

Feeling more at ease with online learning

By GIGI LEHMAN

Not so long ago, a student like Erin Dowd never could have attended college full-time.

Dowd, a junior studying international business at Florida International University, works 40 hours a week while taking a full course load -- about half traditional courses and half online.

"I wouldn't be able to work full-time if I couldn't take some of my classes online," Dowd said.

Internet-based learning has gone from cutting edge at the turn of the 21st century to commonplace on many campuses. "Learning by Degrees," a 2005 report funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, reported that 65 percent of graduate schools and 63 percent of undergraduate institutions offer online as well as face-to-face courses.

COMMUTER STUDENTS

Not surprisingly, online offerings have become critical for institutions that cater to commuter students, said Ruth Ann Balla, executive director of the Virtual College at Miami Dade College. MDC has more than 6,000 students taking 90 courses online, with no more than 28 students in each section of a course. The Virtual College, which has seen a 30 percent growth in enrollment from spring semester 2005 to spring 2006, has more students than three of MDC's eight campuses.

The advantages of an online course, especially for nontraditional college students, are obvious, Balla said. The most important one: "You never have to miss a class. If you have to do something for work or your child is sick, it doesn't matter."

But, Balla warned, "a student does have to be motivated. These courses are not self-paced. There are calendars, schedules and due dates just like in regular classes."

Another drawback: "A person needs current technology. For some of our students, affording a broadband connection and a current computer is a challenge."

Keeping current isn't just an issue for students. Nova Southeastern University's Fischler School of Education and Human Services recently required all 600 of its adjunct faculty members to complete a class in online teaching -- offered, of course, only online.

"We felt we needed to consider at least basic knowledge of online teaching mandatory," said Jean Lewis, dean of adjunct faculty at the Fischler School. "The world of higher education, especially at the graduate level, is changing. No one is compelled to teach online, but our message was that we consider this a minimum skill, just like using e-mail.

"Even in a face-to-face course, you're going to have students e-mailing professors and attaching files to their documents. The days of students mailing papers to their instructors is long over."

While one of the criticisms of online learning is that it lacks a sense of community, the adjunct faculty who participated in the required course found just the opposite, said Marsha Burmeister, director of instructional technology at the Fischler School.

"The feedback about the course was overwhelmingly positive," Burmeister said. Because the course required participants to interact in online discussions, "it brought our adjuncts together and was a way for them to form a community, like an online faculty lounge."

Not every institution of higher learning is proceeding full-steam ahead with online offerings, however. The "Learning by Degrees" report noted that private, nonprofit schools are the least likely to offer online courses, although the percentage doing so grew from 35 percent in 2003 to 41 percent in 2005.

At the University of Miami, online offerings are being developed for niche markets but not for current UM students, said Marcy Ullom, associate vice president, division of continuing and international education.

For example, a working professional who already has a bachelor's or master's degree might get a certificate in enrollment management. Also being developed are professional certificate programs that do not earn credit toward a degree. The first such program, in journalism, will be offered in Spanish and marketed in Latin America.

At Barry University in Miami Shores, the School of Education offers the most online courses -- the latest figures include 30 fully online, three by videoconferencing and 120 "blended" offerings that have an online and face-to-face component. Even so, "we don't do much pure distance learning," said Terry Piper, dean of the Adrian Dominican School of Education.

"There are a lot of providers in the pure online market," Piper said. "The Barry experience cannot be transmitted in quite that way."

For the small, private, Catholic university, she said, "there's a spiritual dimension to education that can't be transmitted online. There aren't very many courses that we offer that aren't offered somewhere else. Students come to Barry for the experience of being here, the community service and the other aspects of our education."

FIU student Dowd noted that ``there's a stigma about online classes, that they're not as good as regular classes, but it's not necessarily about the format, it's about the professor and how they structure the class. Some online classes are really great and there's a lot of interaction; sometimes there's not as much as I would like."

TIME AND EFFORT

David Wernick, a lecturer in the department of management and international business at FIU, agrees.

"Doing an online course is not just throwing up a bunch of articles in cyberspace and having students read them," he said. ``It really depends on the professor and the way they structure the course, if they put the time and the effort into promoting interactivity.

'To turn the [Marshall] McLuhan quote around, `It's the message, not the medium.' "