NORTH CAROLINA COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM
H. Martin Lancaster, President

May 4, 2001

MEMORANDUM

TO: Community College Presidents

FROM: Neil Hollands

RE: Seventh Issue of the Virtual Learning Community Newsletter

Hello!
The Spring Newsletter for online learning, "Creating a Virtual Learning Community" is attached as a Microsoft Word document. As usual, it is full of news and articles about online learning in North Carolina's community colleges. This issue includes information about the upcoming Distance Learning Alliance Conference, news about online enrollments, a variety of advice for working with Blackboard, word about upcoming training, a feature article about online course design, a list of online assignment ideas, and a collection of the best Internet sites to support distance education.

You are encouraged to share this newsletter with others at your college in both digital and print forms. Also, the archive of past issues is posted online at http://www.ncccs.cc.nc.us/Distance_Learning/distance_education.htm. Send questions, comments, or other feedback to hollandsn@ncccs.cc.nc.us.

NH/cb

Attachment

cc: H. Martin Lancaster
Delores A. Parker
Ken Farmer

CC01-088
E-Mail

MAILING ADDRESS: 5016 MAIL SERVICE CENTER ~ RALEIGH, NC 27699-5016
Street Address: 200 West Jones ~ Raleigh, NC 27603-1379 ~ 919-733-7051 ~ Fax 919-733-0680

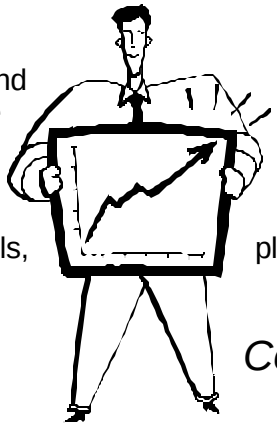
Creating a Virtual Learning Community

Spring 2001 Volume 2, Issue 3

Distance Learning Alliance Conference Set for Fayetteville

The North Carolina Distance Learning Alliance Conference will be held in Fayetteville July 24-27. The conference is scheduled for the Holiday Inn Bordeaux. Early registration is $95 for the full conference or $45 for a single day. This is the key annual meeting for those interested in distance learning.

The Virtual Learning Community will officially unveil this year's 50 courses at the conference. Other sessions will cover topics such as online counseling and mentoring, blending onsite courses with the Internet, and community-based needs analysis with the Internet.



Lieutenant Governor Beverly Perdue and James Leutze, chair of the Rural Internet Access Authority are among featured speakers addressing the topic of distance learning in North Carolina.

For registration forms or other details, please visit http://www.dlalliance.org/.

Online Learning Enrollments Continue Rapid Growth

With most fall and spring enrollment data in, online learning shows brisk expansion in North Carolina community colleges. Without summer numbers, enrollments are near the 25,000 student mark, a 50% growth. Final figures should reflect 75-80% growth for the year.

For the first time in 2000-2001, all 58 colleges report offering at least one online course.

Fayetteville Tech CC and Pitt CC are neck and neck for top honors in online enrollments, with just under 3000 each. Other top ten colleges include Central Piedmont CC, Guilford Tech CC, Western Piedmont CC, Forsyth Tech CC, Craven CC, College of The Albemarle, Catawba Valley CC, Coastal Carolina CC, and Gaston College.

Other colleges have dramatically increased their enrollment numbers as well. Those not in the top 10 that show increases over 100% in online learning enrollments already this year include Asheville-Buncombe Tech CC, Cape Fear CC, Central Carolina CC, Davidson County CC, Durham Tech CC, Halifax CC, Haywood CC, James Sprunt CC, Mitchell CC, Montgomery CC, Pamlico CC, Piedmont CC, Randolph CC, Robeson CC, Rowan-Cabarrus CC, Southwestern CC, Vance-Granville CC, and Wilson Tech CC.

Congratulations to everyone who has contributed to this fantastic growth!

Blackboard to Offer Tech Support Conference Calls

Sean Meelia, Client Relations Manager for Blackboard in North Carolina, sends this message for Blackboard administrators:

In an effort to improve technical support, Blackboard will host conference calls for schools in the NCCCS. Irwin Manes–new Director of Technical Support—will be available during calls to field questions and concerns, as well as talk about improvements in the tech support team. Contact Sean Meelia at (800) 424.9299 ext. 452 or smeelia@blackboard.com to participate.

