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# Online university founders: University of Illinois' Global Campus face uncertain future

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## U. of I.'s Global Campus is foundering

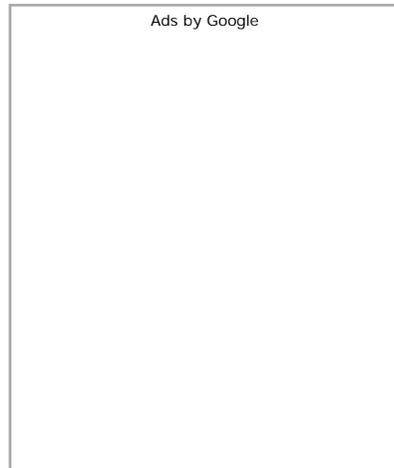
By Jodi S. Cohen | Tribune reporter  
April 5, 2009

After investing more than \$10 million in a program that has attracted only a few hundred students, [University of Illinois](#) trustees are considering whether to shut down the university's 2-year-old online campus.

Global Campus started with high hopes: University leaders predicted it would attract 9,000 students within five years, most of them adult learners who could get low-cost degrees without leaving their homes. The goal was to become one of the largest public online universities in the country, offering a broader alternative to the online classes created by the university's three traditional campuses.

Instead, Global Campus has only 360 students, about a third of them in non-degree classes. Programs have been slow to develop, and there are just five degree options. By the end of June, university officials expect to have put more than \$15 million toward the project, much of it paying for 42 non-instructional employees whose annual payroll is \$3.75 million.

"The administration has spent over \$10 million for a program that has fallen short of where we were told it would be," trustee Devon Bruce told the Tribune. "Now we are put in this unenviable position of determining how we should proceed from here."



In a rare public dissent, several trustees, including chairman Niranjan Shah, questioned at a board meeting last month whether the program should continue. "I don't know the answer whether we should scrap it. Should we go forward?" Shah asked.

### Stocks

Even as Global Campus has stalled, other online programs are thriving. U. of I.'s campuses in Urbana-Champaign, Chicago and Springfield had a combined 29,508 online course enrollments in the 2007-08 academic year, up 26 percent from 2004-05, officials said.

Global Campus courses are intended to serve a different audience—those interested in shorter, 8-week classes offered more than once or twice a year. It also was designed to be more flexible, adding classes quickly to meet demand.

But every online program created by Global Campus has had to work with an existing academic department, and university faculty and Global Campus officials have clashed over everything from course lengths to who would own the teaching materials.

As a result, few courses have been developed. The current offerings include programs in business, nursing and education.

U. of I. President B. Joseph White, who made Global Campus a central focus of his vision for the university, is working feverishly to salvage it. He has asked faculty leaders to suggest a model they think would work.

"We are not getting the programs we need on a timely basis," White said in a recent interview. "It is not happening. ... I have asked [faculty leaders] to come forth with an alternative."

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In November, trustees voted to seek independent accreditation for Global Campus, which would allow it to develop programs without approval from faculty or colleges. But faculty leaders and others criticized that plan as well, saying it would cheapen a U. of I. degree.

U. of I. education professor Nicholas Burbules, chairman of the faculty Senate Executive Committee, is leading a group that will present a third option to White by mid-April. Burbules suggested Global Campus could support online programs operating through the three campuses with centralized marketing and other efforts. Faculty, he said, would be more on board if they initiated course development rather than being asked to teach programs suggested by Global Campus officials. The new proposal also will recommend a smaller administrative staff, he said.

"I honestly hope there is an alternative people will gravitate toward," Burbules said. "I am trying to take something that is broken and failing and turn it into something good for the university."

Chester Gardner, chief executive of Global Campus and a special assistant to White, said he doubts the online venture will succeed unless it operates separately from the traditional campuses. "I don't think we'll get enough programs launched," Gardner said.

Meanwhile, the longer it takes to get programs under way, the longer it will take to make money. In pitching the idea to faculty in 2007, White said Global Campus was "by far our best new financial prospect." Gardner had projected the venture would break even financially by next year, but now predicts it will take at least until 2011 and will rely on tuition revenue from 1,600 students.

"I just think what we could have done with some portion of that \$10 million," said Pat Langley, chair of the Faculty Senate at the Springfield campus. "I don't see a record of success. It's been incredibly expensive, we have borrowed money to do it, and we don't have very many students. All of that speaks for itself."

White said it's too soon to give up. Enrollment is projected to rise to 450 when the May term begins, and up to 700 in September if bachelor-degree completion programs in psychology and environmental sustainability, among others, get under way. White points to those two programs as examples of the campus' mission of providing low-cost degree options. Both are priced at less than \$20,000 for 60 credit hours.

As Global Campus has struggled, the increase in online course enrollments is outpacing the overall growth in higher education, according to a fall report by the Sloan Consortium, a group that tracks online education. Nationally, 3.9 million students took at least one online college course in fall 2007, up 12.9 percent from the prior year.

U. of I.'s residential campuses also continue to add new online programs apart from Global Campus.

The university's School of Labor and Employment Relations in Urbana-Champaign, for example, started offering online undergraduate classes last spring, and nearly 400 students signed up during the first semester. This semester, about 900 students are enrolled in nine classes, said Dean Joel Cutcher-Gershenfeld.

For some students, however, Global Campus offers the only means to get a degree.

Jeannie Robinson, 32, is taking her second class toward a master's degree in recreation, sport and tourism. A supervisor in the [Glen Ellyn](#) Park District, Robinson said she hopes the degree from Global Campus will help her advance to the superintendent level.

"It would be a little frustrating; I won't lie," Robinson said about the prospect of Global Campus shutting down. "I would hope they would try to at least help us finish what we started."

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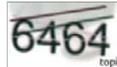
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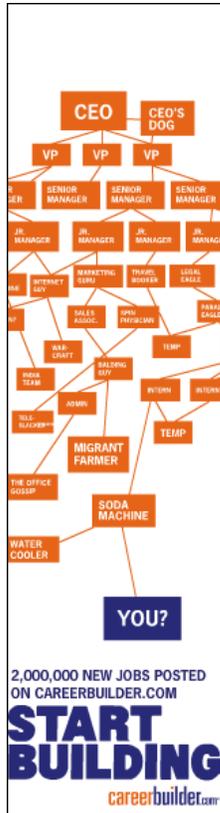
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