

Online Learning at the University of Central Florida

Denise Lowe and Tina Calandrino

INTRODUCTION

Since its inception in 1995, online teaching and learning at the University of Central Florida (UCF) has continued to expand and become more sophisticated in the use of tools, technologies, and best practices. Its impact is reflected in the growth of the institution, success of students and faculty, and information-sharing on national and international levels. What began as a Board of Regents project and an attempt to save a UCF program became a major turning

point for the university, eventually distinguishing UCF as a world-class model for distributed learning.

BEGINNING YEARS: 1995–2000

Steve Sorg, teaching in the College of Education's Vocational Education and Industry Training program, was also involved with a Board of Regents Distance Learning Project grant and was looking at instructional models that would demonstrate both time and place independence. Looking to



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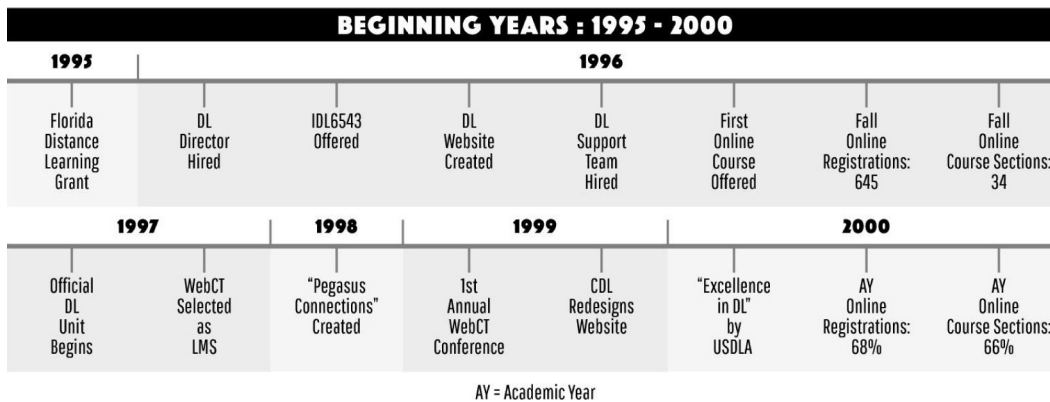


Figure 1. Growth of the Center for Distributed Learning at UCF, 1995–2000.

breathe new life into his program, he decided to take a leap of faith and put a course online, meeting the instructional model parameters of the Board of Regents Distance Learning Project. Barbara Truman, a graduate student in instructional systems technology at UCF, was invited to complete her internship design plan in this venture.

Since topical research was scarce in this time period, the team looked to the British Open University System, the only active web-enhanced distance learning program in 1995. Up against a lack of technology and computer service knowledge, Sorg and Truman developed the very first online course at UCF, Special Methods in Teaching Vocational Education (EVT3312, EVT3371 and BTE4410). Sorg realized that by reaching out to nontraditional, full-time working students wanting to find more convenient and accessible ways of obtaining teacher certifications, that online education could be a successful venture. Realizing the need for support to make this course work, he and Barbara approached Joel Hartman, Vice Provost of Information Technologies and Resources, and asked for assistance with background computer programming technology. At the time, Hartman happened to be working with a presidential task force that was looking for ways to guide the university into the unex-

plored world of “world wide web” teaching and learning. He asked the team to speak at an upcoming dean’s retreat, where their ideas could be advanced. Kathryn L. Seidel, Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences, realized the value of the presentation, and helped to champion the cause for online learning at UCF by requesting that Sorg and Truman be “the” online learning department.

Shortly after the retreat, the first online course debuted in May 1996, anticipating 30 students. A successful surprise came when 70 students statewide registered and attended the course taught by Sorg. The Vice Provost of Academic Programs then hired Truman, who had graduated during the summer, and paired her with Sorg to begin a series of faculty development workshops. Since these workshops needed to take place all over campus, the two set up these early courses with “one laptop computer and a TV tray for a desk” (CDL Video Team, 2013).

Requests for online course setups after the workshop flooded Truman’s desk. Quickly realizing that the demand would only continue to increase, more staff were hired during the summer of 1996. In fall 1996, Truman hired one part-time instructional designer to work with faculty in the development of their online courses, and one full-time coder for the web pages. Col-

lege enrollment was peaking at almost 12,000 students, and 645 students had now enrolled in 34 online course sections. Within a year, this was now an official department named “Distributed Learning Course Development,” under the direction of Hartman and the Information Technologies and Resources unit. The client base was growing due to this move, and a full-time instructional designer and a software engineer were now added to the department. The creation of a main database, processes for scalability, and a programmer made it easier to serve the growing faculty needs.

