



Get on board: Implementing virtual programs to benefit learners

No more chalky fingertips! The traditional board at the front of the classroom where you clumsily formed the alphabet or struggled with equations has been supplemented with a new blackboard, the Internet.

Virtual classrooms benefit all learners, but offer special relief to working professionals, homebound students, or anyone interested in the convenience of a world of knowledge at the touch of a button. Creating a virtual classroom is as simple as **setting goals, defining purpose, training faculty, and recruiting students.**

Gigabyte goals and PC purpose

Identifying your target audience and academic objectives are the first steps. It is essential to develop a straightforward mission statement that clearly defines the purpose of your online program. The message should be concise enough to fit on a t-shirt and capture your audiences' attention.

- Imagine offering a virtual greenhouse to supplement a second grade science class. A clever t-shirt awareness campaign might be "Broadband Botanists: Elmwood Elementary's Virtual Greenhouse Helps Young Minds Grow!"
- At the college level, an entire course of online study can be described in a sentence: "Community College Virtual Classroom: A Campus in the Comfort of Your Home."

Tech training and distinctive discussion boards

- A computer literate faculty with ample technical support is the key to operating online instruction. Once the staff is fluent in Web 101, successful instructors will learn how to engage students online.
- Encourage instructors to use a variety of online communication tools, such as discussion boards, live chat and instant messaging.
- Instructors can bring their own online creativity into the virtual classroom. Elementary school students might love to log onto Mrs. Smith's Poetry Playhouse filled with interactive limerick generators. Blossom Pen/Light Combo notebooks, small diaries with illuminated pens, can be handed out to budding poets to encourage under-the-covers creativity. University students will appreciate mugs from Professor Joe's Creative Writing Coffee House, a site where they can chat about literary symbolism and post their work.

The RAM of recruiting

A successful virtual institution begins by inspiring students to sign up. Once enlisted, learners must be given the right tools and skills to succeed throughout the online course. Finally, administrators and educators should promote programs by instilling individuals with a sense of pride in their online education that will keep them moving forward.

Since RAM is the best known form of computer memory, it's an ideal acronym for an online enrollment strategy:

Reach

Actualize

Motivate

- **Reach** students by designing specialized programs that meet community needs and advertise them creatively. For example, schoolchildren who live far from coastal regions would benefit from taking marine biology classes where they can hop aboard a virtual seafaring expedition and experience Pacific coast wildlife right from their computer terminals. Entice parents to enroll them with an economical recruitment item like a fish-shaped pencil imprinted with your program's name. In areas with a healthcare need, promote your school's Web-based respiratory therapy program with a ministeppedometer reading "UW: The First Step Towards Your Future in Healthcare!"
- **Actualize** your program by setting up computer training orientation, an online help network where students can get answers to their questions about online learning. Send out a welcome kit upon registration filled with functional items to help them acclimate to a virtual classroom, such as a battery free wireless mouse, a mouse pad featuring your school logo, a customized lap top sleeve, and flash drives to tote data.
- **Motivate** online learners by adding that human touch to their virtual classroom experience. Along with e-mail pep talks and newsletters, a top student prize, such as a Peak MP4 Player or other electronic gadget, can encourage healthy competition within the computerized classroom. Mailing out certificates of achievement will inspire students as they move towards the ultimate piece of paper, a diploma.

With a clear direction, technically proficient staff, and a clever strategy for recruiting a strong student body, the modern virtual blackboard will have something in common with the old-fashioned blackboard. Both offer a clean slate onto which a promising future can be written.

