

A Vision for Statewide Undergraduate Teaching Programs

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Issue:

At the University of Florida College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, Statewide Programs are undergraduate degree completion programs (often termed “2+2”) offered at one of several locations outside of the main campus in Gainesville. The programs offer place bound students educational opportunities that would not exist otherwise, and were seen as a way of reaching new audiences with undergraduate programs in the agricultural and life sciences. However, the programs have never achieved reasonable enrollments and suffer from relatively high cost of delivery. Additionally, faculty involved have experienced high rates of attrition. Prior to 2009, the programs were delivered predominantly live by cohorts of faculty at various Research and Education Centers, although some courses were shared among centers using interactive videoconferencing, and a few courses were offered online. A vision was advanced and vetted in early 2010 to transform the programs to blended instruction mode, where the majority of instruction would occur online, and critical live activities would be preserved.

What has been done:

A draft vision statement was produced in December of 2009 and first vetted with the college dean and associate dean, then unit leaders from the centers and departments involved in Statewide Programs. Care was taken to use the term “A vision” rather than “The vision” to indicate that the proposal was one of perhaps several ways forward and feedback on the plan was welcome. The revised draft was discussed at the 2010 Statewide Programs meeting, involving teaching faculty, staff, and unit leaders (copy attached). An exercise was undertaken to demonstrate the curricular change and planning needed to transform the programs to predominantly online instruction over three years, and representatives of each major reported their initial thinking to the group. Follow up meetings were held over the next 6 months with faculty, and unit leaders met in December 2010 for one additional opportunity to report progress on vision implementation and suggest changes. Hardware and software resources were deployed in the affected units, and instructional design training was made available to faculty in 2010. A minigrants program was put in place to provide seed money to incentivize faculty to align their teaching activities with the vision.

Impacts/New Partnerships:

The number of online courses and learning materials has increased sharply as of July 2011, and increased enrollment has been noted at two of five centers that offer Statewide Programs. A new program in Microbiology and Cell Science was initiated and will enroll its first cohort Fall 2011; this program serves as a model for others as it has two critical lab courses taught live and the remainder of the curriculum online.

New partnerships include one with Miami Dade College, where the Microbiology program has been launched, and preliminary discussions with Edison State College in Ft. Myers and Brevard Community College in Cocoa Beach. Perhaps most importantly, there is a greater sense of unity between Gainesville-based faculty and those located at outlying centers, which is critically important to success of the new curricula.

Outcome of Project (societal impact/ measure of increased quality of life): Once reticent to change from live teaching and the problematic interactive videoconference platform, many faculty have embraced online instruction. Students have benefitted from greater flexibility in learning, less need for driving to centers to receive instruction, and greater numbers of courses available. While overall enrollment is up, it is impossible to attribute all of the increase to the implementation of the vision, and enrollment needs to increase two- to three-fold in the next few years to be considered a success.

A paper was authored on the impact of instructional delivery platform and student evaluations of teaching (attached).

How has your project been aided by your FSLI experience? For me, FSLI was a fire hose of information on how to become a more effective leader; one could not absorb or implement all of the techniques presented, but I found myself gravitating to specific elements that seemed most appropriate. Understanding how others perceived me was very important, and helped shape a strategy for implementing the vision described above. As part of my personal development within FSLI, I chose to read at least 10 books on leadership during 2010. Several of those contained important lessons in leadership and broadened my portfolio of skills. I found the peer coaching and mentoring quite a useful sounding board for ideas. My mentor from Cohort 4 was understanding and helpful, and above all could be trusted to keep ideas confidential.

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