

Reaching Out – Delivery options that provide anywhere, any time learning opportunities for students at Confederation College

Opportunity

With a catchment area of over 550,000 square kilometres, the Centre for Continuing Education at Confederation College in Thunder Bay takes advantage of both synchronous and asynchronous delivery to ensure that learning opportunities are accessible and flexible enough to meet the learning needs of students across the region.

Innovation

The staff in the Centre for Continuing Education at Confederation College has created a dynamic mix of learning options, whether developed and taught at the College in varied formats, developed in partnership with other institutions, or from other institutions, to offer a variety of programs and hundreds of courses so that students can learn at times and places that best suit their needs. New models to optimize learning and widen access are continuously being tested and implemented. Confederation presents its technology-based study options as distance education, virtual college, and online learning.



Regional Calendar 2011/2012

Distance Education: Students across northern Ontario can participate in live classes via Centra, a web conferencing application. Courses can be taken at any of the eight regional campuses and from Contact North sites (Contact North, Ontario's distance education and training network, has 112 online learning centres across Ontario that provide free access to technology for learning). The classes offer audio instruction enhanced with visuals and interactive tools for communication. The learning management system Blackboard is used for distribution of handouts, course outlines and announcements, as well as grades.

To expand the capacity of the College to offer complete post-secondary programs, an integrated plan has been put in place to connect the main campus in Thunder Bay and its eight regional campuses. Instead of each campus offering each course, all the students at each campus are assembled into one class receiving the same course through distance education. The various courses in the program may originate from any of the campuses. Grouping the class sites increases class size so that offering the full program is more economically feasible.

The award-winning Leadership Development Series, delivered in partnership with Canadore College in North Bay, comprises ten courses – five of which are taught from Confederation and the other five from Canadore. Using web-based delivery through Centra allows students registered at both colleges to take the program. Offering the courses separately might have meant insufficient registrations to warrant delivering the program.

To encourage maximum accessibility to the Mining Techniques Certificate Program, mature students are provided with preparatory courses via Centra so they can take the maths courses necessary for acceptance. After successful completion of the first preparatory maths module, the mature students in remote and Aboriginal communities can get conditional acceptances to the program.

The Personal Support Worker Certificate Program is offered in many Aboriginal communities as students can take the theoretical courses through Centra, do the laboratory exercises in local nursing stations, and only have to leave their communities for the work placements. In some locations, the college also hires classroom assistants or tutors to help the students.

Virtual College: The Virtual College is a variation on distance education in which students who have access to sufficient bandwidth can take the synchronous classes offered via Centra from home, rather than going to a regional campus or Contact North online learning centre. Instructors are also able to teach the courses from off-site locations.

Online Learning: Confederation College makes extensive use of the inventory of courses available through OntarioLearn.com, a consortium of 24 Ontario community colleges which have partnered to develop and deliver on-line courses. Each partner college selects courses from the OntarioLearn.com course inventory that complement its existing offerings. OntarioLearn.com has an inventory of more than 900 courses available for the spring 2012 term.

Instructors at Confederation College assess the equivalency to their own courses of relevant courses on OntarioLearn.com. Students can then take approved online courses for credit in their program. Students often use these courses to make up a missing credit for graduation or in advance to lighten their load for the coming year, leading to higher retention and graduation rates. In some cases, such as the Human Resources Diploma Program, almost the entire program is offered online through equivalencies.

In-house online learning courses are also being developed, with five now available and five more in development in communications and general education. These new courses take advantage of all the features for teaching and learning offered by BlackBoard, the learning management system.

Outcomes and Benefits

The use of online technologies for learning is essential to the mission of Confederation College as this range of delivery formats allows the institution to reach students across the vast territory it serves and provide them with quality, accessible, and flexible learning opportunities.

Despite occasional technological problems, the students appreciate the learning resources that offer the possibility of learning from their home communities.

Through web-based Centra courses, cooperative development and sharing of courses between institutions makes courses and programs more economically feasible.

The Virtual College option of taking synchronous courses from home is gaining popularity as students become more familiar with the technology and enjoy the flexibility that it provides.

Challenges and Enhancements

Students taking courses using Centra in the off-site classrooms sometimes felt disadvantaged that they were not in the same room as the instructor, unlike the students

in the originating site. In some cases, instructors now teach from home or a separate room so that all students have equal access and attention.

Lack of bandwidth and technological challenges can sometimes hamper course delivery.

Potential

An eight-month program has been compressed into 15 weeks and offered synchronously through Centra as a pilot test of the effectiveness of the model. There are two classes a week and each class has a day-time and a night-time time slot so that students can fit the class times around their schedules. Providing a choice of class time makes a compressed program more accessible and, with the lectures recorded for later viewing, offers optimum flexibility.

Future online learning courses may be in business studies, especially to fill gaps in current offerings, such as the courses needed to complete the Human Resources Diploma Program through online delivery.

A pilot project using mobile devices is underway in which a post-secondary course is being offered free of charge to students who take it via iPad, iPhone, or iPod. The students must also agree to participate in an assessment of the learning experience. The students log in to Centra and follow the class on their mobile device. The course was offered to assess the student response and to explore the usefulness of the devices for learning.

Staff in the Centre for Continuing Education is open to talking with colleagues across Ontario about their approaches to technology-based learning and how they endeavour to serve their widely dispersed learners.

For Further Information

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