

Florida Distance Learning Consortium Provides Statewide Access to Education



Overview

- In Florida, the growth in distance learning courses is 36–43 percent every year. This includes all types of distance learning including online, correspondence, and hybrid courses.
- The Florida Distance Learning Consortium assists K–12 schools, community colleges, and four-year universities provide distance learning options at a fair price and with access for all students.
- Central Florida Community College plans to increase its distance learning and online courses by working through the Consortium in a cost-saving model that provides more options for its students.

Expanding distance learning in Florida

Community colleges, universities, and K–12 institutions are now challenged to provide extended access to their students, while at the same time providing strong instruction to improve student achievement. While technology is often the choice to provide these options to students, the expenses of implementing such programs are often daunting. Says John Opper, executive director of the Florida Distance Learning Consortium, “distance learning technologies have permeated into all areas of instruction.”

The Florida Distance Learning Consortium was originally established by the State Board of Community Colleges in 1996 to coordinate the establishment of a technology-enhanced educational delivery system that supports the mission of Florida educational institutions. The Consortium also ensures maximum access to education for all Florida residents by utilizing instructional technology and eliminating the barriers of distance, time, and place. The Consortium negotiates statewide contracts for its member institutions throughout the state, acting as a liaison for licensing agreements and working for what its members want. The program has expanded to include public and private K–12 and post-secondary four-year universities.

“Ninety-two percent of all students enrolled in distance learning courses are also enrolled in regular courses at the colleges and universities in Florida,” Opper explained. “Students are time-shifting; distance learning allows them to control their scheduling and have power over how they’re learning.”

INSTITUTION: The Florida Distance Learning Consortium was established by the State Board of Community Colleges in 1996. In 2003, the Consortium completed a merger with the Florida Virtual Campus to provide coordination among Florida’s colleges and universities in the development, delivery, marketing, and acquisition of distance learning instruction and its infrastructure. The Consortium provides an online course catalog that contains courses and programs offered via distance learning by Florida’s community colleges and universities.

SIZE: For 2002–03, the Consortium online distance learning course catalog listed 5,706 courses and received more than 32,000 hits a week. The Consortium’s resources are used by Florida’s K–20 system. Total distance education enrollments for 2003–04 grew to more than 580,000 students.

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MAC DISMUKE,
MANAGER OF LEARNING
SUPPORT CENTERS

Access and affordability

According to Opper, the Consortium has six main functional areas: providing an online catalog of courses from its member institutions; negotiating strategic licensing partnerships with technology companies; partnering with libraries and other groups to provide distance learning opportunities across the state; providing adequate and appropriate faculty development; offering student support services; and the Orange Grove Initiative, a statewide resource bank currently being developed.

“One of the main purposes of the Consortium is to leverage the buying power of all its member institutions to negotiate fair and favorable terms,” Opper said. “We work to ensure that smaller schools receive similar opportunities as larger schools and that larger schools receive fair pricing and beneficial contract terms. In the end, student success is what it’s all about, and the Consortium works to help the schools, colleges, and universities to achieve that goal.”

Providing a technology solution

PLATO Learning has partnered with the Consortium to provide technology solutions to the education community across the state of Florida. Currently, nine of the Consortium’s member institutions are using PLATO Learning’s interactive courseware to provide students with a technology alternative to classroom learning or as additional support in remedial and preparation labs. PLATO Learning also works through the Consortium to ensure that faculty receive adequate professional development before implementing PLATO® courseware in their programs.

“Students now have 24/7 access to technology,” Opper said. “There is growth across the board in the use of technology to deliver instruction. When the Consortium acts as the mediator in negotiations between technology companies, like PLATO Learning, and schools, it brings all of the purchasing of the product together to a central location and works with the company to let everyone play, without major concerns about price or implementation strategies. Even the smallest school is now able to buy things they couldn’t do on their own. Larger schools get a fair price, and small schools gain access. Student success is what it’s all about. A successful implementation provides a comfort level and

works as an example; other schools see that success and say ‘that’s working, let’s participate.’”

A cost-saving model

A major way that the Consortium is helping its member institutions off-set the costs of implementing instructional technology, such as PLATO courseware, is by offering to host servers at the Consortium, instead of hosting them locally or by the company. The member institutions save money in this model, allowing them to invest in the technology that provides greater access to students.

Central Florida Community College

Central Florida Community College (CFCC) has used PLATO courseware for over a decade in college preparation programs. The courseware is also used to provide tutorial support for distance learning students and for GED preparation. As the programs have evolved over the years, the faculty and administration at CFCC realized that they need to provide access to more tutorial options for their students in order for students to succeed.

In fall 2005, the Consortium will be hosting servers for PLATO courseware purchased by CFCC. Currently, CFCC operates PLATO courseware on 70 concurrent licenses; they are hoping to increase that by at least 20 licenses. Using the Consortium as a mediator to negotiate price and as a host for the servers will cut the college’s costs in half.

“We want to expand the use of PLATO courseware on campus, to promote it more, and get it to more departments,” explained Mac Dismuke, manager of learning support centers. “Working with the Consortium has really benefited us. We get more PLATO® licenses for our money, in addition to the added benefits of hosting through the Consortium server.”

Joanne Bellovin, dean for learning resources, agrees with that sentiment. “Central Florida Community College offers a wide variety of online credit courses. PLATO Learning’s courseware gives opportunities for online tutoring that students may not get otherwise. We need to provide the same services for our online students as we do for our on-site students. PLATO Learning helps us do that because it’s web-based. As we expand our licenses, we’ll expand usage and access.”