Training Events Forthcoming

Two kinds of systemwide training are planned for online education for faculty and staff during the upcoming summer.

In early July, a two-day session for Blackboard server administrators will be held. The first day will be for new administrators or those who missed the server training held last year. The second day will serve experienced Blackboard administrators, giving them a chance to ask technical questions.

Later in the summer, training events will teach use of the Community-developed Online Course Template and Principles and Techniques of Online Instruction course as a means for faculty training.

This training will be made available to college representatives who can repeat the training for their local faculty. The one-day events will teach use of Blackboard CourseInfo, quality online design and pedagogy, and techniques for online course delivery.

Dates and details for both kinds of training will be sent soon to the Distance Learning Administrators of each college.

Community Rates Perfect Score in Bellwether Competition

The Community Colleges Futures Assembly of the University of Florida's Institute of Higher Education has given its annual Bellwether Award.

In a competition held in Orlando February 10-13, the Virtual Learning Community was one of three finalists to receive a perfect score, ultimately finishing behind a project from Richard J. Daley College of Chicago, which received the cash prize. Ken Farmer, Director of Distance Learning, and Dr Delores Parker, Vice President of Academic and Student Services, made the presentation for the Virtual Learning Community.

Also finishing in the three-way tie for top honors was the Western NC Technology Consortium, represented by Dr. David Sink of Blue Ridge CC and Dr. Ken Boham of Caldwell CC.

Online Course Design: Getting it Right

Building an online course can be intimidating, so we asked instructors around the state to share ideas about how to design an online course site that will enable students to succeed. Here is a summary of eleven of their best answers:

1. Make expectations clear; include details.

Vagueness is disastrous in online courses. When expectations aren't clear, some students get assignments wrong and turn in inappropriate work. At best, every student in the class will need to send email that the instructor must take time to answer. Save yourself the agony and anticipate questions in advance.

The best courses include step-by-step instructions for each assignment with links to help resources, submission guidelines, examples of strong, average, and mediocre work, and grading standards.

2. For key concepts, use redundancy and focusing techniques.

Online learning is reading and writing intensive. A course site can hold a wealth of detail, but some students miss too much of that information. Help them by repeating key concepts (like schedule and deadlines, links to important resources, and instructor expectations) in multiple places around the course.

A related technique is to focus as much student attention as possible on critical concepts. Use eye-grabbing formatting, email reminders, study guides, and summaries to make sure every student understands at least the fundamentals of the course.

3. Break the course into instructional units and use parallel structure in each.

In the online environment, it is often unclear to students when it is time for the class to move to the next subject. To help clarify this, divide each course into units and set a schedule.

Once units are formed, create parallel structure in each. That means using common headings, formatting, and assignment sets and trying to handle grading, announcements, and email with consistent methods and regular response times throughout the course.

This structure will help students keep pace. It has the side benefit of breaking course materials into clusters that are useful when it is time for re-design or re-use of some of those materials into new or revised courses.

4. Interactivity is essential.

Without interactivity, online learning is second-rate education. With interactivity, it contains possibilities a face-to-face classroom does not have.

Interaction should occur not only between instructor and student, but also between students. Other experts can also be brought into the mix. If well managed, this interactivity creates a rich social environment in which most students feel safe to participate.

Include discussion-forum activities in the course. Use small group projects. Teach students to constructively critique each other's work. Facilitating online interaction takes practice (and is a new skill for most instructors,) but the rewards are well worth the effort.

5. Consider both instructor and student workload as you design.

Often online instructors are so worried about courses that lack academic rigor or so excited by the vast amount of content they can find or build online, that they overdo it. The resulting courses are difficult for students to complete and exhausting for instructors to teach.

When designing online courses, think of ways to keep workloads reasonable. Put energy into quality of concepts and assignments, not quantity. Add extra help resources instead of extra demands.

Also, use student interaction and peer critique wisely to control instructor workload. In a well-designed course, the online instructor is not the only one spending time on the keyboard!

