

Long-distance learning at SOU

SOU, six other universities to offer more online courses starting by spring '10

By [Paris Achen](#)

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After launching his career with the Medford Police Department, Sgt. Mike Budreau wanted to finish his bachelor's degree in criminal justice at Southern Oregon University.

His work schedule — 8:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. — largely prevented Budreau from attending classes on campus.

"Then, SOU came up with the online criminal justice degree-completion program," Budreau said. "It was great because it made me realize I could do my entire degree online."

Budreau logs on and chips away at coursework on the weekends and occasionally in the evening.

By as soon as the spring of 2010, Budreau and other SOU students can begin taking online offerings from six other universities through SOU.

The Ashland-based university recently joined with California State University at East Bay, Chicago State University, Louisiana Tech University, Oakland University, University of Southern Maine and University of Illinois at Springfield to share online courses.

The partnership was spearheaded by U of I at Springfield and is backed by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation as a way to improve the overall quality, offerings and availability of online courses, said Ray Schroeder, director of U of I's Office of Technology-Enhanced Learning, who was in Ashland Tuesday and Wednesday.

The joint programs also could provide some cost-savings where classes are duplicated, Schroeder said.

"We want to increase our online and blended offerings," said Jennifer McVay-Dyche, SOU director of distance education. "It also will allow us to broaden our student base and help with retention."

The collaboration represents one of the latest directions of online learning at a time when the recession has driven more and more people to enroll in post-secondary education classes.

"When you look at the recession, you find students need to continue to work while they're continuing their education," Schroeder said. "It becomes increasingly difficult to meet scheduled classes."

"An online program reduces visits to campus and makes it easier for the student to accommodate work needs with academic needs."

Schroeder invited the universities to join the consortium because they are small to mid-size state

universities that focus more on instruction than on research.

The universities still are exploring what online classes to share, as well as joint online degree programs. Physical chemistry and graduate-level education courses have been mentioned as some of the possibilities.

The model could allow classes to be offered in fields in which individual universities might not be able to muster adequate enrollment. One example could be a professor who wants to teach a class on Mayan civilization at the University of Southern Maine.

An example of the power of online education occurred on the Gulf Coast after hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005.

Using funding from the Sloan Foundation, Schroeder and his U of I colleague, Burks Oakley, coaxed 153 colleges and universities to offer more than 1,300 online classes to post-secondary students who were displaced by the hurricanes.

The classes were free-of-charge and allowed students to return to their respective universities once the institutions reopened.

Nearly 1,600 students participated.

"We are looking in a similar vein (for the new consortium) to look for new ways we can work together as institutions," Schroeder said.

Online class enrollments have been increasing by about 10 percent a year in higher education, Schroeder said.

SOU's online enrollment last year surpassed that, growing by more than 300 percent between fall 2007 and fall 2008, McVay-Dyche said. The university offered about 49 online classes in fall 2008, excluding education courses, and has three wholly-online degree programs: criminal justice, criminology and business administration.

The SOU School of Education had about 300 online enrollments in 2007-08. Its class offerings are five times larger than in the early 1990s, when online classes first began.

Online courses also have been growing elsewhere around Jackson County.

Rogue Community College has a joint online-degree program with SOU for undergraduate education.

Since launching online courses in 1997, enrollment in RCC's online classes has grown from about 200 to 1,800 students.

Southern Oregon Education Service District offers about 40 online classes to high school students around the state, mostly for credit-retrieval and accelerated graduation, said online school specialist Virginia Petitt.

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