

## Development of an Online, Two-Campus Degree Program Offered from Disparate Locations

In an attempt to reduce startup costs and to utilize faculty and other resources efficiently, the University of South Carolina (USC) has developed a graduate program for the M. Ed. in Educational Technology degree that is offered jointly by two of its campuses. USC is a large statewide system comprised of a single research campus and several 2- and 4-year regional campuses. This graduate program involves units from the main campus in Columbia, South Carolina (USC Columbia), and a 4-year regional campus in Aiken, South Carolina (USC Aiken), 60 miles distant. (USC Aiken offers graduate programs in Elementary Education and in Psychology in addition to its four-year undergraduate programs.) The M. Ed. in Educational Technology program is the result of preliminary conversations between the faculty and administration of the USC Columbia Department of Educational Psychology in the College of Education and the USC Aiken School of Education. Initially, plans were for the USC Aiken campus to offer the program independently, but it soon became apparent that by combining resources of the two campuses, a program could be developed that utilizes administrative and faculty strengths from both of the campuses.

As the first joint degree program offered in the USC system, the program provides degree candidates the opportunity to take all of their courses on either campus, or some combination of both. Because South Carolina is a large state geographically, the convenience of traveling to a nearby campus for the few required face-to-face classes is appealing to many candidates. Furthermore, the perceived advantages of choosing to attend either a large or small campus increase the attractiveness of the program. Candidates on the Aiken campus also receive a new wireless laptop computer to use while enrolled in the program.

There are many factors that have contributed to the success of this innovative graduate program and there are many challenges yet to be addressed. Much of the success of the program can be attributed to a creative and supportive administration on both campuses. Because this is the first USC joint program between two campuses which are for the most part autonomous, it was necessary to think in new ways about administrative issues such as admissions, financial aid, graduation procedures, diplomas, etc. Admissions are handled by each respective campus, both using the same admission requirements (Minimum GRE or MAT score, minimum

undergraduate GPA, letters of recommendation, a statement of intent). While the procedures for admission are different on each campus, being a little more streamlined on the smaller campus, the criteria remain the same. Likewise, financial aid is granted according to the respective campus's criteria, with slightly more resources available on the larger campus, such as graduate assistantships. Finally, candidates receive a unique diploma which states that the candidate has fulfilled the graduation requirements for the joint program offered by USC Aiken and USC Columbia.

Additionally, the success of the program can be attributed to a creative and enthusiastic faculty who are willing and eager to explore and implement new ways of delivering courses. Faculty had to determine which courses lent themselves to being offered in which particular format; for example, several courses are offered via online distance education while others are delivered face-to-face with accompanying two-way video for the distant campus. Online courses incorporate sections of students from each campus and are taught by a faculty member from one campus. Face-to-face courses are offered with a separate section on each campus taught by separate instructors; occasionally class projects are presented (for review and critique) to the section of candidates on the other campus via two-way video.

The online courses incorporate a large amount of collaboration among candidates who are engaged in project-based activities. A distinct advantage of this arrangement is that such collaboration results in team building and a high degree of familiarity among candidates in the program regardless of which primary campus they are enrolled. Often instructors assign groups of candidates to address course topics; these groups typically include candidates from each campus, again providing candidates with various perspectives and affording them an opportunity to become familiar with others in the program. An additional advantage of this arrangement is the large number of students from outside the program, many of them in Ph.D. programs, who enroll in the M. Ed. in Educational Technology program courses for elective credit. These individuals often tend to raise the level of discussion among the class and typically create projects of high caliber, frequently leading collaborative groups and offering perspectives from a variety of disciplines.

Face-to-face courses offered in the more traditional classroom environment also incorporate a large amount of collaboration among candidates in project-based activities. Collaboration between campus sections of the

course is facilitated via a course management system (Blackboard). Instructors use the communication tools of Blackboard primarily to aid discussion via the Discussion Board and its Chat features. All enrolled candidates have access to Blackboard on- and off-campus and it has become the primary means for communicating announcements and distributing electronic course materials. These materials often are PDF documents and media files (created using Macromedia Flash, Adobe Photoshop Elements, Apple iMovie, for example). Furthermore, candidates often post the results of their project-based activities on Blackboard for sharing with others. Blackboard's email capabilities facilitate easy communication with individual candidates or established groups with classes, and its group pages lend themselves to establishing simple communication within groups.

While there have been many successes in the implementation of this degree program, yet there remain several challenges to its overall success. The USC Columbia College of Education and the USC Aiken School of Education have recently been awarded full continuing accreditation by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). This particular degree program was not reviewed, however, because there had not yet been any graduates; however, the program faculty was responsible for addressing unit standards and because each unit is autonomous, each prepares its own Institutional Report and has its own NCATE review. Hence, such aspects as the Conceptual Framework and the assessment system, integral parts of the accreditation review, are different for each campus. Thus, the faculty must address NCATE standards using two different, but not dissimilar, conceptual frameworks, and must make certain that the program fits the respective assessment systems for each campus. This continues to be a challenge for the program faculty. A commonality in the process is that the degree program also must address the standards of the learned society, in this case the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE). By addressing these recently revised (and now data-driven) standards, the program by default is more in line with the unit standards of NCATE. The program faculty continues to focus on program improvement by addressing the respective conceptual frameworks and by refining the assessment system for the program.

Another challenge for the program is a technical one: initially plans were made to offer some courses via 2-way interactive video. However, due to bandwidth limitations and different videoconferencing systems on the two campuses (V-Tel and Polycom), there have been serious problems with

consistent high-quality communication between the two sites. While the two campuses are addressing this, distance education offerings are restricted to web-based only.

In spite of these continuing challenges, the M. Ed. in Educational Technology at the University of South Carolina Aiken and Columbia is a thriving and innovative program that provides advanced professional studies to develop capabilities essential to effective design, evaluation, and delivery of technology-based instruction and training. The program prepares educators to assume leadership roles in the integration of educational technology into the school curriculum, and it provides graduate-level instructional opportunities for several populations (classroom teachers, corporate trainers, educational software developers) that need to acquire both technological competencies and understanding of sound instructional design principles and techniques. It serves as a model for other multi-campus, joint programs that strive to utilize faculty and other resources efficiently.

Program URL: <http://edtech.usca.edu>