By the end of 1997, Sorg was appointed director, and the department was renamed “Course Development and Web Services” or CDWS. The next year saw an evolution in online course development and web services as campus-wide Web support and new leadership was added. This year marks the selection of the faculty-selected online learning management system: WebCT. This allowed an even wider access to developing online courses by the beginning of 1998, and the faculty development workshops provided the basis for a unique compact disc full of information for the faculty completers. Named *The Pegasus Connections*, this disc was:

a compilation of resources for faculty and students which contained numerous tutorials on required technical skills ranging from an introduction to computers to how to log into their course and use WebCT. Students were able to use the disc to learn new skills, improve existing skills, or check their knowledge. The tutorials included QuickTime movies, self-check quizzes, and practice exercises. Many faculty members assigned the practice exercises from the disc in their online courses. The disc was also used to assist users in setting up a dial-up connection from their home computer to the university’s network via a wizard-driven interface. (CDL Archive History, personal communication collective, 2010)

According to Linda Futch, Department Head for Course Design and Delivery, who joined the team full-time in 1998, there was excitement that something different was happening. Barbara’s team was almost flying under the radar by encouraging faculty to adopt features of WebCT, even if not teaching a fully online or mixed mode course. Futch explained that instead of mandating faculty to go online, people would come onboard with the idea once they were less intimidated by the learning management system (LMS) and the technology in general (L. Futch, personal communication, May 10, 2017). The year 1999 brought focus to the fast-growing, award-winning department, and CDWS was awarded a prestigious grant to develop statewide train-the-trainer curriculum. The team of four soon grew to seven, officially naming the blended faculty development program IDL6543- *Interactive Distributed Learning*. Upgrading from a rolling cart and TV table, the CDWS team were packing up cars to travel the state to teach best practices for online course adoption. At a time when distance learning was mostly comprised of video recordings or mail-in workbook packets, CDWS was sharing a new climate change for this arena. Recognizing this trendsetting department, the United States Distance Learning Association awarded UCF the Excellence in Distance Learning Program Award. The award lauded UCF’s comprehensive approach to supporting faculty and students engaged in distance learning, leading a transition into the new millennia for CDWS.

TRANSITIONAL YEARS: 2001–2008

Kelvin Thompson, Director of CDL’s Online Design and Development Strategies, is often found commenting that the early years felt like “laying the tracks with the train steaming behind” (K. Thompson, personal communication, May 9, 2017). Technology that is now taken for granted

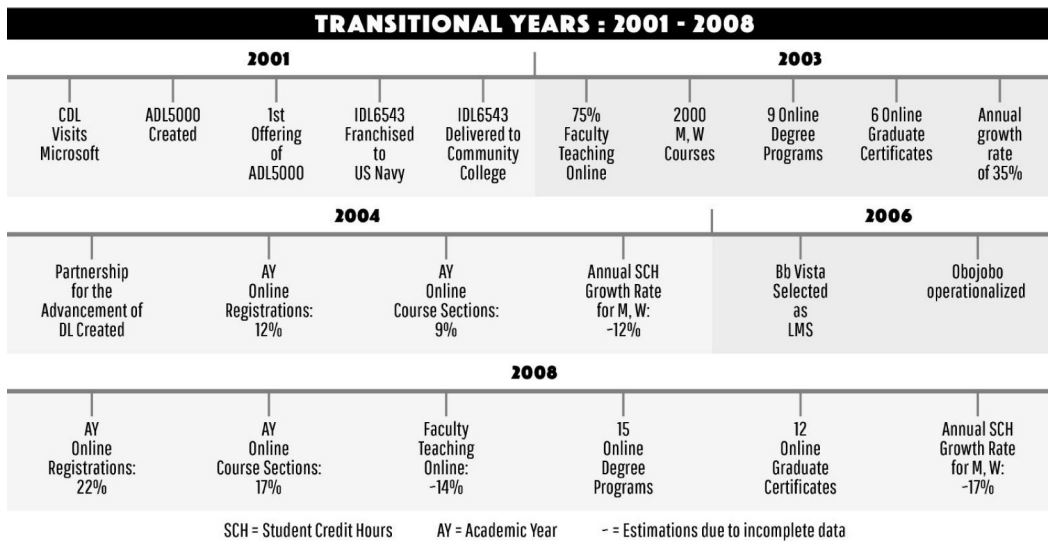


Figure 2. Growth of the Center for Distributed Learning at UCF, 2001-2008.

was new and changing monthly, and CDWS was excitedly moving distributed learning from the old-school correspondence courses into a brand new vista. Acceptance was now coming from the UCF President and Provost, the State's Department of Education, and national associations of distance learning. The growth of a team of a few people with new ideas was now morphing into a large-scale, far-reaching planning agency with varied responsibilities.

