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## University of Ill. virtual campus flounders

By DAVID MERCER – 4 days ago

CHAMPAIGN, Ill. (AP) — An \$8.9 million online campus launched by the University of Illinois nine months ago has had disappointing enrollment and fewer course offerings than expected, but the man who created it isn't giving up.

Instead, University of Illinois President Joseph White said he wants to turn the school's Global Campus into an independent, accredited university to speed up development of degree programs.

So far 121 students have enrolled in just five degree programs — far short of the 9,000 students White projected would enroll by the end of the Global Campus' first five years.

When it started offering classes in January, White hoped his professors would quickly create online programs in business, engineering and other high-demand fields.

For the most part, "That has not happened," White told The Associated Press in an interview Wednesday. "I'm not mad at anybody about that. I think we've come to realize that we have a university faculty that is at capacity."

White said the Global Campus is hamstrung by its status in the university system — it lacks the autonomy of the campuses in Urbana-Champaign, Chicago and Springfield — and by the fact that its degree programs have to be created by departments on those campuses.

Nicholas Burbules, a professor in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the Urbana-Champaign campus and chairman of the Faculty Senate there, said some departments White counted on to create degree programs may have decided — for whatever reason — that they'd rather not.

"I think everyone understands the current model isn't generating the kind and number and diversity of programs that any of us envisioned," said Burbules. "I think frankly there were a lot of questions about implementation details."

So, White plans to ask the university's board of trustees in November to let the Global Campus seek its own accreditation, giving it the same standing and independence as the university's three brick-and-mortar campuses.

White envisioned the Global Campus as a revenue generator. He estimated a fully developed virtual campus would pump \$10 million a year into the university system by providing affordable access to higher education for people who can't easily take classes at a U of I campus.

White said the Global Campus could gain accreditation, create new degree programs and draw on interested faculty from the three existing campuses, all without initially spending more than the \$8.9 million budgeted for the venture this year.

Online learning is not particularly new, and other institutions have had more success with it. The University of Massachusetts, for example, said in April its online program had 33,900 enrollments and revenue of \$37 million last fiscal year. Nearly 3.5 million students nationwide took at least one online course during the fall 2006 term, according to a report last year by the Sloan Consortium.

Trustees David Dorris and Robert Vickery say they haven't seen the details of White's proposal, but support at least the idea of restructuring the Global Campus.

"We have not had the success thus far that we had anticipated, so I think it's appropriate," said Dorris.

If trustees sign off his idea, White says the Global Campus could win accreditation from the Chicago-based Higher Learning Commission in two to three years. That's shorter than the usual time required, he said, but he expects the status of the university's three campuses would help speed the process.

White hopes to launch at least one degree-completion program within a year, and he added he won't allow the Global Campus to lower the university system's existing standards to increase Global Campus enrollment and offerings.

"Access to mediocrity is no bargain," he said. "Our goal is that all the University of Illinois' programs be of the highest quality."

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