SAINT MARY'S CLASS

Professors learn how to enliven a virtual classroom

Survey: In 2012, 7.1 million higher ed students took an online course

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MORAGA — For more than 35 years, Barry Eckhouse has taught at Saint Mary’s College in Moraga, but this term he’s taking on a new kind of student — fellow professors.

As the college expands the number of classes it offers online, Eckhouse is busy training instructors on how to teach Web-centered classes effectively. He calls the training program a Digital Driver's License, and he believes it’s the first of its kind in the nation.

Eckhouse, who helped launch the college’s hybrid online MBA program in 2006, said the need for a training program at this point is critical and that “It’s been necessary for a while, but I think we’ve gotten to a critical mass.”

— Barry Eckhouse,
Saint Mary’s professor

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every professor needs to be on board.

"Back in 2006, we could take our faculty who were comfortable with online, familiar with technology and put them into that environment, and other professors could continue to teach face to face and everybody was happy," Eckhouse said.

"That’s not the case anymore, and it’s not the case nationally."

Across the country, the trend in higher education is to offer more online courses for students, putting pressure on professors to learn how to take their class from the physical to the virtual classroom. A 2013 survey of online learning conducted by the Babson Survey Research Group found that more than 73 million higher education students took at least one online course during the fall 2012 term.

Since the Babson group began studying the issue a decade ago, that number has steadily risen. And while massive open online courses (MOOCs) have received the majority of media attention, the study found that less than a quarter of academic leaders believe MOOCs are a sustainable method for offering online classes.

Instead, many believe, like Eckhouse, that hybrid courses — in which teaching is done both online and face to face — are the future.

To support the program, Saint Mary’s built a slick new digital center, complete with a green screen for teachers to record videos in front of and change the background as desired, docking stations for laptops and an entire wall that functions as a giant touch screen.

There, Eckhouse will show teachers how to record and publish videos and podcasts on the school's iTunes page, lead synchronous Web conferences and provide voice grading, instead of just written feedback, on assignments.

The plan is to certify all 34 faculty members of the business school over the next two years.

Saint Mary’s online instruction growth follows a national trend toward the virtual classroom. Since 2006, Saint Mary’s has offered hybrid online courses for students in the MBA program. Hanging outside of Eckhouse’s office is a picture of the first group of students to brave the hybrid MBA degree program within the School of Economics and Business Administration.

Now, seven pilot hybrid courses will be offered to undergraduates through the college’s one-month “Jan Term” session that starts after New Year’s. As Eckhouse watched — and often led — the movement of the college’s innovative teaching measures online, he realized that there was a need to give professors the tools to teach online.

"It’s been necessary for a while, but I think we’ve gotten to a critical mass," Eckhouse said.

The synchronous Web-conference software the school purchased allows professors to replicate face-to-face interactions in ways that go beyond a real-time lecture.

In a statistics class, for example, a professor can assign students a quick problem set and have them work on it in small breakout groups while the professor virtually sits in and out of the groups, overseeing their chats and shared spreadsheets where the work is taking place. After each group has finished with the problem set, the professor can then put everyone back in the same Web conference and have the students present their solutions to the class — along with the work they did.

With podcasts, professors can prerecord lectures and upload them in advance of class so students can listen to them through their iTunes accounts. This opens up class time for questions and discussion, as opposed to the one-way dialogue that often consumes traditional classes.

Over the next few weeks, Eckhouse will wrap up the first Digital Driver’s License course. He kept enrollment to just six professors to ensure hands-on assistance. And he targeted those instructors who were set to teach a hybrid course for the first time.

“I’m really excited about the whole thing," said Natasha Munshi, an associate professor who teaches a Strategic Management of Technology and Innovation class. "It’s nice to be in the student seat and learn about something directly relevant to what I do in my profession."

Munshi said she’s taught online courses at other institutions, but they weren’t very advanced — just message or discussion boards where she could post and students would respond at their leisure. Those methods, she said, don’t allow for the same level of interaction as a virtual course where teachers and students are online in the same Web conference.

“There are really cool features in the synchronous programs,” she said. “Students can press an icon to raise their hands, and you can ask people if they agree or disagree with statements and get instant results. And if I’m talking really fast, they can hit an icon to say ‘slow down.’”

Kirk Knapp, an adjunct professor teaching the class, said he appreciates learning what teaching methods work best in the digital environment, because it’s such a new format.

“We’ve done teaching the same way for a long time; the classes we teach aren’t that much different than what I did in school 20 or 30 years ago," he said.

“As a teaching institution, we need to be prepared to understand what’s going on and maybe even lead the way.”

Eckhouse will continue to research best methods for online teaching and will study the effectiveness of the licensing program by closely monitoring teachers’ evaluations over time.

“We’re going to want to see better midterm evaluations for people who get a Digital Driver’s License,” he said. "If they’re not there, we’re going to have to rethink what we’re doing."