Thompson said those transitional years felt as if the "decentralized thoughts and views now had to be made into one centralized mission" (K. Thompson, personal communication, May 9, 2017). The team doubled in size by hiring additional designers, then assistant designers. Leadership activities and roles were divided between Truman's original team, with some roles focusing on faculty programs, others on college outreach as interest in CDWS continued to grow. Policy and structure began to create even further outreach for the department. UCF-CDWS instructional designers were invited to several universities to teach IDL6543 work-

shops; and in 2001 a partnership agreement was signed to deliver IDL6543 at Naval Postgraduate schools.

Now regarded as a successful program to "engage faculty with real-world course development experiences, offer all participants flexibility as adult learners with busy work schedules, and nurture a sense of connectedness and collegiality among faculty participants" (Chen, Sugar, & Bauer, 2012), this original faculty development course was no longer serving the needs of the faculty participants, based on curriculum reviews and faculty feedback. In 1995, the course was developed by two people and delivered to a handful of participants. By 2001, the course needed to incorporate a full-team of instructional designers; eight weekly face-to-face sessions; all day lecture workshops; mandatory technology labs; one-on-one instructional design consultations; and, completion of weekly online assignments to model strong course design strategy. Between program outreach and the ongoing need to develop and maintain online courses through faculty support, CDWS expanded once again.

Instructional designers were teaching, training, traveling, designing, coaching on and revising course curriculum. The one-stop shop approach no longer could do it all. Assistants to the instructional designers were hired to focus on the technical support of the faculty who had completed IDL6543, and work on special projects. Two graphic designers were added to help create standardized and copyright-compliant images. Videographers were hired to replace the instructional designers' tripod camera. Three part-time students were hired to develop in-house educational games. "Techrangers" also worked part-time to solve the coding and database needs, along with one full-time LMS manager. With all these services, administrative support was hired to handle the front office, and paperwork. CDWS now was almost 18 strong and serving approximately 75% of all UCF faculty members—those engaged in teaching online courses—developing nearly 2,000 online courses, including 9 online degree programs and 6 online graduate certificates with an annual growth rate of 35% by 2003 (CDL Archive History, personal communication collective, 2010).

With all this growth, however, the need to spend time teaching technology, such as Dreamweaver, was quickly overshadowing course pedagogy and universal design principles. The inclusion of course accessibility needs could now be addressed, including professional video captioning, integrated icons and games, and an even more rigorous and continued assessment of the faculty development process as instructional designers turned their skills to a more faculty-centered needs approach. Always with a systematic, sustainable approach to faculty support and development in mind, CDWS began planning sessions with the deans of all UCF colleges to review current and future online activities. The *Essentials of WebCT* course was created, providing a self-paced guide to mastering the LMS. The need for

instructors to facilitate a previously developed, IDL6543 faculty-certified course was the driving force behind the development of *ADL5000-Advanced Distributed Learning*. This fully online abbreviated model focused on the knowledge of how to use and apply the LMS technology and principles of course design, allowing only small changes to be made in the already developed content.

Online teaching and learning at UCF was also outgrowing the LMS. UCF adopted Blackboard Vista after a full pilot of Blackboard Vista 4 in fall of 2006 with a select group of faculties. This allowed a much needed operationalized learning object system (later dubbed *Obojobo*) to meet the needs of the information fluency initiative (QEP for SACS-COC requirements). After being awarded the Sloan-C inaugural Ralph E. Gomory Award for Quality Online Education (based on the Sloan-C pillars of quality online education), UCF announced that fully 17% of all students were taking an online course, 15 programs were online, and there were 12 online graduate certificates. According to Director Barbara Truman (2004), CDWS was now:

a full-service, multimedia production house employing graphic artists who make up the Digital Media Team, flash and multimedia programmers who make up the New Media Team, video producers who make up the Video Convergence Team and student web programmers call the Techrangers. These experts combined with the authority of the Instructional Design Team, and the systems of support create considerable capacity for institutional transformation through online learning. (p. 92)

