FLCC embraces online education with Open SUNY

HOPEWELL — The new Open SUNY online college courses initiative is about to bring students from across the state — and the world — to Finger Lakes Community College.

One of the stars of the initiative is FLCC's two-year associate of applied sciences degree in tourism management. Open SUNY is promoting the course, along with seven others from other colleges, and will provide 24/7 student help desk services and a one-stop concierge at FLCC to answer questions and provide direction.

Jeanne Fagan, professor of business administration at FLCC, is the primary faculty member for the tourism curriculum and knows first-hand how difficult it is for many adult students to complete coursework and get a degree.

“They have lots of things going on in their lives; they don’t have time to drive to campus, and this restricts their schedule,” she said. “Online courses offer them the opportunity to do their class work anytime, anywhere.

“I had a student who was in the service and had to spend three months in Germany. I went with her, in her laptop, as she finished the course,” said Fagan.

The effort bring the classroom to the computer is a state priority.

“SUNY (State University of New York) is expanding access to its world-class programs and faculty by embracing technology and innovative instructional delivery,” said David Doyle, director of communications at SUNY. “The state university system of New York is a national leader in public higher education, and Open SUNY is one of our signature initiatives. We believe it is a model that can be replicated across the country to educate more students and educate them better.”

Officials at FLCC see this as a boon and a recognition.

Larry Dugan, director of online learning at FLCC, said Open SUNY helps the school reach new audiences.

“This is a way to aggregate all of our online courses into a single repository across the state, so students can do some one-stop shopping on a website and find courses from FLCC,” he said. “We’ll get a tremendous amount of student support from SUNY.”

Dugan added, “We as a college get centralized marketing across the state, as opposed to what we usually do here. We’re a small college, but now we’re now part of the Open SUNY catalog, which is a benefit to us. This will help tell people our story: We’re the only college in SUNY with a tourism program online. People (who) might not have seen our program before will see it now.”

Fagan said she was pleased that FLCC’s tourism management degree program was chosen for the Open SUNY introduction.

“Tourism is one of the governor’s economic initiatives,” she said, “so they wanted a tourism program. Ours is the only tourism management program that is totally online. So, we feel very flattered they chose us.”

She also believes her students will benefit, and Doyle agreed.

“In addition to supporting high-demand career opportunities, Open SUNY is also designed to decrease the amount of time it takes for students to earn their degree by expanding access to programs and courses, thus lowering their cost and allowing them to enter the workforce sooner with the skills they need to succeed.”

The state’s program will help build the workforce for the jobs that are here now and are developing, and FLCC is poised to benefit from new emphasis on online learning.

Dugan said FLCC has 140 online courses, 200 sections and 12 online degrees.

“We’re adding 10 to 15 courses per year, and I see us maintaining that,” he said. “A number of these courses are market-driven; for instance, our business degrees are in high demand online. Our sociology and liberal arts courses and psychology – those have been in high demand.”

He said the tourism degree, including many of the courses Fagan designed for it, is aimed at “older adults students who can’t get to campus — that’s who we’re trying to service in this program. We have programs that lend themselves to student needs. We also have sciences online and even pays. ed. online — one class, on walking and jogging, uses students’ iPhones and iPads to track their walks and jogging every day.”

Student perspective

Janel Allen of Rochester, a first-semester student in the tourism management program, is the kind of person an online program is designed for. She is a busy woman.
"I have a degree in marketing," she said. "I take a few classes at Monroe Community College. I have a full-time job at the Hilton Garden Inn in Pittsford, and I work part-time at the mall. I’m looking to further my hospitality education, staying with Hilton and on a sales path toward director of sales or general manager."

Allen said it’s “a big balancing act,” explaining it’s “all about juggling and prioritizing and getting things done according to their importance.”

When she gets home from work, Allen said, “I jump on the computer and finish any assignments, post discussions, do assignments and homework, any exams.”

On a one-job night, that means starting at 6:30 p.m. or so and going no later than 11:30 p.m. On the nights she is working her second job, she doesn’t get started until after 10 p.m.

If she had the time and wasn’t holding down two jobs, Allen said she’d prefer going to class.

“There’s more interaction with your peers and with the instructor,” she said. “Online is completely isolated. It’s what you make of it, and might be a little more difficult for people who haven’t adjusted to college life because there’s a lot of individual work.”

Still, she added, “it is a timesaver. I have the ability to go online to school rather than sacrificing time during the day. For me, it works out well. The learning environment isn’t the same, but being a graduate and in a work environment, I think I’m learning and growing and enhancing my education through online courses.”

Professors learning, too

Fagan said that even though she oversees an online degree program, she’s still learning about the process.

“Online courses are totally different because when you write a course and deliver it traditionally, you’re speaking, collecting homework and showing videos,” she said. “In an online course, you don’t have that interaction, so lectures have to be delivered in a different way.”

Fagan has created text and PowerPoint talking points for students to read, and she has to make sure they work technologically, meaning students have to have links to other articles and web pages.

Still, she recognizes the format’s shortcomings.

“In teaching in a classroom, I can survey who doesn’t have a clue; I don’t have that visually online,” she said, noting she misses the face-to-face interaction with her online students.

“I never get to shake their hands,” Fagan added. "They never come sit in my office for advice. But I can still build relationships, especially with students I have more than one semester. It’s just another skill teachers learn. Now I have to cue into a student by their writing. If they turn in assignments, the quality of their assignments — I’m able to pick up what’s happening to those students. It’s a learning curve.”

And still, her students delight and surprise her.

“One student drove to campus to meet me,” Fagan said. “He had started the program two years ago. I watched this guy just develop. For me, it was so revealing that online, teachers really can have relationships with students and can watch them develop and grow.”

Dugan said that as he looks at the landscape and directs the online programs, FLCC will see more of the “swirl” students — “those who aggregate courses from four or five different colleges. They’re matriculating at one school, but when they need a course that’s not offered when they need it there, they’re taking different courses at different schools. We will fill some of those holes.”

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