6. Include content from a variety of sources.

While quick, designing a course with content from only one or two sources is wrong. First, it's boring for students. If simply directed to the book time and again, they will wonder why they didn't just read the book instead of taking the course. A variety of content provides instruction in many unique voices, each taking unique approaches to content and design, a potential advantage of online learning.

Second, courses built from just a few sources are fragile and inflexible. If the textbook edition changes, the web site goes down, or a new instructor takes over, suddenly the source of all content has disappeared or become inaccurate. A course that uses a variety of instructor-written text, book references, Internet sites, guest instructors, and other materials is robust. At worst, you will only need to replace or adjust small pieces occasionally.

7. Create a friendly environment.

To most students, the online environment is associated with fun. They are used to computer games, email between friends, or visiting interesting web sites. If they encounter a dry, online course, this past experience will make their boredom and aggravation even more acute.

To prevent this, make the course site inviting and friendly. Show enthusiasm for the subject, and a sense of humor. Include some links that are fun (but still subject-related.) Include a variety of assignments.

Project personality in communications, not just efficiency. Share positive interactions that occur with individual students with the entire class to show that interaction is welcome. Make your online site a place where students can enjoy the repeat visits that the course will require.

8. Don't overcomplicate the design.

We hear about the wonders of technology every day. As a result, many instructors come online expecting to fill courses with streaming multi-media, eye-popping animation, sound clips, and other technological bells and whistles.

The problem is that technical wizardry creates technical complications. Students spend more time pursuing technical help than learning the course content. They need fancier computers than some can afford, set up with a dozen kinds of software. Extra technology needs extra support, so the college's technical staff and Internet server are stretched beyond their limits.

As you gain experience, you'll be able to support more technology as an instructor, but in the meanwhile, focus on quality curriculum design and interaction with students. Use simple formats like text, html, and gif and jpeg graphics.

9. Include graphics.

Take time to put graphics in your course site. This can be done with clip art, digital cameras, scanning, screen captures, or simple graphic-building programs. You don't have to learn all of these methods, just one or two. Alternatively, get a few talented students to help in this endeavor.

A few pictures in the simple formats read by web browsers will make the course more enjoyable for students, particularly those with visual learning styles.

10. Build help resources into the course site.

When you include enough help resources in the course, students can sometimes turn to them instead of constantly relying on the instructor. Resources include links to reference web sites, course content sites, student service resources and staff at your college, technical help sites and staff, course discussion forums, and more.

Ideas for article submitted by:

Kathleen Anderson	Cape Fear CC
Dorothy Cattle	Forsyth Tech CC
Lewis Gravis	Sampson CC
Laurie Hamilton	Sampson CC
Penny Sermons	Beaufort County CC
Tami Thrasher	Piedmont CC
Michelle Turnage	Wayne CC
Lynn Ward	Piedmont CC

Creative Ideas for Online Assignments

Courses that repeat the same kinds of assignments over and over do not retain students. Here are 11 ways to create variety.

1. Evaluate web sites.

A site doesn't have to be perfect to be used in a course. Students can learn from bad examples. Teach the real world skill of site evaluation.

In evaluating sites, students develop critical thinking skills while absorbing site content. Activities can include rating one site, comparing two, or arguing for selected favorites from a list. Many Internet sites can provide directions and rubrics for evaluation activities.

2. Build cut and paste scrapbooks.

Students can collect text and graphics that they find on web sites into temporary reports. As long as reports are used only in the course, and are not published, they do not violate copyright.

If students can highlight, copy, and paste, they can be building great multimedia reports in no time. This works as both an individual and group project, and the results can be very entertaining. While they are at it, have them practice citing the sources from which they collect their samples.

3. Try real world activities.

Online students don't have to stay in a "virtual" world. Even at a distance, most can access libraries, videotapes, museums, workplaces, and historical sites. Pick activities and resources that are usually available in local communities, and send students out to complete tasks. They'll welcome the variety.

For these real world activities, offer alternate assignments that can be completed online. That way, if someone cannot access needed resources or leave home, they will still have options.

4. Present case studies and other examples.

Case studies are a versatile tool for assignment building. They work especially well in courses that are not traditionally interactive (like math, science, and technology). Provide students with a complex situation they might encounter if working in the field. They can critique solutions, create an action plan, practice asking relevant questions, or find

mistakes. In the process, content that was technical can begin to generate discussion. Case studies raise interactivity and bring the real world into the course.