GROWTH YEARS: 2009–PRESENT

In February 2009, Thomas Cavanagh began his journey as the department's new Associate Vice President of Distributed Learning to bring oversight and clarity to

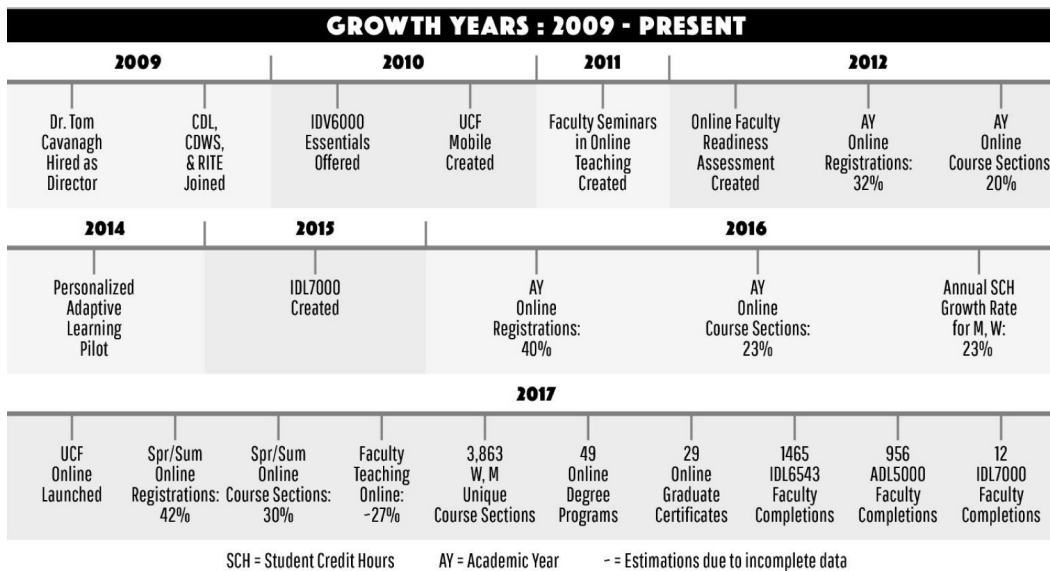


Figure 3. Growth of the Center for Distributed Learning at UCF, 2009–present.

the various sectors now supporting online learning at UCF. Through the efforts of Cavanagh, distributed learning at UCF was coming full circle to the original ideals of Steve Sorg—connecting with students who want to learn, yet need the flexibility and interaction that online learning could bring by “better serv(ing) existing students or reaching out to potential new students” with emphasis on courses for students who were not just geographically distant, but those that needed flexibility due to other life demands (Cavanagh, 2016). To meet the burgeoning demand for IT and faculty support, CDWS was split into two distinct sections, per its name—Course Design and Web Services. The Center for Distributed Learning (CDL) became the new official name of the Course Design department. The Research Institute for Teaching Effectiveness (RITE) also became a part of CDL to conduct ongoing research into course modality success rates and other related topics (“The New Is Now the Norm,” 2013). Cavanagh is often quoted as saying, “Students don’t care about modality. They want what they want when they

want it” (para. 2). The number of online enrollments certainly proved him correct; at the onset of fall 2009, the number of online students (across W, M, RV, or V modality) had grown to 25,039.

The new Center for Distributed Learning began to develop its own identity and culture of strategic innovations in online learning. Teams were more integrated for project work and understanding of the technology and usage needs of faculty. Three illustrious awards accorded UCF in 2011 illustrated that by uniting and advancing ideas, breakthroughs will happen:

- Davis Productivity Award: Developed and Implemented Digital Banner Search Tool. University of Central Florida staff developed a first-in-Florida graphical banner search tool for online courses that reduced the time spent by faculty, instructional and graphic designers on creating banners by 50%, saving more than \$17,000 in 8 months.
- Davis Productivity Award: Techrangers and Advanced Systems Team developed

a client and course management, workflow, and reporting system to support 96,000 students, faculty, and staff and content for 10,000 online course sections at the third largest public university in the United States. More than \$100,000 in development costs was saved.

