

ONLINE CLASSES

are the wave of the present

BY DANNY DAVIS

Recent trends in higher education have students learning in new ways that students 10 to 15 years ago would have thought unimaginable. Watching almost any television channel, you are almost guaranteed to see a University of Phoenix commercial or that of another university promising online degrees “on your own time.” But what does Kansas State University offer in terms of online classes?

K-State offers 660 online courses to students during the fall and spring semesters and the January, May and August intersessions, said Melinda Bever Sinn ’80, ’85, director of marketing and communication services for the Division of Continuing Education (DCE). Within those courses, there are eight bachelor’s degree completion programs, 22 master’s degrees, one doctorate and 20 certificate programs.

Enrolling in a distance education course is similar to enrolling in a traditional on-campus course. A student uses K-State’s online iSIS system to search for a course and then completes the enrollment process online. Students haven’t stood in long enrollment

lines for years.

Last fall, 5,700 students enrolled in K-State’s distance education classes, of whom 2,335 students were not sitting in traditional classrooms in Manhattan or Salina. They were in all 50 states and 15 countries.

Once students have enrolled in an online course and paid the fees, they log into K-State Online to access their course materials and instruction. The first thing they will see is a course listing of all the courses they are currently enrolled. By clicking on the course title, they are taken to a welcome page, set up by the course instructor. There are links to a message board, grades, a calendar and files. Within the files, instructors might upload videos or audio clips, slideshows or instructional materials.

Communication between the instructor and online student is especially critical with distance education courses because students rarely meet the instructor in person. Instructors use a variety of communication methods with their students, Sinn said. One is the message board where students and instructors can post messages in a conversational setting. Then, there are the typical communication methods such as email or phone. With Skype Internet calling, students and instructors can converse via video calling.

“An experienced instructor will try to utilize a variety of tools for communicating with students in a manner that is relevant to the course,” Sinn said.

Tests may be administered online, and instructors have several options for administering them. Instructors may opt to hold proctored exams, timed exams or open-book exams. Online students, like traditional students, are expected to follow the K-State Honor System, which states that work is performed honestly without unauthorized collaboration, Sinn said.

Courses offered online through DCE might be courses that also are offered in

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15 Number of countries with students taking K-State’s online courses

the traditional classroom, or they might be courses that are offered only online, as is the case with assistant professor Satoris Culbertson’s “Psychology Applied to Work” course.

Culbertson said the biggest difference between an online course and a traditional course is the issue of time management and work ethic. In a classroom, the instructor sets the pace for learning, but online, students must set their own pace. They also face the added burden of time management; it can be easy to put off work through the online system and not budget time for the course.

Another issue that both Culbertson and her students face is communication. In class, an instructor may notice visual cues hinting at students’ frustrations or confused expressions. Online, however, the instructor must rely on students to be proactive, she said.

Jana Fallin, professor of music education, echoes Culbertson’s concerns with the challenges of communication.

“You have to be cautious on communication because it can sound different in an email than how it would in person,” Fallin said. “And it is hard to pick up on signals.”

This becomes a challenge for the

students when they are not accustomed to taking a proactive role through an online system. Some students, for example, will wait until they see colleagues having the same problems until they speak up. Online, students must take responsibility that they would not take in a traditional course.

Fallin approaches online teaching in a different way, which includes using different methods. One is assigning students partners and having them complete assignments using online resources.

“When it’s working right, it’s a powerful learning experience,” she said. Students take ownership and “they’re connected with the learning.”

Students are not the only ones benefiting from online learning. Culbertson said distance education has changed the way she views distance programs.

“It has actually gotten rid of some of my own biases and prejudices against distance education,” Culbertson said. “Assuming classes are the same quality as mine, there’s less of a stigma for me.”

Often, that stigma has people viewing online courses as a lower means of education, she said. But Culbertson, as a teacher of online courses, sees the work that students put into their learning and the motivation that online courses demand.

“To earn an A in an online class is sometimes a bigger deal because I see that you have to be diligent to do it, and that says something in and of itself,” she said.

The cost to take an online course includes tuition set by the Kansas Board of Regents and additional fees that are directly associated with the delivery of the course. There is no in-state and out-of-state price difference, Sinn said.

Distance education at K-State is helping students complete degrees and meet their academic goals. To call it “the wave of the future” would be an understatement. It is the wave of the present. 🌊