students online instead of trying to find space in a classroom seems like a cost-saving measure. But online education is growing in Arkansas, as it is around the nation, and the nature of education in the Internet age is rapidly changing.

Mike DeLong, the executive vice president and provost of Pulaski Tech, knows this pretty well, considering he did his doctoral dissertation on online education. But that was during, you know, the dark ages - way back in 2000.

"Nowadays, you can pretty much provide the same kind of resources as for a traditional student - as far as videos, extra work - to ensure the concepts sink in, if the class is put together right," said DeLong. "Not to say there aren't some schools that don't try to make [online learning] a fancy correspondence course. But if it's done right and the instructor is engaged as they should be, it's just as good as a classroom course."

Just as good? That's a pretty powerful statement. But it's one that's being echoed by educators and administrators all over the state, from community colleges to the boss of the University of Arkansas System, President Donald R. Bobbitt. Bobbitt, who arrived in November, is a familiar face to advocates of online education.

He's plugged it at many appearances, including the UA Distance Learning Symposium held in April at UALR. There, Bobbitt talked about the changing face of the educational landscape versus the static nature of university education.

### 'Disruptive Innovation'

"Our traditional universities are designed around a system that's been in place for hundreds of years," he said, harking back to the medieval roots of universities like Oxford. "As quickly as society is changing ... [we should ask], is this structure appropriate for this period we're about to enter?"

The Internet is a "disruptive innovation" to the education system, Bobbitt said, borrowing a term used by Harvard business professor Clayton Christensen, and part of the disruption is coming from for-profit educational institutions that are "playing in our sandbox."

"The difference right now, and this is the advantage that we can't squander," Bobbitt said, "is that the students aren't being as successful and it's not at a lower cost. And we can deal with both of those."

The ability to reach students cheaply and efficiently is the great promise of online education, especially with the proliferation of broadband Internet access even in many rural parts of the state.

The man in charge of the UA System's efforts to capitalize on the advance of technology is Dan Ferritor, the former chancellor of the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville who is now the system's vice president for academic affairs. He said Arkansas is currently mid-pack as far as its use of online education technology.

"I don't think we're the heaviest user, and I don't think we're the lightest user," he said. "I think we're a state that is recognizing the importance of online education."

But while the UA system is bullish toward online education, it isn't mandating from the top down. Ferritor said each campus is responsible for its own

Nor is there a statewide mandate. Shane Broadway, the interim director of the Arkansas Department of Higher Education, said that each public university or college within the state makes its own call on whether, and how much, to use online courses. But the state does require students to have some presence on an Arkansas campus, he noted.

"We do have a policy in terms of the higher education funding formula," said Broadway. Students "have to have at least one class on the campus to receive credit under the funding formula. Basically, that's so you're not getting a bunch of out-of-state students who never set foot in Arkansas."

Early concerns about the quality of education imparted through online courses have eased, Broadway said, as the "checks and balances" have been improved. He noted that Arkansas State University, which offers an MBA program that is entirely online, had been among those making improvements to the credibility of the system.

The director of ASU's three-year-old online MBA program is Karen McDaniel, who came to the campus in August and has been busy promoting it to businesses both within the region and in neighboring states. She said that one way the university addressed the question of quality was to take on developing the program itself, with the business faculty and IT staff collaborating.

"Instead of outsourcing the technology, they do it all at ASU," McDaniel said. "All the courses have the same look, touch and feel throughout the entire program."

The program got a boost this year when U.S. News & World Report, in its first ranking of online MBA programs, placed ASU among the top such programs in the country and ranked its faculty No. 1 in terms of credentials and training. McDaniel said the school hopes to enroll 50 new students each semester for the next year.

"Our faculty is on board with this; our technology staff is on board with it. It really is a great team effort," she said.

Charles L. "Chuck" Welch, president of the ASU System, said that the feedback from the business community - the folks who will be hiring newly minted MBAs or sending their employees out to get an online degree - has been positive.

"What we have heard in just about all the disciplines is that most employers don't see a dramatic difference in student skill levels, whether they did an online degree or face-to-face classes," said Welch. "I think the business community realizes that technology is changing their own businesses just as it has the business of higher education."

The University of Arkansas at Fayetteville is retooling how it approaches online learning with the division it calls the Global Campus. Javier Reyes, a nine-year UA veteran who was most recently an associate dean at the Walton College of Business, has been tapped to take over as vice provost for distance learning in July. He believes there is ample precedent that good online learning programs are no different from their in-classroom counterparts.

