

Bridgewater State College

Frequently Asked Questions about Online Learning

The overarching purpose of the online programs initiative is to increase access to a BSC education for learners in our service region. The focus is on better meeting the needs of students in Southeastern Massachusetts, including the Cape and Islands. Major goals include:

1. Developing the services and infrastructure required to support rigorous online programs and courses in keeping with the quality that BSC provides in its face-to-face programs.
2. Building capacity to enable every undergraduate student to take at least one online course per year.
3. Delivering undergraduate, graduate, and degree completion programs online.

A proactive approach to online learning will help to meet the need for:

- A wide variety of interactive teaching strategies to address diverse learning styles and promote engaged student learning.
- More online course sections to keep pace with the rapidly growing, unmet demand.
- Online, third and fourth year degree completion programs for students who have successfully completed MA community college programs.
- Logistically sound alternatives to conventional on-campus courses for nontraditional students with employment, family and other responsibilities.
- Options to resolve schedule conflicts that might otherwise delay a student's degree completion.
- BSC's critical shortage of classroom space.

BSC has nationally-recognized technological infrastructure, extensive faculty support services, and a rapidly growing number of faculty committed to exploring both the pedagogical and practical possibilities of online learning. In the past year alone, there has been a five-fold increase in the number of course sections offered online. The challenge BSC now faces is to incorporate online education into its strategic planning and build capacity for sustainable online programs. In doing so, the college will substantially increase access, so all motivated learners in Southeastern Massachusetts can benefit from the high-quality programs BSC has to offer.

It is important to remember that the online programs initiative is an effort to expand teaching and learning options and is not intended to replace BSC's highly respected on-campus programs. As happens with any new initiative, a number of questions and concerns have been raised by faculty. Included here are responses to frequently asked questions.

? How is the term “online” being used at BSC?

Historically, BSC has used the term “online” in accordance with parameters established by the Sloan Consortium <http://www.sloan-c.org> An online course is one which takes place predominantly via an interactive course website. A BSC course with “W” in the section designation is 100% online, with no face-to-face meeting required. “Y” in the section designation is between 80-99% online and has some required face-to-face class meeting time, not to exceed 7.5 hours. An online program may be 100% online, or it may include a combination of W and Y courses. In any online program, this balance should be informed by best practices in the discipline.

? Isn't BSC moving ahead too fast? Shouldn't we first decide whether or not to engage in online learning?

Although BSC is one of the most technologically advanced institutions in the US, we have fallen far behind with regard to online learning. We are at least four to six years behind in terms of the online courses, programs and support services available to students in our service region. To put things in perspective, students who have successfully completed online degree programs at MA community colleges are being advised to pursue 3rd-4th year degree completion at private institutions, due to lack of online learning options at state institutions. University of Phoenix has a physical presence in both Braintree and Burlington, MA. Kaplan is heavily recruiting students and faculty for its online programs.

Among MA state colleges, Westfield State College recently took the lead, with the Fall 2008 opening of a Business Management degree completion program. Westfield is launching similar programs in Marketing and Finance will follow by Fall, 2009. Each spring, Framingham State College promotes its online summer courses to BSC students with an advertisement in the *Comment*.

With over 250 undergraduate and graduate course sections online in 2007-2008, BSC is already engaged in online learning. BSC's first online course ran in 1999. Online course sections tend to fill within the first week of registration. The need that we face is to give shape and direction to online learning at BSC through proactive planning, in conjunction with faculty and departments interested in pursuing online learning. The anticipated pace of program development is two online programs (e.g. third and fourth year degree completion, academic minor, graduate program) per year. As we move forward, decisions regarding which courses and programs to offer online will still need to emanate from academic departments.

? I have never taken a course online before. Is there a way for me to experience online learning from a student perspective, before I attempt to teach online?

There are a number of opportunities to experience online learning from a student perspective. Many professional development options, e.g. the Massachusetts Colleges Online “web camp”, are delivered online. Another option is for faculty to take advantage of tuition benefits to take a course from any one of the state institutions in the Massachusetts Colleges Online consortium <http://www.mco.mass.edu> . Additional courses are available from

UMassOnline <http://www.umassonline.net> . Yet another option is to ask a colleague teaching online to let you “observe” his or her course by giving you student access to the course website for a set period of timeⁱ.

? Is online learning possible in all disciplines and courses?