5. Let students lead.

Concerned with instructor workload? In need of improved student participation and interaction? Worried that the course is dull? An answer to these worries is to let students lead sometimes. In groups or alone, they can prepare course topics, find support links, start or facilitate discussions, or even (with instructor guidance) design and teach a unit. Online learning encourages students to independently explore ideas. Student-led assignments just take that idea one step further.

6. Try online show and tell.

Great online sites are available for most topics, but as an instructor, you don't always have time to track them down. Let students help. They can find useful pages, share the URL with others, summarize the content, or lead them through a tour of the site.

7. Build web pages.

With HTML training or a word processor that can save a document as HTML, students can soon be posting sites. Course delivery software such as Blackboard, has built-in capacity to support student page building. A web site can be a great group project, a place to share individual work, or simply a way for a student to share their personality and interests.

8. Learn and practice peer evaluation.

Many instructors avoid peer evaluation because students are either too kind or too cruel to their peers. Solve this by directly teaching constructive criticism skills, requiring both praise and critique in peer evaluations. By directly teaching students to provide and accept good advice, you pass on an important life skill and open the door for truly useful collaborative activities.

9. Practice problem solving.

Here's another real world skill that can be built into interesting assignments in almost any curriculum. Present a problem from the discipline and let students find solutions. Activities include brainstorming possible answers, creating criteria for choosing one solution from many, or turning a broad solution into a step-by-step action plan.

10. Bring a guest online.

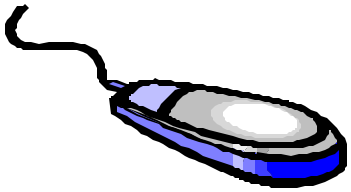
People who never have time to attend a regular classroom can visit online classes. Invite experts or real-life practitioners to post documents or answer email questions. Bring them in as guest evaluators of student projects. Online, there is no reason for an instructor to go it alone!

11. Give assignments that will help future courses.

Keep one eye on the future as you conduct an online course. Students can find graphics, collect links, or evaluate web sites for use in future courses. Collect exemplary assignments and the permission to use them to help future students. In groups, students can summarize units or build study guides. At the end of a course, have the class prepare a list of hints for future students.

Internet Sites to Support Distance Learning

The Internet is full of advice for instructors about how to improve the practice of online learning. If you have a favorite site, send the URL to hollandsn@ncccs.cc.nc.us for inclusion in future issues. Here are especially useful sites—full of everything you need in online education:



About.com Distance Learning
http://distancelearn.about.com/
Kristin Hirst, past president of the American Association for College Independent Study serves as guide in this clearinghouse, which features current links and articles in all aspects of distance education.

Education World
http://www.education-world.com/
Although some of the content focuses on K-12 education, this is the largest, most diverse site for educators available on the Net.

Teaching & Learning on the Web
http://www.mcli.dist.maricopa.edu/tl/
From Maricopa Community College in Arizona, this collection links to more than 700 real-life examples of how other educators use the web.

Distance Education at a Glance
http://www.uidaho.edu/evo/distglan.html
Barry Willis has created 15 guides about how different elements of distance education work.

Blackboard Home Page
http://www.blackboard.com/
Home site for the most common course-delivery software in NC community colleges.

American Distance Education Consortium
http://www.adec.edu/
Hosted by NC State, this consortium offers information on administration of distance education. This also provides grant information and news about laws and guidelines for the field.

Catalyst
http://catalyst.washington.edu/home.html
From the University of Washington Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology, tutorials and action plans for those learning online instruction along with profiles of those who have found success.

Illinois Online Network Resources
http://illinois.online.uillinois.edu/IONresources
This wonderful collection has hints about how to improve every aspect of online education. Pedagogical issues are especially well covered.

Encyclopedia of Educational Technology
http://coe.sdsu.edu/eet/
San Diego State has long been a leader in educational technology and this very complete encyclopedia proves it.

Yale Style Manual
http://info.med.yale.edu/caim/manual/
To teach design of elegant, well-organized web sites this is one of the premier sources available.

