

A Surging Education Sector

Online Learning for High School Through College

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When asked about the benefits distance learning offers, near the top of the list is always the reach of online learning, that is, folks who otherwise could not attend a brick-and-mortar college, the disabled, active military personnel, adults working full time and/or serving as caregivers, and those living in an area where no college or university is nearby. Yet there is one more group that enormously benefits from distance learning but is seldom mentioned nor considered, and their numbers are growing rapidly: high school students who take college courses for credit through online learning.

For 10 years I have taught this population through Daemen College's (Snyder, NY) superb distance learning program. Why should a college seek out high school students as part of its student demographic? Daemen College's President, Gary Olson, perhaps best sums it up: "One role of a college is to make available the opportunity to learn for as many individuals as possible. Teaching high school seniors through our distance learning program helps to achieve that, while introducing the students to Daemen College and the higher degree of standard that college requires."

While 800,000 high school students took advantage of college-sponsored distance learning courses in 2002–2003, 1.3 million did this in the 2010–2011 school year, a 67% increase, the most recent data available ("Number of High School," 2013)—and this growth continues at a fast pace. What is the attraction to the high schools? There are several reasons: students earn college credits while still in high school; the cost per course is nearly always lower than if taken as a "regular" student in a 2- or 4-year college; the high school student is introduced to the expectations of university life, especially professor demands, the need for excellent time management skills, being held to a higher degree of standard (than that of a high school student), and the need for more self-responsibility and discipline. Tom Sullivan, principal of Bishop Timon-St. Jude (Buffalo, NY)—one of the high schools I teach—offers that "Our distance learning class has been a godsend for our seniors. Our young men are able to take a college level writing course, which is great preparation for what is expected on the collegiate level, not to mention that the seniors can earn 6 college credits as well. I cannot tell you how valuable this class has been for Bishop Timon-St. Jude High School."

How does a college enlist high schools, and how does a college go about developing a successful high school distance learning program? The steps are several—but as President Olson, Principal Sullivan, and I have discovered, the end result can be a quality education program that greatly assists any high school student who takes part and tremendously extends the educational and community reach of a college. Here's how:

A—DEVELOPING THE PROGRAM

- **The college must have the technological capabilities to offer distance learning.** Having the idea to offer distance learning programs to high schools must be backed up by a solid technological capability at the college. With the exponential growth of online learning nearly all colleges and universities now have such capability—but it is crucial to be sure all components are in place. Speak with the person at your school who oversees distance learning; he or she can immediately tell you if your school is ready for such a program or if one or more components are missing.
- **There must be a full endorsement and total cooperation of the program and course(s) to be taught by the department(s) whose courses will be offered.** Several dots have to be connected for a high school distance learning program to go off smoothly, and one of these is total agreement of the program and the courses offered by the department(s) under which the programs reside. Speak with the department chair(s), and be sure you go in with a solid outline of what is intended and how the course(s) will be presented. And it is important to stress that although the course(s) is/are being offered to high school students they will be subject to the same quality and standards as if offered to students attending the college full time.
- **The college must have fully qualified faculty to teach such courses.** Any faculty member teaching a college course through distance learning to high school students must come with two important basics: highly qualified to teach the subject(s) and familiar with teaching courses through distance learning. The former, most would say, is a given: seldom is a school going to allow someone to teach a course in which he or she does not have at least a master's degree and (preferably) real world experience. But it is in the latter where problems so often occur: teaching a course online is far different from teaching it in a face-to-face environment, and many online courses have failed because the faculty member did not know how to teach via online and in the format the college school will use (e.g., fully online, live camera and online, etc.) (Note: If you cannot find a faculty member with online experience contact me for assistance.)
- **The high school must have the technological capability to host distance learning programs.** No matter how wonderful the college's distance learning setup might be the high school(s) involved in the distance learning program must also have the technological capability to be involved in such a program. The first conversation will be with the principal or headmaster, of course, but then you might be directed to someone at the school who oversees any distance learning that takes place at the school. You do not have to be fully knowledgeable in what the school needs; rather, the person overseeing distance learning at your college would want to speak with the person in charge of a similar program in high school to be sure the high school has all necessary computer facets and systems for a

smooth interchange between the two schools.