- SLOAN-C Effective Practices Award Winner—UCF's Online Faculty Readiness Assessment: A web-based form and corresponding rubric that assess a faculty member's prior online teaching experience. This instrument is competency-based and determines if the candidate's experience, practices, and teaching philosophy meet university standards and conventions, and potentially, exempt them from the faculty development training that is required for all online instructors. (CDL Archive History, personal communication collective, 2010)

Cavanagh's thought process in his first years was twofold: To aid the online learning community at UCF by asking, "How can online learning help you accomplish what you wish to do?" (K. Thompson, personal communication, May 9, 2017).

Over the past five years, the online learning initiative at the University of Central Florida (UCF) has grown exponentially. Compared with the previous academic year, for example, the increase of online learning in 2011–2012 accounted for 94.15% of the growth in UCF's student credit hours, including 32.27% of the overall hours, 43.03% of the graduate hours, and 73.62% of the regional student hours. This growth trend created a need for an expanded faculty development program to prepare UCF faculty to teach online. Thus, in 2010 the university's Center for Distributed Learning (CDL) redesigned our flagship faculty development course in interactive distributed learning (IDL6543) to provide more effective and efficient training to accommodate the increasing demands for online learning. (Chen, Sugar, & Bauer, 2012, para. 1)

This vision of the expansion of online teaching and learning to reach existing and new students is shared by Cavanagh ("The New is Now the Norm," 2013):

The growth in online offerings clearly enables UCF to educate more students without having to invest in new buildings, parking and other factors that traditionally limit university attendance. But even more important, is that the expansion of online learning makes education available to people who face significant obstacles to attending traditional classes—whether for medical, geographic or scheduling reason. (para. 13)

Growth also means change, and this growing University once again needed a new LMS to incorporate CDL's inventive successes with an easier integration of technology. After a lengthy selection process, Canvas was selected as the new LMS in 2012, ushering in a meaningful and necessary partnership with an LMS provider that was receptive to being on the cutting edge of change management. As stated by Linda Futch, Department Head of CDL Course Design and Delivery (L. Futch, personal communication, May 10, 2017):

We've always had people who are really into technology, with great ideas, that always weren't sustainable. Now we see more who are interested in integrating technology that already exists, like Twitter, and are open to meaningfully adding that to their course. People watch their industry, so if there is a lot of blogging, they would add that to the course immediately.

Cavanagh (2017) contends that "online learning is in the process of turning a corner" (para. 7). No longer is just having an online program innovative. It is what CDL is doing with the online programs here at UCF that defines innovation. "We hear language along the lines of ... 'We need this, how can you help us accomplish that?'" (L. Futch, personal communication, May 10,

2017). This pushes the process of innovation. Benchmark projects continue to be the norm at CDL in both online faculty professional development and technology:

- *Online Faculty Readiness Assessment (OFRA)*, designed for incoming faculty with previous online training and experience, who may now be certified to design and develop online courses for UCF in lieu of required online faculty professional development;
- *Faculty Seminars in Online Teaching*, faculty professional development offerings that take place each semester highlighting new trends;
- *Personalized Adaptive Learning (PAL)*, designed to offer an accelerated learning path for students, implemented in 2014 launching three courses;
- *Interactive Distributed Learning 7000 (IDL7000)*, a faculty professional development course created in 2015 for those who completed IDL6543 at least 5 years earlier and desire to remain current with course design and technologies at UCF; and,
- *UDOIT*, a proactive, automated accessibility course checker that can fix minor issues and alert faculty to others.

While this list is not exhaustive, it demonstrates the innovative spirit that is alive and well at UCF. As CDL continues to expand, Cavanagh (2017) knows that “Investing in and supporting such an environment of innovation and experimentation, will likely yield the next game changer in higher education” (para. 12).

UPCOMING ARTICLE SERIES

Future articles in this series focus on key topics related to the growth of online learning at UCF, including professional faculty development programs for online and blended teaching, evaluating quality issues related to online learning and the use of evaluative rubrics, facilitating professors in

their online course design, open educational resources and eTextbooks, and exploring alternative models for online instruction.

Denise Lowe and Tina Calandrino explore “Faculty Development and UCF” by reviewing each of the professional faculty development programs offered for online teaching at UCF. Their article focuses on the award-winning flagship program, IDL6543, and offers insights into the program design and faculty relationships with instructional designers.

