

Advances in technology are helping expand and improve the quality of distance education in Iowa.

Today, the virtual distance education classroom includes automatic voice- and motion-activated 360-degree or double-mount video cameras, and software that presents visual, audio, slideshow presentations, real-time instructor notes and personal space for student notes on the student's desktop computer screen.

"The teacher can walk around the room and the camera follows," said Ron Kral, University of Iowa's instructional development and Web services manager.

Some of UI's high-tech classrooms have about \$25,000 worth of technology in them.

UI has a \$150,000 budget for investing in classroom technology for distance education, and it appears to be paying off. UI offered the most distance education classes ever this fall -- 282 -- and has the highest fall enrollment ever and the second highest overall enrollment with 4,508 students. Last spring, UI topped out at 4,808.

"Our goals are quality and access throughout the state and even the region," said Chet Rzonca, associate provost and dean of UI Division of Continuing Education. "The technology just keeps changing. It gets easier to use and, in most cases, cheaper."

Distance education enrollment at UI has grown by more than 200 percent in the past five years, from 1,459 students in fall 2006.

"Students are responding more positively in general to the advances in technology," said Anne Zalenski, associate dean of distance education.

UI uses the technology to deliver the classes live or in a pre-recorded format, and some of the recordings are available to students for review purposes.

The division has six classrooms to deliver distance education classes for six to 49 students on campus and two lecture hall classrooms are being added next fall. The classes are a blend of on-campus and off-campus students who participate from their desktop computers.

One limitation is bandwidth in remote areas, which affects how much technology can be used in delivering the classes, Rzonca said.

Next fall, UI, Iowa State University and the University of Northern Iowa will be collaborating on a pilot program in which classes based at one school will be available to students at the other. Nine classes will be offered.

"What we are looking for is something unique that the other schools don't offer. Ideally, we'd like it to be a strong elective," Rzonca said.

By B.A. Morelli

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