

## **Distance Education in Idaho: The Case of Ag Econ 391 - Agribusiness Management**

### ***The Situation***

Idaho is a relatively sparsely populated state, ranking 39<sup>th</sup> in population density. It, however, ranks 11<sup>th</sup> in the U.S. for geographical size. In this large, rural state, agriculture plays a dominant role; 25 percent of Idaho's gross state product comes from agriculture. These demographics present a need and an excellent opportunity for the use of distance education, which is why the College of Agriculture at the University of Idaho has been working hard to make distance education courses available to students around the state. One course that has been part of these outreach efforts is an upper division Agribusiness Management course offered by the Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology. Professor John Foltz had taught Agricultural Economics 391 – Agribusiness Management on-campus for five years. He first offered the course as a distance offering in the fall of 1997, and has taught the class each fall since then. The course provides students with an overview of business management applied to agribusiness, which includes firms in input supply industries such as seed, feed, fertilizer and agrichemicals, as well as production agriculture and businesses in the food processing, distribution and retailing areas.

In addition to meeting Idaho's distance education needs, this course is part of a developing tri-state cooperative distance education program. The Tri-State Agricultural Distance Delivery Alliance offers a degree program developed by the colleges of

agriculture at the University of Idaho, Washington State University, and Oregon State University. The alliance's goal is to enable students in the three-state region to obtain a Bachelor of Science degree in Agriculture through distance delivery.

### ***Our Response***

In order to fulfill these delivery objectives, the components of the Agribusiness Management course were redesigned and redeveloped so as to be available asynchronously and at a distance. The course includes the following components: two web sites, an interactive virtual space, videotapes, textbooks, and a print course packet of case studies. The two web pages, one for on-campus students (<http://www.uidaho.edu/ag/agecon/391/agec391.htm>) and one for distance students (<http://www.uidaho.edu/ag/agecon/391/agec391dist.html>), reflect the difference in assignments for each group of students. Both sets of students are required to participate in online threaded discussions (twice per week) and both have midterm exams and a final exam. The on-campus students participate in a business simulation game that includes written and oral components, a team assignment that proves difficult to administer at a distance. The off-campus students, thus, are assigned 10 case studies, whereas the on-campus students meet and discuss these case studies in weekly recitation sections. The course's web sites include a syllabus, class notes, copies of old exams and their answers, links to agribusiness web sites, links to similar

agribusiness classes, and a space for class participation. Class participation accounts for 10 percent of the students' grades and is accomplished through electronic threaded discussions using an innovative virtual environment called *The Speakeasy Studio and Café*, created by Washington State University. Readers are invited to visit The Speakeasy Studio and Café (<http://morrison.wsu.edu/studio/>); begin by clicking on "Start," which will give you an overview of *The Speakeasy* community (which includes discussions from several colleges and universities across the U.S.). To see what is currently going on at the University of Idaho, click on the "University of Idaho" neighborhood. To browse past studios (including the Fall 1998 Ag Ec 391 Agribusiness Management studio), you must first log in. Click on "Log In/Out" on the left-hand navigation bar, then type in the login name "uiguest" and the password "uiguest." You will find that this login gives you access to several UI studios, including "John Foltz's Ag Ec 391, Fall 1998" course. After clicking on that studio link, you can read through the threaded discussions by going to the "Playbill."

## ***Achievements***

*The Speakeasy* helps implement Foltz's teaching goals of more interaction among students, active participation in the course, and integration of real-world insight. Within *The Speakeasy*, Foltz posts a discussion topic each week and students are required to post a minimum of two responses—either to the initial topic or to someone else's comments. Because of these online threaded discussions, Foltz feels that this class is much more interactive than it has been traditionally—even when the course was taught entirely face-to-face. Students respond positively to the online interactions, as evidenced in the "Off-The-Record" course evaluation that Foltz administers in addition to the standard University

evaluations. In response to the question, "What were the most valuable aspects of this course?" one student said "I thoroughly enjoyed *The Speakeasy Café*," while another said "Good information and lots of computer interaction." This latter student suggested having "more work with *Speakeasy* discussions" as a way to improve the course.

*The Speakeasy* affords Foltz the ability to easily incorporate agribusiness experts from around the country into the learning community. Some weeks, an outside expert would construct a description of a real life situation or problem that is put on the virtual "table" for discussion. The agribusiness professional, the students, and the instructor then engage in an asynchronous discussion of that topic. This method of integrating current, real-world experiences and situations encourages lively participation from all class members, even those who otherwise might be hesitant to participate in traditional face-to-face discussions.

Student enrollment in the class can be seen in Table 1 below. Student performance in the on-campus and off-campus sections has differed somewhat, though Foltz's goal is to give both sets of students equal learning and performance opportunities. He attributes these slight differences to slightly different course requirements, but even more so to differing populations of students. In his anecdotal experience, the off-campus students seem to be better students in some cases (desire more out of the course, work harder and bring additional insight and experience into the class – perhaps due to age and work experience), and poorer students in other cases (less maturity, lower performance on assignments and exams – perhaps due to expectations that the class would be more similar to a community college level course).

Semester	Location	Distance Site	# of students
Fall 1997	On Campus students		34
	Distance students	Twin Falls, ID	8
Fall 1998	On Campus students		40
	Distance students	Twin Falls, ID	10
		Ontario, OR	3
		Idaho Falls, ID	1
Fall 1999	On Campus students		31
	Distance students	Twin Falls, ID	6
		Ontario, OR	1
		Idaho Falls, ID	7

### ***The Future***

Distance education is no panacea for all learning at the higher ed level. However, it does offer some significant advantages and opportunities to time and place-bound students – opening up avenues for education for them that were never available before. The key for students and professors alike is to embrace the technology, realize its limitations and work to utilize it to its fullest advantages. In addition, thoughtful users can use innovative methods to make University distance classes more interactive. The challenge is that to do so requires both time and resources.

### ***For More Information***

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