UCF is addressing issues of quality in course designs and the use of evaluative rubrics. In “Quality Issues and Online Learning: How Rubrics Help,” authors Denise Lowe, Amanda Major, Aimee deNoyelles, and Tina Calandrino present the foundation of a new quality initiative at UCF that is positioned to work in tandem with new, upcoming statewide quality standards. Approaches taken to create a UCF-specific quality rubric, and communication approaches for implementation, are discussed.

Strategies for multiple course designs are showcased in the article entitled “Online Course Design: Helping Professors Make the Switch.” Based on their work representing faculty in varied collegial disciplines, Denise Lowe and Tina Calandrino share their ideas to increase faculty satisfaction with the world of hybrid and online teaching.

Evidence of the acceptance and adoption rates of open educational resources and eTextbooks at UCF is provided in the article titled “eTextbooks and Open Educational Resources: Pros and Cons.” Aimee deNoyelles and Denise Lowe explore the investigation, adoption, and research into this emerging focus area, as well as advantages and disadvantages for both students and faculty.

Case use methods are examined by authors Denise Lowe and Tina Calandrino in the article entitled “Exploration of Alternative Models for Online Instruction.” Per-

sonalized adaptive learning, competency-based education, and virtual reality are some of the models discussed as they are currently utilized at UCF, or are under review for possible future implementation.

Additional articles related to the growth of online learning at UCF—especially those that focus on current and emerging trends, tools, and technologies—are under consideration. Look for other upcoming articles in this series as we share this continuing journey for UCF!

CONCLUSION

The growth of CDL continues unabated. While IDL6543 remains the flagship online faculty development program at UCF, numerous alternative programs have been created to meet the various faculty development and course delivery needs of such a large university; many of these options will be explored in future articles. Expansion of the unit occurs as required by institutional need and in accordance with budget limitations. The support of online teaching and learning is fostered by the highest levels of the university administration, has become an integral part of the institutional culture, and is reflected in quality by UCF students, faculty, and CDL employees.

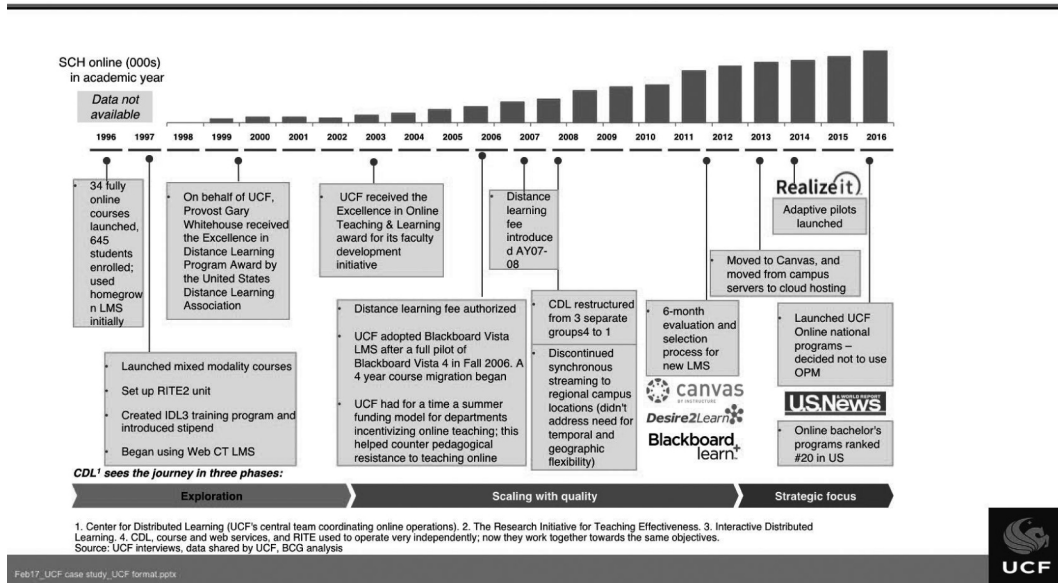
Author Note: Tommi Barrett-Greenly, a former instructional designer in the Center for Distributed Learning at the University

of Central Florida, contributed to this article.

