Online Learning Opportunities for Undergraduate Students at the University of Toronto

Opportunity

The use of technology to enhance learning at the University of Toronto is not new. For the past few years, online courses and programs have been available to graduate students in faculties such as nursing, social work, and education. In addition, technology has been integrated into classrooms, through the widespread use of the learning management system (LMS) and many tools and applications beyond the LMS.

The recently introduced strategy of offering online courses for undergraduate students has been motivated by students, faculty, and senior academic leadership. The provincial government has also been interested in the expansion of online offerings in Ontario post-secondary education. The University of Toronto, while not being an online university, has championed the introduction of online options for undergraduate students and is eager to explore the possibilities of more flexibility in course delivery.

Innovation

The Online Undergraduate Course Initiative, following a pilot study in 2011-12, supports the re-design of courses for online delivery and provides an opportunity to further develop the capacity for, and the understanding, of online learning and its strategic role at the institutional level.

The specific objectives of the Initiative include:

- Increasing access to undergraduate courses for students in first entry programs at the U of T;
- Increasing accessibility of to U of T courses by students from other universities.

Proposals for courses to be re-designed for online delivery are brought forward by interested faculty members and reviewed according to criteria that specify that the courses must be acceptable for credit in an undergraduate degree at the university, and have both content acceptable for course transfer by other universities and prerequisites broad enough to allow access by students from other universities. The university has recently joined a course transfer consortium with six other Ontario universities.

Ten online courses are being developed this academic year (2012-13); the goal is to add ten courses a year for three years. The growth is to be both scalable and sustainable, offering a mix of online delivery models for students in various programs and on all three campuses.

The courses are developed using a team approach with professors, educational technologists, course coordinators, teaching assistants, and librarians all taking part. The ten courses for the 2012-13 academic year are in biology, computer science, physical education, psychology, history and religion, geography, and one course from the Centre for Teaching and Learning in effective academic communications.

Support for faculty development in the area of online instruction has been enhanced through the introduction of a specialized cohort within an annual two-day Course Design Institute coordinated by the Centre for Teaching Support and Innovation. The Institute looks at general principles for good course design, but also offers a customized program for those involved in online learning. On the second day, educational technology professionals and instructional librarians participate in the design process and provide "curb-side consulting". A community of practice has been created from the course attendees.

As U of T is such a large, decentralized institution, online learning is best positioned by engaging with existing service units to determine how it fits into existing practices and processes. The visual presentation below indicates all the areas of connection and support.
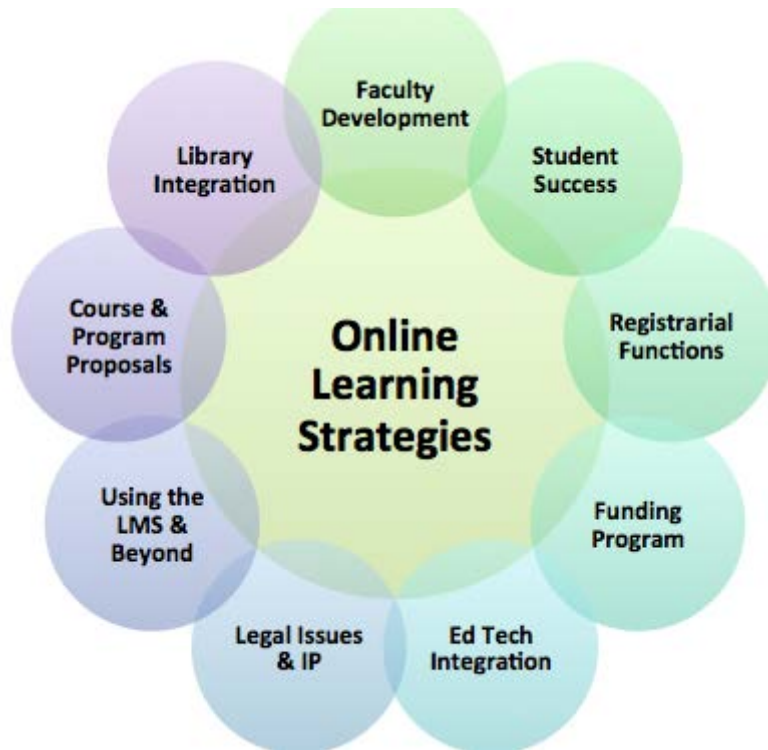
An essential component of this strategy is the Online Learning Strategies Office, recently created under the leadership of Laurie Harrison, with the mandate to identify, recommend, and support the coherent provision of online learning solutions, services, processes, and related infrastructure required to serve the academic and administrative needs of the university.

Outcomes and Benefits

Five online courses were launched in the 2011-12 academic year as a pilot study and the students were asked to evaluate their experience. Over 85% said that, based on their experience in the course, they would take another online course. Flexibility in scheduling was chosen by over 70% of students (students could chose multiple responses) as one of the most important motivators for registering in an online course; with about 34% citing remote access and 30% course content. Almost 25% taking the online courses indicated that online learning was their preferred learning environment.

Enhancement of the students' digital literacy is noted as a benefit of learning in a digital environment. For example, the teacher education course modelled how online teaching and learning can be structured and supported and the geography course integrated the use of digital mapping tools.

Individual courses introduce specific innovations, such as the use of [peerScholar](#) for peer assessment in the psychology course (description included in the Pockets of Innovation Series), the use of online GIS tools for the geography course, and the embedding of librarians and research literacy for students of Middle Eastern Religion and Culture.

In the future, it is anticipated that courses in areas of particular specialization will be offered online to provide access for students at other universities and increase enrolment in some of the more specialized subjects.

Cheryl Regehr, Vice Provost, Academic Programs, highlights the benefits of students getting access to great instructors: "Fabulous instructors looking for another challenge come forward – and then serve as mentors".

Each course offered online is being evaluated by the students, instructors, and educational technology staff so that the development is informed by what is learned at each step. The surveys look at experiences within the digital course environment and the support received to enable work in the online context. This data will be used to support long-term planning. The registration system has now been adapted to flag online courses so that patterns can be determined.

Challenges and Enhancements

The faculty members involved in developing the courses in the pilot project concurred that they needed more time for the re-design of the course format, activities, and assessment. They also recommended the involvement of educational technology professionals to advise on learning, pedagogy, and curriculum development – to translate between the technology and the learning.

In response to these requests, the Provost has introduced modest funding for the departments in which online courses are being developed to use for release time, technological support, or other development needs. As well, a network of educational technologists is being established.

Experience with the pilot courses revealed the need for institution-wide access to some tools such as those supporting lecture capture and webinars, which are now being licenced for general use on campus. Specialized tools and approaches are also necessary to support such activities as writing in Cyrillic in the Russian for Russians course or handwritten solutions to mathematical problems in mechanical engineering.

Potential

The university is committed to the campus-based experience with in-person interaction between students and professors. Online learning is seen as an augmentation of the student learning experience. It is not being approached as a cheaper way of providing education; online courses can take more resources to create and the same resources to run. The goal is to provide quality alternatives for undergraduate students, not to offer full programs through online learning.

Professional networking, for conversations, showcasing, and connections with colleagues in post-secondary education, is of great importance. U of T is active in a number of associations, such as the Ontario Universities' Council on E-Learning (OUCEL) and the Educause eLearning Initiative. They welcome opportunities to make connections and share experiences and strategies with other institutions involved in online learning.

For Further Information

Academic Technology Initiatives
ai@utoronto.ca

Online learning web site