Teaching Technology

Miami’s universities are sprinting to keep up with the demand created by the technology boom.

The developing and rapidly changing field of e-business presents a formidable challenge to the more sedate and analytical world of academia, which is not particularly known for moving quickly. Business schools are finding that to remain competitive and attract students to their courses – and companies to their students – they need to get with the program, so to speak.

Miami’s universities are no exception. As part of its (E)-Business Crossroads Initiative, Florida International University (FIU) has incorporated e-business strategies into existing classes, has offered courses in e-business on both the graduate and undergraduate levels, and has created an e-business specialization for students enrolled in the evening MBA program.

FIU is also designing an MS degree in e-business, scheduled to begin this fall. As many as 40 students are expected to enroll, according to Charles Newman, a former vice president and senior international planning officer at Chase Manhattan Bank who was hired last fall as coordinator of the initiative.

Nor is FIU alone. Besides building a high-tech headquarters for its business school – complete with a live Wall Street ticker – the University of Miami School of Business inaugurated a popular lecture series last spring showcasing leaders in e-business. The series, called “Executive Perspectives on E-Commerce,” attracted audiences of more than 300 and will be offered again this spring. UM is infusing e-commerce and Internet-related themes into existing courses and offers a three-course specialization in e-commerce for students enrolled in the MBA program, says Professor Robert Plant.

Barry University’s Andreas School of Business was the first of Miami’s universities to offer certificate programs in e-commerce on both the undergraduate and graduate levels – three courses each – both of which began in January 2000. It offers a specialization in e-commerce to undergraduates majoring in business, and an MS in e-commerce. “I’ve never seen anything be approved and change as rapidly as this program,” says Ron Lennon, a professor of marketing and e-commerce who has been teaching at Barry for 13 years. The University anticipates that its e-commerce offerings will increase enrollment – and jump revenue – by 10 to 20 percent at the Andreas School.

To bolster its academic offerings, FIU is developing a large core of highly specialized faculty, training 10 professors and recruiting two new ones, with plans to recruit three more. Professors from the different business disciplines, including finance and marketing, are on a mission to “re-tool themselves in e-business, and not just by reading and research, but by being out there in the world,” says Kuldeep Kumar, the information technology professor charged with designing the e-business initiative. “We are re-creating a new body of knowledge, but we can’t do it by ourselves,” he says. “Industry also realizes that it doesn’t have all the answers and so the best way is to work together.”

At FIU, faculty are working with the private sector to develop case studies, lending their expertise as consultants and recruiting industry professionals to teach classes for a day. Businesses meanwhile benefit from the research and development work performed on their behalf at the university. In addition to the experience gained by students, FIU plans to reinvest money generated by its research to make the program self-sufficient, Kumar explains.

In particular, the initiative hopes to help establish Miami as an e-business hub for the Americas. “FIU understands the role Miami can play and the (E)-Business Crossroads targets this potential market,” says Hernando Bahamon, who has spoken to students about his role as chairman of Fusion Networks, a Miami-based software company with operations in six Latin American countries. “The university plays an important role in bringing together local companies and foreign companies.”

If these relationships between business and education flourish, utilizing the pool of local tech professionals, then a cycle of growth should ensue: more talent will attract more companies, which will attract more talent, etc. And whether it’s UM, Barry or FIU taking the lead, all boats will rise.