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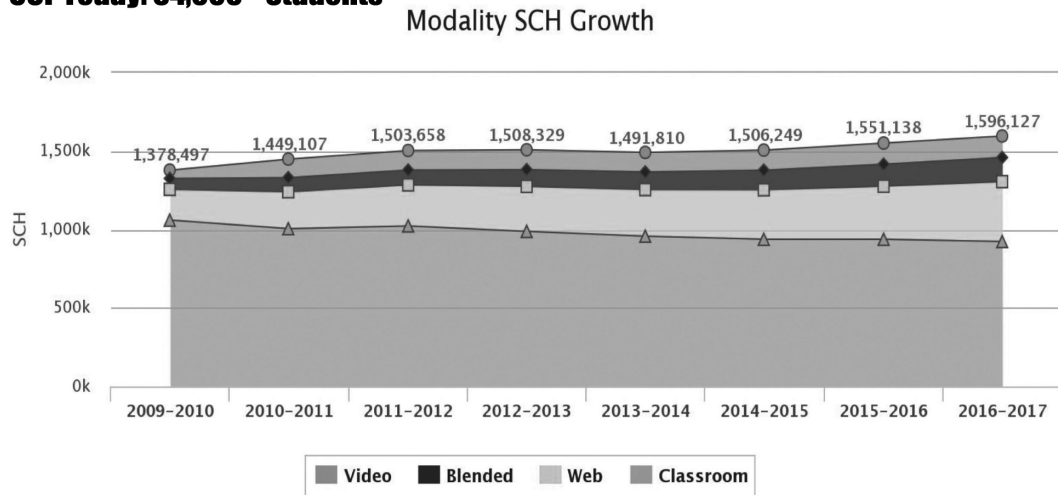
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APPENDIX A: TIMELINE OF UCF'S DIGITAL LEARNING DEVELOPMENT



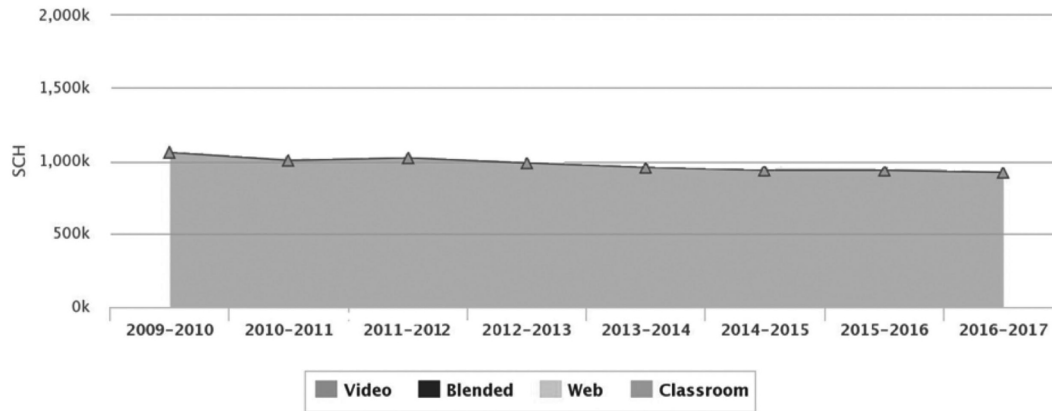
APPENDIX B: COMPARISON OF STUDENT CREDIT HOURS

