

## DIGITAL LEARNING IN ACTION

# Online Learning at the University of Central Florida Delivers Quality and Cost Savings for Students and the Institution

### Online Learning Is Integral to UCF

In 1996, the University of Central Florida entered the world of online learning with a handful of courses. This decision was the result of converging factors, including plans to grow enrollment significantly to increase access for remote students while minimizing costs. UCF also launched mixed-modality courses (where course activity is both online and face-to-face) that provided students with flexibility in scheduling and location.

From the beginning, UCF's investment in online learning has been based on the premise that online education is core to the university's mission rather than a separate initiative with its own goals. Instead of outsourcing its online program development, UCF invested in its own staff to be experts in online learning and instruction. In addition, impact evaluation has been an integral part of online learning at the institution, playing an important and ongoing role in informing practice.

With the launch of online learning, UCF created the Center for Distributed Learning as a central resource to support the development and instruction of online courses. Today, CDL has a team of nearly 80 people, including instructional designers, developers, media producers and other professionals who work to advance online learning at the institution.

One factor that has helped UCF invest in its online learning capabilities is a State University System of Florida policy that allows institutions to charge a distance learning fee for online courses. At UCF, this fee is \$18 per online credit hour. Given the volume of online courses, the fee provides nearly enough income for the expenses incurred to operate the CDL.

### Faculty Are Key to Online Learning at UCF

Many institutions that scale online learning do so by using adjunct faculty and part-time instructors to teach online sections. This helps to manage instructional costs and maintain flexibility in course offerings and scheduling. Unlike many institutions, UCF does not exclusively hire adjunct professors to teach online courses. Instead, UCF online courses are taught by the same faculty who are teaching face-to-face courses,

### AT A GLANCE



#### UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

- Total enrollment of over 66,000, with nearly 57,000 undergraduates and over 9,000 graduate students
- UCF serves a diverse undergraduate population:
  - 55% female, 45% male
  - 48% white
  - 26% Hispanic
  - 11% black/African American
  - 6% Asian
- 31% of first-time freshmen are Pell Grant eligible
- 60% of undergraduate students take at least some courses online, and 14% of undergraduates take all of their courses online

FALL 2017 STATISTICS

including senior faculty. This works to set an example for junior faculty and those who are new to the institution – reinforcing that online learning is core to the institution and core to being UCF faculty.

To ensure quality in online learning, UCF requires comprehensive training programs for anyone building or teaching an online course. For those looking to build a course, the [IDL6543 faculty professional development course](#) is 80 hours over 10 weeks and includes face-to-face and online components, as well as consultations with instructional designers in the CDL. Faculty who are teaching in online environments have 35 hours of training provided by the institution. These trainings recognize that online instruction is more than just taking what faculty know from face-to-face courses and applying it in an online environment.

## How Online Learning Can Generate a Return on Investment for Institutions and Learners

In 2018, Arizona State University and Boston Consulting Group released “Making Digital Learning Work,” a report based on over two years of analysis on the return on investment from digital learning in six institutional contexts. The report identifies three components of the return realized from an institution’s investments in digital learning: impacts on student *access* to higher education, impacts on student learning *outcomes*, and impacts on institutional and student *economics*.

Data from UCF points to several potential benefits that can help to drive return on investment, including:

- **Expanding educational access, both overall and for some groups of traditionally underserved students.** Enrollment at UCF has grown from 26,000 students in 1996 to over 66,000 in fall 2017, with much of the growth coming from students taking courses online. In addition, a comparison of the students taking entirely face-to-face courses versus those taking entirely online courses showed that students enrolled only in online courses were more likely to be female, Pell-Grant eligible and older than their peers.
- **Improving student learning outcomes, like time to graduation.** Students who take more courses online at UCF tend to graduate more quickly than those taking more face-to-face courses. For example, students taking 41 to 60 percent of their credit hours online graduate in 3.9 years, compared to 4.3 years for students taking no online classes.
- **Lowering instructional costs per student for the institution and reducing costs for students.** Analysis of per-student credit hour costs at UCF showed that the cost to the institution for online courses was 16 percent lower than the institutional average, primarily due to lower instructional costs. For students, a shorter time to graduation, referenced above, can translate to lower tuition costs and an accelerated path to the workforce.

While not all institutions have similar results from their online learning initiatives, this case study shows how online learning implementation can result in positive return on investment.