While each discipline presents its own unique challenges, nationwide, the penetration rates of online learning is fairly evenly distributed across disciplines, with the exception of engineering. The 2008 Sloan Consortium study of online learning has found that online programs exist in relatively even proportions across the following discipline areas: psychology; social sciences and history; computer and information sciences; education; health professions and related sciences; liberal arts, general studies, and humanities; and business. The one discipline area in which penetration of online programs is low is engineering.ⁱⁱ However, it is up to each department or program to determine what course delivery methods best fit the instructional goals and objectives.

? How can we be confident that online courses are of the same high quality as BSC’s face-to-face courses?

Online courses are subject to several layers of review. First, it is the responsibility of each academic department to apply the contractual peer observation process to evaluate online courses. SIRS II and DCGE student evaluations are administered in online course sections. Any online courses and programs offered by a department must also comply with professional accreditation requirements applicable in the discipline. College-wide, NEASC accreditation standards apply. BSC will also be making available to faculty Quality Matters, a rubric for optional, self-assessment of online course design. This tool, which was developed at the University of Maryland, provides a robust checklist for faculty who are either teaching online for the first time or seeking to improve upon the design of their online courses.

? Won’t BSC lose its local competitive advantage and reputation if students are able to take the same course online from any institution, without regard to geographic location?

The focus is on improving services to students in BSC’s current service region, Southeastern Massachusetts (including Cape Cod and the Islands.) Currently, 99% of our online students reside within this region. The reality is that students already have a wide array of options to take online courses elsewhere. It would be disappointing to think that geographic proximity is the only factor attracting students to BSC. This is a very good opportunity to consider what is unique about BSC courses and how this can be carried over into online learning environments.

- ❓ **Won't faculty lose control over curriculum and course design, with faculty role being reduced to delivering generic courses or even contract courses?**
- ❓ **Will the state push for a single online, generic course that is easily transferable and eliminates duplication among state institutions?**
- ❓ **Is this a trend toward contract courses or generic courses?**

Historically, BSC has taken a strong stance against both contract courses and brokering of generic courses across multiple institutions. A major concern here is that, in order to ensure course quality, BSC must retain control over assignment of instructors for all online courses bearing BSC credit.ⁱⁱⁱ There is no plan to change BSC's practice with regard to online courses and programs. Responsibility for course design and assignment of instructors will continue to reside with academic departments.

- ❓ **Will online course sections eliminate the need for face-to-face course sections?**

The need for face-to-face sections is not going to go away. Several factors point to an ongoing need for a variety of course sections. Increase in overall student enrollment necessitates more sections of all types. Lower class caps for certain types of courses (e.g. first and second year seminars, courses approved for the Core), necessitate an increase in the overall number of sections scheduled. We do not anticipate a mass exodus of students from campus; rather, we anticipate that most students will continue to integrate online courses into a predominantly on-campus schedule. For example, a student might take an online course as a way to resolve a schedule conflict between two required courses, with the end result being that the student is able to stay on track for four-year degree completion. Fully online programs, e.g. third and fourth year degree completion programs, are intended to reach a new clientele, learners who fall outside the group that we are currently serving on campus.

- ❓ **How do online courses count in load credit?**

Online courses may be taught by either full-time faculty or VL's. For full-time faculty, each online course is counted as either regular load or overload, depending on the individual faculty member's schedule. Of the 132 courses offered online during Fall 2008, 45% (59 courses) are regular load, and 52% (69 courses) are either overload or taught by a VL. The remaining 3% (4 courses) did not yet have an instructor assigned at the time of data collection.

- ❓ **Students will still find a way to get to BSC, in spite of high gasoline costs. Isn't this just one more case of giving in to what students want?**

It is important to make a distinction between wants and needs. As the demographics of our student body have changed, so, too, have their needs. Increasingly, students are working 20-30 hours per week in order to fund their education and daily living expenses. This is not a choice; it is a necessity. In addition, some students juggle other responsibilities, including parenting and caring for elderly family members. Sixty-two percent of BSC students face the additional burden of recent increases in commuting costs. For these students, each trip to

campus represents a cost in terms of time and money putting them closer to the breaking point between whether or not they can complete their BSC education. A key underlying issue here is what we believe about access to education. Should all qualified students have access to a BSC education, or is this a privilege reserved for those who can afford to attend campus full-time for four years?

❓ Will there still be a need for online courses if gasoline costs decrease?