Chronicle of Higher Education: Distance Education
http://chronicle.com/indepth/distance/
All of the distance education news from the Chronicle is archived here.

Web-based Learning Resources Library
http://www.outreach.utk.edu/weblearning/
The University of Tennessee maintains this database of distance education information.

Theory into Practice Database
http://home.sprynet.com/~gkearsley/tip/
Greg Kearsley designs and teaches online courses for several universities. His collection of 50 learning theories includes accompanying examples and references.

On-Line Pedagogy Connected Education Portal
http://jac.sbs.ohio-state.edu/cable/pedagogy/
Cable Green's site seems small at first, but mine deeper to discover a wealth of information about online pedagogy and policy.

Node Learning Technologies Network
http://thenode.org/
This Canadian nonprofit organization web site is stuffed with great hints. Try "Pedagogy in Practice," "Notable Issues," or "Technology Trainer."

Educause Quarterly
http://www.educause.edu/pub/eq/eq.html
A "practitioner's journal for college and university managers and users of information resources—information technology, and services."

Horizon
http://horizon.unc.edu/
Hosted by UNC-Chapel Hill, Horizon includes online courses about technology, great articles and links under "Projects," "The Technology Source," and "On-Ramp."

5 Minutes Tech Tutorials
http://www.thirdage.com/features/tech/booster/

Behind in technical skills and don't know where to start? Try one of these easy tutorials every day to quickly build your computer skills.

Netiquette Home Page
http://www.albion.com/netiquette/
Virginia Shea's book about do's and don'ts of online communication is available in its entirety.

Netiquette Guide
http://www.darkmountain.com/netiquette
Another excellent guide for online behavior, useful for both students and educators.

Net.Tutor
http://gateway.lib.ohio-state.edu/tutor/
From Ohio State, these tutorials focus on the Internet, but tutorials for other computer skills are also available.

Refdesk.com
http://www.refdesk.com
Billed as "the single best source for facts on the Net," this site includes enough strong online references to make you a believer.

Paradigm Online Writing Assistant
http://www.powa.org/
Do your students need writing help? Paradigm is a superb resource, with clear tutorials for every step of the writing process.

World Lecture Hall
http://www.utexas.edu/world/lecture/
For examples of online courses, try this Texas site, with examples from around the country.

Closing the Gap
http://www.closingthegap.com/
Here's an extremely complete site about assistive technologies for learners.

Kathy Schrock's Guide for Educators
http://school.discovery.com/schrockguide/
Kathy Schrock has helped educators master the web since its inception. Although her site aims at K-12 education, you'll still find many useful hints and links.

15 Sites from North Carolina Community Colleges

Great sites to support online learning are being built by North Carolina Community Colleges. Here are a few samples:
FOLDER
http://sco.ncccs.cc.nc.us/folder/

Asheville-Buncombe Tech CC Online Course Orientation
http://www.asheville.cc.nc.us/vcampus/Webclass_Orientation/Webclass_Orientation.html

Beaufort County CC "Key Principles for a Successful Online Experience"
http://www.beaufort.cc.nc.us/LRC/Distance/PDF/ success.pdf

Carteret CC Orientation
http://gofish.carteret.cc.nc.us/distancelearning/ orientation.htm

Catawba Valley CC Distance Education Site
http://www.cvcc.cc.nc.us/specserv/lrc/DISTLEAR.HTM

Central Carolina Distance Education Site
http://www.ccarolina.cc.nc.us/departments/distance_education/Index.html

Central Piedmont CC College Without Walls Support Center
http://cww.cpcc.cc.nc.us/support/

Cleveland CC DL Faculty Handbook
http://www.cleveland.cc.nc.us/staff/ledford/pdf/dlh.pdf

Fayetteville Tech CC Student Orientation (login with "guest" and "ftcc"
http://blackboard.faytech.cc.nc.us/courses/ADMIN002/

Guilford Tech CC Distance Education page
http://webster.gtcc.cc.nc.us/lr/distance/

Lenoir CC Distance Education Page
http://disted.lenoir.cc.nc.us/~disted/lcc.htm

Rowan-Cabarrus Distance Education Page
http://vc.rccc.cc.nc.us/

Sandhills CC: Learning and Teaching with Blackboard course (login with “guest”)
http://198.85.71.34/courses/00-00-CIS001-N01/

Southwest CC Resources for Instructors
http://www.southwest.cc.nc.us/distlearn/instructor

Wilkes CC Virtual Campus
http://204.84.96.72/virtualcampus/homepage.htm

CourseInfo Corner

Blackboard CourseInfo is the software platform of the Virtual Learning Community. Submit questions to nhollands@ncccs.cc.nc.us for consideration in our next newsletter.