- **The courses offered must be in sync with related departments in the high school and must be approved by the principal or headmaster.** This comes down to a total sign-off of approval at the high school: from the person in charge of the school to the head of the department where such a course would piggyback on the high school courses offered (for example: a college English Composition 101 course should be a natural extension of a junior or senior English course in composition taught at the high school) to the faculty member at the high school who will oversee the distance learning end of the program. And throughout the course all three should be kept up to date on the progress of the course.
- **The high school must have a distance learning-savvy faculty member in any room where the course takes place if part of the course is live interaction via camera.** Many high school distance learning programs are offered with partial or full use of a live camera feed (i.e., the students and college faculty member see and hear each other in real time). In such a situation it has often happened that a distance learning program begins, and the faculty member in the room with the high school students has little to no knowledge of the technical aspects of the course, and thus when a problem pops up a session is lost or delayed. When possible always have a tech-savvy faculty member in the room; when this is not possible have someone in school at the ready in case such a problem occurs.
- **The students signing up for the distance learning course(s) must be made aware of what to expect.** High school students taking the distance learning course should have a primer on how the course will differ from a face-to-face course, have a tutorial in the course

delivery system (Blackboard, eCollege, LEO, etc.), be reminded of the importance of meeting deadlines and participating in all areas of the course, and that they will be taking a college course, not a high school one, thus they will be held to the same standards of any college student. Simply starting a course without the students being aware of this will lead to many problems with the course.

B—HAVING A SUCCESSFUL PROGRAM

- **Having qualified faculty is key.** This cannot be stressed enough: any faculty member teaching a high school course associated with a college must not only be thoroughly qualified in the subject (nearly always with at least a master's degree and preferably professional experience in the subject) and be familiar with teaching in a distance learning environment, but also must know how to engage students, be personable and enthusiastic, be adept at motivating, practice timeliness in all types of communication with students and assignment feedback, and excel at providing positive feedback. If any of these areas are missing or weak the distance learning program will suffer.
- **The course must be designed/presented around the distance learning environment.** Just as there are differences between teaching a course face-to-face versus online there are also differences in the way a course is structured to be taught online. For example, as there are no set meeting times, dates for submission of assignments and other items become crucial; unlike a face-to-face class, online discussion becomes an integral part of any distance learning course, and should be set to function throughout the course; students must understand how to submit attachments, where to look for class announcements and course syllabus, and how to access

online lectures/textbooks; and where a Resources link can be found for videos, audio clips, and related articles to help understand the course material. And all students and faculty must be thoroughly familiar with the virtual campus platform.

- **Glitches will happen: this must be accepted, and they must be worked around.** No matter how much planning is put into an online course, and no matter how up-to-date the technology—glitches will pop up! It could be minor, such as a loose wire, or major—the instructor’s computer crashes—but no matter the problem the course must go on, and thus it is important to always think of a Plan B and Plan C in the event of X, Y, or Z interferes with the smooth operation of the online course. Let students know this on Day 1 of class, with any options you have devised: the more secure the students feel you have the course under control no matter what, the better course experience all will have.
- **Constant emphasis must be placed on students for engagement, meeting deadlines, and a focus on the course.** For any online course to be successful students must be engaged, deadlines need to be met, and there must be a strong student focus on the course. But these are taken to a new level with high school students: most taking online courses through college are seniors, and thus they may be in grasp of “senioritis” (i.e., not having a strong focus on their courses); often, high school students are used to much more reminding of deadlines than is given by college professors; and students need understand the importance of the course(s) being taken in their lives (always connect courses and course subject to “the real world”) and throughout their college “careers.” In essence, high school students must be made to think and act as college students.

- **The faculty member must be constantly communicating with the class and be timely in all correspondence.** In every survey taken of online students that asks for the #1 problem they encountered in taking an online class the answer is always the same: lack of communication/lack of timely communication from the instructor. No matter how well an online course has been set up and no matter how thorough the content, it is the faculty member who motivates, who engages, who guides, who excites, who reminds the students; without his or her continual presence the course falls flat. Be sure the faculty member teaching the online course knows this—and adheres to it.
- **There must be a melding of the college and high school requirements and procedures.** Unlike the typical college student who resides only in a college or university, the high school student taking online college courses remains in high school while also in college. Thus, not only must procedures, deadlines, and requirements of the college be followed but also those of the high school must be observed. As an example: while nearly all colleges and universities ask for grades in letter form high schools usually require these numerically, thus both must be available. Be sure to check with the high school principal/headmaster, academic director, and department chair (of the related course) for this information—just as you would for the college you represent.

Remember: Mr. Miyagi reached out to and schooled Daniel—and look at how he turned out!

REFERENCE

Number of High School Students Taking College Courses Surges. (2013, March 18). Retrieved December 26, 2015, from Diverse Issues in Higher Education website: <http://diverseeducation.com/article/52014/>