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Jay Keeler, right, lead faculty with the application development computer information systems department at Lake Michigan College, talks with Lionel Kanyowa, a member of LMC's IT work study program, about the school's new Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) Thursday afternoon.

Demand rises for distance learning

Area community colleges consider many factors for online options

By RALPH HEIBUTZKI
HP Correspondent

BENTON HARBOR — Getting an education without leaving the comforts of home can be appealing for students who can't make it to class.

Convenience definitely is the driving force behind the growth of online education, or distance learning, notes Jay Keeler, lead faculty for application development in computer information systems at Lake Michigan College.

Examples from last year include a student who recently had given birth.

"She could not come to class with a newborn, but she came to campus, in real time, and participated without leaving home," Keeler said.

Another student took the same approach to work around his schedule at Lakeland Health.

"He would jack in two days a week from Lakeland," Keeler said. "We would see the lab techs and their gurneys in the background. So he came to class and participated, in real time, without showing up."

Not all online programs are created equal, however, according to David Fleming, vice president of instruction for Southwestern Michigan College.

For example, he said online classes at for-profit schools often carry a hefty price tag.

"People get sucked into the convenience," Fleming said. "That's a very, very powerful motivator. Our average 18-year-old



Lake Michigan College's Jay Keeler, right, talks with Lionel Kanyowa about the school's new Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). LMC's "virtual classroom" will roll out with its Hanson Technology Center, which opens this fall. The system uses videoconferencing software.

is working a job or two: 'I don't have to do that (the traditional way).' It's all in the marketing, which helps, right?"



FLEMING

LMC's virtual experience

The furor over Trump University, which began in 2005 as an online-only class but soon expanded into a series of four- and five-figure seminars, often is cited as an example of the downside of digital education.

The now-defunct creation of Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump is under investigation by New York's Attorney General's Office. Two class action lawsuits are underway in federal court, while a third

is pending in New York's state courts.

The program has been rocked by allegations of deceptive marketing practices used to enroll students, but never was accredited, and never conferred credit, graded students or granted degrees, officials say.

By contrast, LMC and SMC don't put any class offerings totally online, which Fleming sees as a big red flag in evaluating any program.

"Often, an institution runs online, and all they've done is, they've moved their nontraditional students online," he said.

"Community college, by definition, is the best bang for your buck," Keller agrees.

Instead, both institutions follow a "hybrid" model

that allows students to interact online with instructors or show up in class.

In LMC's case, it's created a "virtual classroom" that will roll out with its Hanson Technology Center that opens this fall, Keeler said.

The system is built around Adobe Connect videoconferencing software, an interactive screen in the classroom and a "chat pond" for students "who don't want to interact with a webcam and a microphone," Keeler said.

"It's not just a lecture. They participate live with me, whether they're on campus or not," he said. "I've got that whole interactive experience that integrates those different resources."

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The approach is essentially an upgraded version of the technology that Keeler's already using, like his office webcam.

"Students can just ding in and say, 'Hi, I want some face time with you.' They get face time with me, but it's through a camera," he said.

SMC's virtual experience

SMC favors a slightly different philosophy for its hybrid model classes.

"Basically, about 50 percent of the time is spent in the classroom and the other 50 percent is spent doing work through the Learning Management (software) system," Fleming said.

Fleming estimates that 75 to 100 classes, roughly one-third of SMC's 500 total courses, follow that approach.

Many are offered at SMC's Niles campus, whose major demographic is "the nontraditional 21 and over (adult population)," he said.

Examples include Fast Track, for students who want an associate degree in business but can't fit a standard class schedule into their lives, said Brent Brewer, Niles campus director.

"They go Monday and Wednesday for three hours each night," he said. "It's really convenient for working adults because it allows them to go part-time and



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Lionel Kanyowa, part of Lake Michigan College's IT work study program, works with the school's new Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) Thursday afternoon.

still finish in two years."

SMC also imposes a different rule on younger students.

"Some 18- to 21-year-olds can take hybrids," Fleming said. "We try not to let them do that (during) their first semester. We try to get them embedded in the college, do a little bit of screening, and talk to them: 'Is a hybrid (class) a good option for you?'"

Checks and balances

Ensuring a quality online program means building plenty of checks and balances into the system, Keeler and Fleming said.

For example, when LMC created its geographic information science and technology program, which it's submitted for approval by the Higher Learning Commission, it made sure the content matched federal guidelines and local employers' needs, Keeler said.

"All of our curriculum is based in current technology," he said. "We don't use (educational) versions. We use commercial versions of software so students can make a seamless transition into the workplace."

LMC also checked that the course materials fit its college or university part-

ners' expectations, which makes it easier for students to transfer, he said.

Fleming advises students interested in any online program to check for those types of connections.

"If the online (class or program) is associated with a traditional bricks and mortar institution, that probably means there's an alignment in place to align the classroom with what happens online," he said.

Any well-run program also gives students the chance to interact with instructors and support systems, like tutoring programs, said Leslie Kellogg.

LMC's vice president of academic services, career and workforce education.

"A poor quality online learning experience is one where you just throw out the curriculum onto a website and you call it a day, and students trudge through their way through it by themselves, without a lot of support," she said.

Otherwise, students are more likely to flounder, because they aren't relating to the material, Keeler said.

"You feel untethered and isolated, cranking through content," he said.

More than classes

Fleming and Kellogg also recommend checking out who accredits the online class or program that interests you.

LMC and SMC are accredited by the Higher Learning Commission, one of seven such regional bodies in the U.S.

The HLC evaluates 1,000 institutions in a 19-state area, making it the largest of the seven, spokesman Steve Kauffman said.

In accrediting an online class or program, the HLC looks at whether it's appropriate for the school, how well it matches traditional classroom formats and what type of support the institution provides, Kauffman said.

"We want students to have the same learning experience as they have in person," he said. "It's making sure the institution evalu-

ates their offerings to make sure students are getting the experience that they expected."

That philosophy has guided LMC all along, Keeler said.

"The curriculum is identical," he said. "There's no (strictly) online version. There's no watered-down, weaned stuff."

Accreditation by the HLC or any of the other regional bodies is a good marker of quality, Fleming said.

"You always want to make sure that any institution is accredited by one of them," he said.

Aside from those issues, Brewer suggests thinking hard about why an online or hybrid model might be a good fit.

That advice "isn't (given) just for our own institutional reasons," he said. "We just think that's what many students need, and it's the best thing for them."

How students answer that question depends on their circumstances since everybody's academic needs are different, Fleming said.

"If you're a working professional and only have so much time, to look for a hybrid or online component makes a lot of sense," he said. "For an average 19- or 20-year-old, the college experience is more than just classrooms. It's the way you interact with people, the way you learn. We believe, very strongly, that's a good way to be engaged."