

Global Campus' future uncertain due to high costs, debated quality

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Officially established in June 2006, Global Campus was aimed at expanding the University's accessibility to nontraditional students by providing online distance learning classes. But slow curriculum development, unsatisfactory enrollment numbers, questions about the program's educational quality and a multi-million dollar budget deficit have caused administrators, teachers and trustees to consider if the venture is still worth pursuing.

"The faculty seems to be unhappy," said University Trustee Niranjan Shah. "We don't know right now (if this is a good use of the University's money)."

The administration has spent more than \$10 million on Global Campus and University officials expect that number to rise to \$15 million by the end of June. Global Campus CEO Chester Gardner projects the program to break even financially in May 2011 when enrollment is predicted to reach about 1,600 students.

For its current March through April term, Global Campus has 360 students enrolled in two bachelor's degree programs and three master's degree programs. These numbers indicate a progression far slower than Gardner's 2007 estimates, in which he predicted Global Campus to have enrolled 9,000 students by 2012.

University President B. Joseph White — an ardent and continuing supporter of Global Campus — acknowledged that the program has not performed up to standards.

In order to achieve its financial and educational goals, Global Campus requested — and the Board of Trustees granted — the right to seek accreditation separate from the University's existing campuses in November 2008.

Currently, Global Campus operates under a partnership with the University of Illinois' campuses in Chicago, Springfield and Urbana-Champaign. While partnership specifics vary between the three campuses, the common agreement is that each campus's administration will oversee Global Campus classes and degree programs in exchange for granting diplomas via the online program.

"Because the campus unit controls the degree, they control the program; they control the content, they control who is hired to teach in the program," said Nicholas Burbules, chairman of the Senate Faculty Committee and professor of educational policy studies.

In addressing Global Campus' shortcomings, White appointed Burbules to head a faculty panel that will present the president and Board of Trustees with a proposal to remedy the program's problems on May 21.

"I think a lot of people are looking for a third way; neither keeping (Global Campus) as it is nor shutting it down," Burbules said.

Burbules believes that the program can maintain its partnership with the university and achieve its goal of becoming a more effective, cost-efficient system.

In addition to administrative concerns about the program's financial viability, campus students have expressed displeasure over Global Campus students receiving University of Illinois diplomas for online coursework. Members of the university student senate have stated that students fear that Global Campus degrees are easier to obtain and therefore lessen the university's prestige, Burbules said.

University officials, however, reject the idea that online classes are less valuable than those taught face-to-face and agree that Global Campus, and online learning in general, affords students a learning experience that is in many ways superior to a traditional classroom setting.