"What we see is that has already happened in MBA programs and graduate programs in engineering," said Reyes. "It's the same level of quality, just different methods. They make it available for those folks who can't get out of their job for a year and need to continue to deliver the goods for their company, and at the same time get a degree."

For that reason, Reyes believes online learning is a natural fit for graduate programs, which are generally smaller and populated by student who are there for a specific reason. In Fayetteville, the university offers an operations management program in engineering and a managerial MBA online already.

But there are changes in store at the Global Campus that Reyes said will allow it to concentrate on online learning. For example, the department used to also handle academic outreach and media services and run the conference center. Those units have been placed under the purview of other departments, he said, so his department can focus more closely on the needs of both students and individual departments.

"We're going to identify our strategies for each of the colleges," said Reyes. "The Global Campus itself has to rely on the efforts of our colleges. When you think of the Fulbright College, the Walton College, the Bumpers College, the programs we have are superb programs and we have to facilitate their efforts."

#### Partnership Envisioned

So, no cookie-cutter approach to online learning at Fayetteville. Plus, no limiting efforts to just university students alone: Reyes would like to see the university partner with high schools that don't have the resources to, for instance, provide Advanced Placement courses. The university could provide the actual coursework and the school would only need to have the students and classroom space.

"We're looking at the whole spectrum of students," he said. "Nontraditional students trying to finish a degree, traditional students who would like to stay around their parents for two more years, or ones in face-to-face classes on campus who would like to speed up their progress and take some online courses, or the students that would like to start their college education but are still in high school."

# Ensuring Quality Instruction

One persistent issue concerning online education is the perception that it is somehow a lesser educational experience than in-class learning. But methods and software have changed during the years, and educators and advocates are now laying claim to equality on the quality question.

"The same professors who teach in class teach the same course, in the same semester, online," said Karen McDaniel of ASU's online MBA. "It's our actual Ph.D. graduate-qualified professors." McDaniel leads the online MBA program.

The UA's Dan Ferritor said one of the most interesting effects he's noticed from online education is how courses are developed by the instructors. "Instead of just going in and staying a day ahead of the students, you develop the class before it's even offered," he said.

Furthermore, the university has a vested interest in the equality of instruction between online and classroom students. "In part because I think the technology is still terribly new, we really need to make sure the students are getting their money's worth," he said.

State Rep. Ann Glemmer, R-Benton, has been a full-time university instructor for 28 years, the last two decades at UALR, and has watched the development of online learning. As with any education model where classroom attendance is not the only option, there are pros and cons to online learning. For starters, it requires a particular level of discipline from the students.

"Because the act of going to class tends to keep you more on task, kind of like the teachers who take attendance versus the ones who don't," she said.

Glemmer teaches political science courses, including an online class. She said that there's really no difference, academically, between the online and in-class offerings. However, she thinks online classes are a bad idea for 18-year-old freshmen, for anyone who is not prepared for college. But there are plenty who would benefit from it. "Obviously, it's great for the young mother or an older mother with kids at home, people with jobs, people with a long commute to the campus," she said.

—Bric Francis



Kelli Trickey of Conway took online courses to prepare for nursing school. (PHOTO BY JASON BURT)

## Not All Subjects Work Online

For one student with experience both in a traditional college setting and online learning, sometimes the "you get out of it what you put into it" mantra voiced by educators didn't work that way.

Kelli Trickey of Conway has a bachelor's degree from Hendrix College and has been considering applying to nursing school. That meant finishing up some required science classes first. But as a mother of four boys — from a college freshman down to a fourth-grader — she had to have the flexibility to cover her family obligations. So she took online courses from both Pulaski Technical College and the University of Arkansas Community College at Monticello.

What she found, Trickey

said, was that not all online classes are created equal.

"I took a nutrition class, and we were required to do certain things, like we had to post on the discussion board with questions or replies twice a week," she said. "I had friends enrolled in nutrition at UACGM going to class and they were struggling. It was hard. I might've spent an hour a week on the class and that was it, and I got an A. They were probably in the class two or three hours a week and studying five or six hours a week. You get the same credit and it doesn't say on your transcript anywhere it was an online class."

Trickey said she was using the same textbook and syllabus as her friends on campus, but thinks she probably didn't

learn as much taking the class online.

"I don't think it's the teachers; I think it's just a different learning environment," she said, noting that she had an on-campus class at UACGM, too, and the professor was as good as any she'd had at Hendrix.

While Trickey said she'd still consider taking some online classes for her nursing prerequisites, she'd be particular about which ones.

"You can't do anatomy and physiology online. I wouldn't do it because I don't know how you can get a lab online," she said. "Biology and a couple of others are available online, but I don't think I could learn enough."

— Eric Francis