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Online Courses to Increase Accessibility to Education

By ALEX KAPLUN
Staff Writer

Starting next fall, a new learning opportunity will give all N.C. community college students a chance to receive credit for online courses.

The project is designed to provide educational opportunities for individuals, such as working parents, who have other time commitments that prevent them from attending regular classes.

The Virtual Learning Community project would include 10 online courses, which could be taken for credit and additional student services such as registration, advising and library services.

N.C. community colleges already offer more than 250 available online courses and online course enrollment is more than 10,000.

The online courses will cost \$26.75 per credit hour for in-state students, the same as regular classes, unless individual colleges choose to tack on a fee.

Colleges have complete freedom in determining how to use the Virtual Learning Community, said Neil Hollands, VIC project coordinator.

Hollands said colleges could decide for themselves whether to offer the classes for credit, modify them or completely ignore them. "The individual colleges didn't want this to be a separate institution offering credit," he said.

Hollands said that while many community colleges had extensive distance learning programs, some schools had no available online courses. The project would give schools without distance learning an opportunity to get programs off the ground, he said.

He said the project would also reduce labor because many of the same courses were offered at other community colleges.

Janyth Fredrickson, N.C. Community College system associate vice president of academic and student services, said distance learning would give more people access to public education.

"The most important thing is it increases access for people to learn," Fredrickson said.

She said community colleges primarily served adults who lacked the time to attend class. "Virtual Learning Community" really provides access to

people from all over the state, no matter where they are or when they are able to study," Fredrickson said.

But she said distance learning would not replace the traditional classroom education. "Online courses will never replace regular classrooms," Fredrickson said. "They will add to them."

She said Virtual Online Community will offer over 50 courses by fall 2001, and students would be able to receive a degree completely from online courses.

Jim Sadler, UNC-system assistant vice president for planning, said system schools were also creating more distance learning programs. "UNC campuses have been very active in developing online courses," Sadler said.

He said this was only the second year the system received government funds for distance learning programs. He said the system already offered five degree programs that were completely online.

"We will see the distance learning student-credit hours that are available increase dramatically."

The State & National Editor can be reached at stntdesk@unc.edu.

Fla. Program Slows Teen Smoking

By DEEPIKA NARASIMHAN
Staff Writer

Underage smoking is on the decline in Florida, thanks to a preventative campaign partially designed by kids.

The Florida Tobacco Pilot Program, paid for by a \$13 billion settlement with the tobacco industry, focused on a marketing campaign, community outreach and stronger enforcement of underage smoking laws.

Since the two-year project began, teen smoking in middle schools has dropped 54 percent while high schools had a 24 percent drop.

Frank Panella, a spokesman for the Department of Health's secretary, said the key to the program's success was youth involvement.

"For years public health officials have said smoking is bad, but kids don't listen

to adults," Panella said.

"Kids listen to their peers, and kids telling kids that smoking isn't cool just works."

Panella also said the growth of teen involvement was encouraging. "We began the program with a youth summit of 1,500 kids," he said. "Now 10,000 kids are part of SWAT."

Panella added that the program's success made it a staple of Florida's anti-tobacco campaign.

"It is no longer a pilot program, and we have plans to help prevent smoking in ages 24 and under," he said.

"Since tobacco companies will lose profits from teen smokers, they will probably target an older crowd."

The campaign also caught the eye of other anti-tobacco groups, including some in North Carolina.

"Florida's results are stellar, making it

a model for other states," said Deborah Bryan, director of programs and government relations at the N.C. branch of the American Lung Association.

But Bryan said North Carolina's lack of sufficient funds contributed to the state's high underage smoking rate.

"It takes state funding to produce results like (Florida's), and North Carolina doesn't have that," she said. "This is why we have such a high underage smoking rate."

Ed Bissette, a member of N.C.'s tobacco commission, said he also encouraged curbing youth smoking.

Bissette said, "I am certainly glad underage smoking is being contained and hope North Carolina follows the example."

The State & National Editor can be reached at stntdesk@unc.edu.

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