

President's Report
State Board of Community Colleges
Dr. R. Scott Ralls
July 18, 2014

Fall registration is in full-swing at our college campuses, and this is also the time of year when college advertising hits its peak, before ceding the airways to the ubiquitous campaign ads that await us in the fall election cycle. If you drove any type of distance to today's State Board meeting, you probably also passed various billboards along the highway advertising colleges and universities, attempting to drum up enrollment for the upcoming academic year.

Several times, folks have asked me why they don't see more community colleges advertising distance education opportunities like other institutions of higher education often do this time of year. Does this mean that our community colleges are behind the curve in the move to digitized education?

Actually, it is quite the opposite. Community colleges are the forerunners in distance education, driven by the necessities of our older, nontraditional student population. Our students require flexible learning opportunities that enable them to align their course schedule with work and family responsibilities. This is also the reason that our distance education courses are very often the most popular during our hectic registration periods – a key reason why you don't often see community colleges advertising distance education courses. In other words, you don't have to sell the idea of distance education to community college students; the demand often surpasses the supply.

Something that can easily go unnoticed is how much of a national leader our North Carolina community colleges are in the distance education space, with pioneering efforts dating back almost 20 years. That's when college faculty joined together to jointly develop on-line course models in what we called the Virtual Learning Community or VLC.

To see where we are today, you just have to look at the scoreboard. Our System is only one of two states, including North Dakota, where a majority of community college students are enrolled in distance education classes. And while a few states have a higher percentage of students taking all their classes through distance education, we lead the nation for community colleges with 33.8 percent of our degree students taking some part of their coursework through distance education – that is almost twice the national average of 17.3 percent for community colleges and double the national average for four-year students of 16.3 percent, which is also the North Carolina average for four-year public colleges.

Actually, it is this notion of "some" distance education that is really taking root and growing in our System with respect to what we call "hybrid" distance education. Hybrid courses are those courses where some instruction occurs over the Internet or other technology platforms, while instruction also takes place through live interactions in a lab, shop or classroom.

Hybrid distance education offers us a great opportunity to not only be more efficient but more effective with our education – opening up the opportunity to what some refer to as the flipped classroom. Rather than an instructor lecturing in the front of a large classroom and every student moving at the same pace regardless of their capabilities or motivation, the knowledge-based portion of the instruction is offered through distance education. For example, traditional nursing lectures can be offered in on-line formats, while class time for students takes place in simulated hospital environments where students deal with realistic simulated situations they will face in the work environment.

“Some” distance education also occurs when all the assignments, classroom and online, occur through a Learning Management System. Thus, when Fayetteville Tech faced one of the worst snowstorms in years last year, all their students could continue with their studies as distance education students through the LMS. In many ways, distance education options offer a lifeline to students.

Kelli Bolick is a full-time student at Mitchell Community College with plans to transfer to Appalachian State University. She works two jobs to save money for tuition. She often attends school in morning at 9 a.m., goes to her first job at 2 p.m., then works at her second job in a restaurant until closing. She says online classes haven’t just helped her achieve her educational goals, but they’ve also helped her get on track to truly starting her life by receiving her associate degree and pursuing a bachelor’s degree in Food and Nutrition.

Martha Smith is in a wheelchair, having lost the use of her legs in an accident. Attending face-to-face classes at Davidson County Community College would be difficult, if not impossible, because she does not have regular, reliable transportation for her and her wheelchair. Online classes allow her to have a flexible schedule to accommodate the challenges that come with her situation. Martha has been in the online program for more than a year and has been making consistent progress toward her High School Equivalency, despite the challenges she faces.

Distance education is what enables us to serve our special population of working students more effectively, particularly our highly regarded enlisted service members. Multiple stories can be told of community college soldiers, sailors, marines and airmen based in North Carolina, fighting overseas, who, while studying through distance education, hurriedly rush away for combat, and then return to their studies once the combat is over.

Michael Webb of Hillsborough graduated from Vance-Granville Community College in 2009 with an Associate in Arts degree. He was president of the VGCC chapter of the Phi Theta Kappa honor society and the student speaker at commencement. He took his first course, Psychology 150, online while serving in the United States Navy, as his ship was conducting counter-intelligence operations off the coast of China – adding new meaning to the word “distance” in “distance education.” After being honorably discharged from the Navy, he finished his degree with a combination of online and traditional classes.

Distance education is also what allows us to guarantee in-state tuition to military members and their dependents who continue their education elsewhere once deployed, helping us justify our claim as the nation's most military-friendly state.

After twenty years, we can also rightly lay claim to being one of the nation's leaders in distance education, a spot that was perhaps somewhat predicted by noted innovation guru and Harvard professor, Clayton Christensen, who cited our distance education efforts as an example of applying "disruptive innovation" to public education. And innovations keep moving forward, particularly through the development of learning objects, the micro learning components that form the parts of distance courses, developed by our faculty and staff and made available to colleges and public schools throughout North Carolina through our pioneering Learning Object Repository.

I wanted to leave you with one of our more recent examples. An area of distance education where we are clearly world leaders is biotechnology and life sciences, thanks to our BioNetwork programs and particularly the innovations generated at BioNetwork's Learning Solutions Center at Gaston College. Each year, this Board approves the financial disbursements to the colleges that host BioNetwork professionals and what you're about to see is just one small example of the work they do in bringing a creative approach to learning online, in the classroom and in industries around our state.

I know you've seen the explosion of interest in books, movies, videos, etc. related to zombies. It might sound strange, but our innovators developed a lab safety learning program and an accompanying music video using a zombie apocalypse created by lab missteps as the "hook."

"Zombie College" has won numerous awards including "Best-in-Show" from the International eLearning Guild and several Silver Awards of Distinction from the 2014 Communicator Awards. The entire "Zombie College" experience is about 15 minutes long so our resident creative mind, Dr. Matt Meyer, put together a short "mash-up" of the learning experience and the music video to give you an idea of why it is so distinctive.

You can get the full "Zombie College" immersion at www.ncbionetwork.org.

There is also a "Zombie College" mini-game available from that website on Facebook.

And, as they say at "Zombie College," if we all spread the word, we might just save the day.