What is it?

The University of Central Florida has earned national recognition for Online@UCF, a 10-year-old initiative that has transformed teaching and learning at this metropolitan research university. Key to the success of the UCF distributed-learning model has been the institution’s unwavering commitment to faculty support and professional development. The rapid acceptance of online learning at UCF owes much to the systematic way in which the institution set out to assemble the necessary faculty support architecture, instructional design expertise, course-development production support, and assessment capabilities to ensure that the online learning experience would be highly interactive, learner-centered, and pedagogically sound.

Three units were established to focus the university’s efforts and provide administrative support for its expanding online credit courses, degree programs, and activities. Course Development and Web Services (CDWS) was established in 1996 to support faculty and course development for online learning. Also in 1996, the Research Initiative for Teaching Effectiveness (RITE) was established to provide an independent assessment of the impact of online learning on students, faculty, and the institution. The Center for Distributed Learning (CDL) was created in 1997 to provide planning and administrative support for students and faculty engaged in one or more of the university’s distributed learning modalities.

CDWS pairs faculty with instructional designers who work with them to expand the range of instructional tools and techniques at the faculty member’s disposal by examining best practices in online course delivery, including three distinct learning models:

- Fully online instruction
- Blended or “mixed-mode” learning, in which Web-based instruction replaces a certain amount of face-to-face class time
- Web-enhanced learning, in which there is no reduction in face-to-face class time but course materials are delivered over the Web

RITE has documented improved learning outcomes for each mode of delivery, along with high levels of student and faculty satisfaction.

From its modest beginnings in 1996, Online@UCF has expanded to serve tens of thousands of students across the state of Florida and engage 75 percent of the UCF faculty. UCF currently offers 15 online degree programs, 10 online graduate-certificate programs, approximately 1,300 fully online and blended courses, which combine online instruction with face-to-face instruction, and hundreds of other courses that enhance face-to-face classroom instruction with online resources. In the 2003-2004 school year, nearly 44 percent of UCF’s approximately 44,000 students enrolled in at least one fully online or blended course. Unique in its level of commitment to institutionalized faculty support, Online@UCF is a model of effective practice in the realm of online learning.

What problem does it solve?

In the mid-1990s, with more than 20,000 students on campus and enrollments on the rise, UCF established an institutional goal of expanding its services to include students who might not otherwise have access to higher education by leveraging new opportunities for flexible, Web-based course delivery. Online technologies would permit the institution to enroll greater numbers of students in its high-demand degree and graduate-certificate programs and to manage that growth without placing additional strain on limited classroom space.

The real challenge for UCF, however, was to devise a distributed-learning program that delivered a quality education to large numbers of geographically dispersed learners. UCF developed clear teaching and learning objectives from the start that were meant to mitigate the known problems with distance learning, including the learner’s sense of isolation and an accompanying lack of engagement. The success of the UCF model for online learning is a testament to institutional commitment, careful planning, and skillful execution. Most importantly, UCF addressed the potential problems that come with learning at a distance by thinking through the entire course-development process, providing the resources and support faculty would need to generate highly interactive, learner-centered, and pedagogically sound online courses.

How did they do it?

A careful plan guided the growth of Online@UCF, from a handful of courses in 1996 to the nearly 1,300 fully online and blended-learning courses offered this past year (with combined enrollments of 45,830). Based on the UCF experience, the following institutional commitments are needed to ensure the success of a large-scale online learning program:
Online@UCF

- **Consultation:** The advice of outside consultants will help ensure the development of sustainable action plans.
- **Collaboration:** Regular meetings with academic leaders (deans, chairs, and all interested faculty) will help ensure that the program is faculty-supported, pedagogically sound, and sustainable.
- **Ongoing assessment:** The introduction of a research component to the program plan—such as UCF’s RITE (<http://rite.ucf.edu>)—guarantees that ongoing student and faculty assessments are conducted and that continuous quality improvement is built into the distributed learning program. Continual monitoring of the program’s effectiveness ensures that it remains closely aligned with institutional goals, results in measurable learning improvements, and generates effective new assessment mechanisms.
- **Course-development support:** Institutional commitment to comprehensive course-development assistance and faculty support—of the kind provided by UCF’s CDL and CDWS—is key to the success of any online learning initiative.
- **Faculty development:** Faculty members new to online instruction should receive specialized training in interactive distributed learning, such as UCF’s 60-hour development program, Interactive Distributed Learning for Technology Mediated Course Delivery (<http://reach.ucf.edu/~id6543>). Faculty members are also provided with ongoing staff support and online resources (see <http://teach.ucf.edu>) to ensure success in the online environment.
- **Student training:** Students new to the online learning experience will benefit from easy access to online tutorials and other orientation materials (see <http://learn.ucf.edu/>).
- **Online knowledge base:** Institutions may want to provide an online knowledge base similar to the one developed by UCF (<http://ask.ucf.edu>) so that students and faculty can find answers to commonly asked questions about online learning.
- **Student-faculty IT collaboration:** Processes should be in place for leveraging the expertise of technically skilled students capable of providing faculty with Web-development assistance and additional technical support.

Web-based courses require substantial time and resources to produce. At UCF, faculty development support is provided through a cooperative planning process involving college deans, department chairs, and the distributed learning administrative team. UCF’s intellectual property policy requires UCF to ask permission before using materials developed primarily by a faculty member but allows UCF to reuse course materials developed primarily by campus support units.

**Why is it noteworthy?**

- **Strategic plan:** A strategic plan drove the program and ensured its alignment with university priorities.
- **Stakeholder involvement:** Key stakeholders were involved early—and often—ensuring the program met their needs and had support.
- **Faculty development:** The emphasis on faculty development, support, and feedback—throughout all phases of the program—ensured a high level of faculty engagement.
- **Assessment:** Assessment data documented the impact of online, blended, and Web-enhanced delivery modes on successful teaching and facilitated continuous improvement.

**To learn more**

Read more detailed information about Online@UCF at [http://online.ucf.edu](http://online.ucf.edu).

**To share your innovation**

If your institution has a practice that you believe would be of interest to the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative, please share it with us. To submit your innovation for review, please use the ELI Innovations Contribution Form on our Community Exchange page (<http://www.educause.edu/ELICommunityExchange/6797>). A panel will review your submission and make a recommendation to the ELI staff.

**About the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative**

The EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative (ELI) is a community of higher education institutions and organizations committed to advancing learning through IT innovation. To achieve this mission, ELI focuses on learners, learning principles and practices, and learning technologies. We believe that using IT to improve learning requires a solid understanding of learners and how they learn. It also requires effective practices enabled by learning technologies. We encourage institutions to use this report to broaden awareness and improve effective teaching and learning practice.