UCF Today: 64,000+ Students

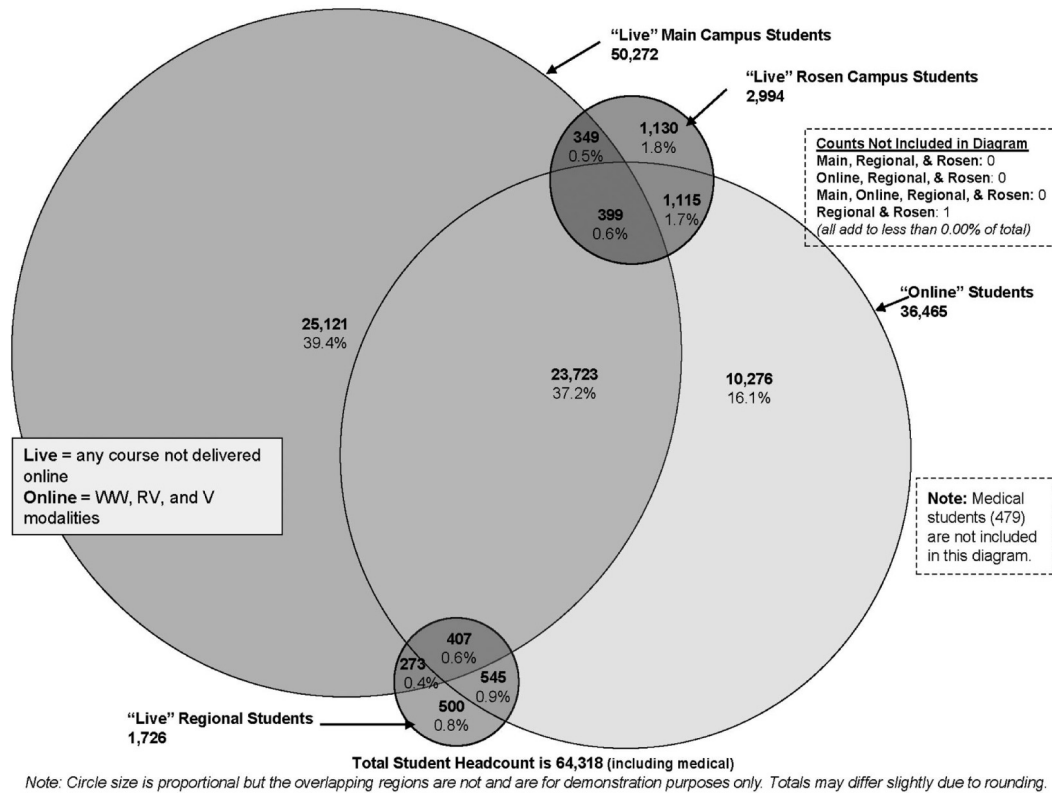


Without Online Learning: 40,000 Students

Modality SCH Growth



APPENDIX C: FALL 2016 PRELIMINARY STUDENT HEADCOUNT IN ALL COURSE MODALITIES



APPENDIX D: HISTORY OF ONLINE LEARNING AWARDS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

BEGINNING YEARS : 1995 - 2000																			
1995		1996		1997		1998		1999		2000									
Florida Distance Learning Grant		First Online Course Offered		Official Distance Learning Unit Begins		Named Best Practice Institution		Statewide Grant: "WebCT Zone"		"Excellence in Distance Learning" by USDLA									
TRANSITIONAL YEARS : 2001 - 2008																			
2001			2002			2003			2008										
IDL6543 Franchised to United States Navy			IDL6543 Delivered to Community College			UCF recognized as "WebCT Institute"			Campus Tours 4-Star Award			WebCT Exemplary Course Award			Excellence in Online Teaching & Learning Award				
2005			2006			2008			2008										
Educause Teaching & Learning Award			Outstanding Achievement Sloan-C Award			Davis Productivity Award (2)			Telly: Excellence in Video Production			Sloan-C Effective Practice Award			Quality Online Education Award				
GROWTH YEARS : 2009 - PRESENT																			
2009					2010														
Telly: Excellence in Video Production		Excellence in Online Teaching & Learning Award			Excellence in Online Teaching & Learning Award			Tegrity: Student Achievement Award		Telly: Bronze Award									
2011																			
Frank Mayadas Leadership Award		Telly: Excellence in Video Production		Davis Productivity Award (2)		The Communicator Award (2)		Sloan-C Effective Practices Award		FL TaxWatch: Davis Productivity Award (2)		Telly: Bronze Award (2)		Telly: Excellence in Video Production		Gold Communicator Award (3)		Silver Communicator Award (2)	
2012					2013														
Sloan-C Award: Excellence in Institution-Wide Online Education		Tegrity: Student Achievement Award			Tegrity: President Award			Best of Competition: BEA		"Best of": Brouhaha Film & Video		WOW Award: Obojobo		Sloan-C Effective Practice Award: OFRA		FL Historical Society Hampton Dunn Internet Award			
2014					2015														
OLC Fellow: Dr. Cavanagh		Connected Learning App: OneSearch Lite		FL TaxWatch: Prudential Productivity Award (2)		Suncoast Emmy Award		Best Documentary Award		International Jury Award for Best Documentary		OLC Effective Practice Award: UDOIT		21st Century Best Practice Award for DL: USDLA		IMS Global Learning Consortium		2nd Annual App Challenge	
2016					2017														
IMS Global Learning Consortium		3rd Annual App Challenge		Center of Excellence Award: NMC		Campus Technology Innovators Award: UDOIT		Horizon Report Video Competition: Educause		Quality Research Paper: USDLA		Outstanding Leadership Award		Collective Impact Excellence Award		Davis Productivity Award			