Blackboard’s new Client Relationship Manager for North Carolina is Sean Meelia, available at smeelia@blackboard.com or (202) 463-4860 x452. Sharon Della, sdella@blackboard.com, and Jessica Bernhardt, jbernhardt@blackboard. com, are secondary contacts. Wendy Passman, wpassman@blackboard.com, is our primary

sales representative. Orlando Pizana leads technical support for the Southern region and Irwin Manes is the new head of technical support.

Our college license for Blackboard is coming due soon. How do we extend it for the next year? Dennis Keough, Southwestern CC

The price your college paid for its first year of Blackboard CourseInfo was guaranteed for three years by negotiations between Blackboard and the Virtual Learning Community. Blackboard will send a bill when your license is due.

Another element of the negotiation between Blackboard and the VLC was left out of some contracts. That was the agreement that the year-long license would begin on installation of software, not delivery. Blackboard has agreed to honor this original negotiating point for the initial starting date of CourseInfo contracts in North Carolina community colleges. If you receive your bill too soon, contact your Client Relations Manager and let them know of the mistake.

Blackboard representatives visited Alamance CC on April 2 for a meeting with representatives from over 40 of our community colleges. They shared information about the future of their product and plans to improve technical support. Minutes are available from Neil Hollands.

I hear a lot about disability compliance for online learning. What does this mean and is Blackboard in compliance?

Online course materials (and other web sites) should be accessible by those with disabilities. Most often, this means that sites are designed to be compatible with reading software that can read the course site aloud.

There are not yet official standards for compliance, although there has been talk recently of imposing standards. Most likely, official standards will be like those developed by the W^{3}C Consortium's Web Accessibility Initiative (online at http://www.w3.org/WAI/).

Blackboard is not currently in compliance, mostly due to design of frames in CourseInfo sites, but has a plan to phase in complete compliance over the next few software releases. Sharon Della of Blackboard shares some details:

"Phase One disability access improvements will be released in 5.5 and include:

- Add user-friendly titles to each frame.
- Add a <noframes> tag that provides direct links to the default content of the frameset and explains the layout of the frameset.
- Add meaningful Alt tags to images.
- Spacer gifs and other "architectural" graphics should have an empty Alt tag.
- Form inputs of type "image" should have an Alt tag.
- Image maps should have Alt tags for each "hot spot" (link) in the image map.
- Tables containing lists of data should identify row and column headers.

Phase Two of improvements will happen in our 6.0 release, scheduled for 2002.

Blackboard is participating in and committed to open standards. We continue to be proactive in this area and take accessibility compliance seriously."

Answers to other questions can be found at the support site http://support.blackboard.com. Before calling Blackboard, you are encouraged to review this documentation. Other help is located at either http://trainingcenter.blackboard.com or http://instructors.blackboard.com.

Contacts at other North Carolina community colleges who run Blackboard on the same kind of server as your college does are available from Neil Hollands at hollandsn@ncccs.cc.nc.us.

The Community at a Glance

The Virtual Learning Community is a collaborative effort of all 58 North Carolina community colleges, sharing resources and expertise to expand access to quality online courses and support services. Benefits to colleges include:

- A library of online credit and non-credit courses that can be offered as-is or adapted to local needs;
- Access to Blackboard CourseInfo for development or delivery of online courses or support materials;
- Online and face-to-face faculty training;
- Tips for effective online course delivery;
- Help materials for online students;
- Online student support services;
- A web listing of online offerings from each college, with links back to local web sites;
- Newsletters, online discussion, and mailing lists to spur communication;
- Evaluation materials for online courses.

In the Next Issue

- Next year's course list for Virtual Learning Community development.
- Encouraging interactivity and enthusiasm in online learners.
- Evaluating online resources.