While online learning helps to alleviate commuting costs incurred by students, this is only one of the reasons for the increased need for online courses and programs. Interest in online courses has increased rapidly over the past ten years, with the recent spike due to high fuel costs in 2008 representing only a minor portion of the overall growth in online enrollments. During Fall 2007, over 20% of all US students took at least one online course. The current downturn in the economy and the accompanying high rate of unemployment are viewed as factors that will increase the demand for online programs. The 2007 double-digit growth rate in online enrollments is a strong indicator that the demand for online courses and programs will continue to grow for the foreseeable future.^{iv} The Post-9/11 GI Bill^v is likely to increase the demand for online learning, as many of the beneficiaries fall into the nontraditional student population for whom flexible access to education is critical.

❓ Are online learning and engaged student learning compatible with each other?

BSC's Engaged Student Learning Task Force describes engaged student learning as including "...a variety of curricular and co-curricular activities such as out-of-class experiences, hands-on laboratory exercises, student teaching, field work, service learning, inquiry-based studies, internships, leadership opportunities, undergraduate research projects, international study opportunities, and classroom innovations that involve students in the active construction of their own knowledge."^{vi}

Many BSC faculty use online teaching strategies that are highly compatible with this definition. Faculty traveling to conduct research use online learning as a way to engage students in the research. Online course delivery allows students in remote student teaching sites to discuss their pre-professional experiences with each other and the instructor far more frequently than in the past. Students have mock interviews with area employers, a learning experience which has resulted in job placements for some students. These are only a few of the many different ways BSC faculty use online learning environments to advance engaged student learning.

❓ How does the instructor know who is actually completing the course work and tests online?

The Higher Education Opportunity Act, reauthorized in August 2008, requires, "...institutions offering distance education to have a process to establish that a student registered for a distance education course is the same student that participates in, completes, and receives credit for the course." (Part H, Section 495). Although full details are not yet available, BSC will need to meet this requirement.^{vii}

In the meantime, the same question needs to be asked of on-campus courses: do you require every student to produce two photo ID's upon entering each class? How do you know that the student who turns in the paper or problem set is the one who really completed the work? Anti-plagiarism tools such as turnitin.com can be used to deter and detect plagiarism, but are currently limited to text-based assignments and will not prevent ghost writing by a third party. Institutions with a history of successful online programs encourage faculty to consider shifting away from reliance on single right answer tests to other forms of assessment. The Teaching and Technology Center regularly provides information and workshops on secure assessments, preventing plagiarism, and other related topics. Ultimately, there is no course delivery method that is 100% foolproof when it comes to cheating.

❓ Are student retention rates lower online than in face-to-face classrooms?

A variety of factors affect student retention rates in online courses. Early on, many institutions approached online learning as a way to achieve economy of scale. Dropout rates were extremely high, but so, too, were class sizes, which often ran into the thousands. As it became clear that this approach was ineffective, retention rates improved, but they still fall below those for on-campus courses. One factor involved is that non-traditional students enrolling in online courses typically have complicated lives with a number of other responsibilities, e.g. families and jobs. It is somewhat common for an online learner to realize partway through a course that he/she does not have the time needed to complete the course in that particular semester. Another factor is that the flexibility of scheduling may entice students to register for courses for which they are not adequately prepared. There are also students who register for an online course section on the assumption that it will be easier than the face-to-face section, only to discover that the online version is far more challenging than they had anticipated. Pre-registration advising, with information specific to the skills needed for online learning, is needed to help students make sound decisions regarding online courses.

❓ Don't online courses lack the faculty/student interaction that occurs in the classroom?

Communication is the area in which online courses differ most from face-to-face courses. In well-structured online discussions, student engagement increases over classroom discussion. In a typical classroom setting, students may feel hesitant to engage in public class discussions. However, in an online discussion setting, students often feel more at ease and less inhibited by fellow students and the classroom setting, and have more time to thoughtfully consider what they want to say before posting their thoughts in the discussion forum. Communication between instructor and students increases, as does communication among students. In contrast to the classroom in which discussion participation is limited by factors such as time, online instructors typically require all students to contribute to the online discussion on each course topic. Since these discussions are archived, the instructor can moderate the discussion as it occurs and then go back and grade each student's contribution later, after the topic has closed. This is very different from the face-to-face classroom discussion, in which an instructor must moderate the discussion and assess student participation simultaneously in "real time", often while the instructor is trying to learn

students' names. Instructors can use the archives to review and build on their own discussion moderating skills. For example, it is very easy to review the balance between instructor and student voices in the online discussion archive. Since there is no bell at the end of the class period, one of the most difficult tasks encountered by faculty teaching online is setting limits on time spent online with students in each course.

- ❓ **Aren't online courses more dependent on the text, with less "play" between instructor and text?**
- ❓ **How does "pre-formatted" content used in online courses fit with disciplines, e.g. those in liberal arts, where the investigations in the class should be more free-form?**

For almost a decade, faculty at BSC have had full access to their course websites throughout the semester. Each instructor is able to make changes and updates to course content and assignments at anytime during the semester. For example, if an instructor chooses to shift gears to focus on a prominent current event that is relevant to the course, the instructor has direct access to the course website from his/her computer and can easily make the necessary changes to course content and assignments. This is very different from some of the private institutions in our area, at which online instructors must provide all course website materials prior to the start of the semester and must go through an administrator to make changes to the course website.

Online course communication tools provide a variety of ways for instructors and students to interact with text and other media. These include asynchronous discussion boards, blogs, wikis, web video conferencing, and synchronous "virtual classrooms" (chat rooms). The Teaching and Technology Center provides ongoing workshops, online tutorials, and one-on-one assistance to help faculty determine which medium will best fit the particular learning activity at hand and allow for the level of fluidity that the instructor is seeking.

- ❓ **How can online courses provide students with much needed opportunities for students to develop speaking skills?**

While it is challenging to incorporate speaking into online courses, it can be done. Most current computers require only the addition of an inexpensive microphone in order to record audio files. BSC has had successful speaking-intensive second year seminars online. Audio capture has been combined with PowerPoint for student presentations in online courses. Digital video is another medium that challenges students to represent their knowledge. In all of these cases, the technical skills are minimal; it is the creation and composition of the content that is most challenging.

Asynchronous online learning does lack the spontaneous discourse that occurs in some face-to-face classrooms. However, we are working with a generation of young adults who have all but abandoned the telephone for media such as text messaging, which allows them to think first about what they want to say, then "speak". Virtual classroom tools can be utilized to conduct synchronous, online class meetings, in which all students are required to be online at the same time. Programs such as Adobe Connect include interactive audio and video tools for instructor and student use. Where course objectives involve speaking before a live audience,

class meeting time in 80/20 hybrid course sections also provides an opportunity for students to develop skills needed for face-to-face, verbal discourse.

❓ Are there any alternatives to the Blackboard course management system?

After careful consideration of a variety of open source products, BSC has made Moodle available to faculty seeking an alternative to the Blackboard course management system. This year, seventeen faculty members have received grants to pilot Moodle in their courses. Each course management system has its advantages and disadvantages. The IT Division makes a concerted effort to respond to faculty concerns while also staying abreast of new developments in this area.

❓ What is Ed2Go, and how is this different from for-credit online courses?

Ed2Go is a non-credit program offered as a service to the larger community and geared toward lifelong, independent learning around very specific, professional development and personal enrichment topics. Each course is taught by an expert on the specific topic. It is very common for colleges and universities to offer this type of non-credit, enrichment program as a service to the local community. For more information, see the BSC Office of Continuing and Distance Education web page at <http://www.bridgew.edu/Distance/>

ⁱ As a courtesy, the course instructor should let students know anytime someone other than registered students is allowed access to the course website. This can take the form of a brief announcement letting students know who the visitor is and why the person is observing the website. This is similar to introducing any visitors to the physical classroom.

ⁱⁱ Allen, I.E. and Seaman, J. (2008). *Staying the course: Online education in the United States, 2008*. (Needham, MA: Sloan Consortium), p. 13. Online at http://www.sloan-c.org/publications/survey/pdf/staying_the_course.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ This is reinforced by the NEASC stipulation that the degree-granting institution is responsible for quality of instruction in all courses in an online program.

^{iv} Allen and Seaman, p. 6.

^v For information on the Post-9/11 Veterans' Educational Assistance Act of 2008, see <http://www.gibill.va.gov/>

^{vi} See <http://www.bridgew.edu/President/EngagedStudentLearning.cfm>

^{vii} For summary, see <http://www.nasfaa.org/publications/2008/HEAsummary.html#TITLEI>