Faculty Member Recognized for Online Teaching

Blackboard, Inc., the company that has acquired WebCT, Iowa State’s online course management system, recognizes outstanding faculty who model effective practices in course design and instruction. Dr. Shu-Hui (Susan) Chang, Director of Distance Education in the Department of Computer Science, recently received Blackboard’s Greenhouse Exemplary Course Program (ECP) award for her work in Computer Science 103, Computer Literacy and Applications.

Susan has designed and taught courses entirely online since 2003. Before that, she taught face-to-face computer courses for many years, in addition to doing her doctoral research in this field. She has been recognized by Blackboard not only because of the size of Computer Science 103 course – 1000 students – but also because of the course’s success. According to her research, 94 percent of students were satisfied with the course. In another research project, course evaluations (1996-2005) were analyzed to determine the effects of transforming Com Sci 103 from a large, traditionally taught course to one taught partially and then entirely online. In general, students reported being more satisfied with the instructor and the overall course as it moved online. They felt that they were more stimulated to learn, that course materials were more clearly explained in the virtual environment, and that they were significantly more satisfied with the amount that they learned. Students also reported spending significantly less time in the entirely online class than in the face-to-face classes.

According to Susan, the many advantages of teaching online courses outweigh the disadvantages. One great advantage is that distance education “provides flexibility and convenience for learners because students have control over schedules and the pace at which they learn.” The learner-centered model, using sound pedagogy and modern technology, has become a key component for successful distance education, she adds.

Another advantage that Susan sees concerns course design: “I use systematic course design to help students navigate the course material and achieve in-depth learning.” The different applications and tools allow students to get to know one another and the course, allow students to work with partners in real-world case study projects, and encourage students to evaluate each other’s research projects and provide constructive comments. “In addition,” she says, “I use different kinds of technology to accommodate different learning styles and students with disabilities.

Online courses are also more efficient, since students can view course material 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and can replay the lectures if needed. There are also online student resource materials and help desk sessions which provide support to learners. “In addition to the fact that online courses allow us to enroll more students that the traditional face-to-face class, they offer more opportunities for students, especially students who are shy, to interact with each other than does the traditional classroom setting.”

The disadvantage? “Teaching online courses is a seven-day, 24-hour job. However, I do enjoy my teaching very much. I appreciate all of the support I have received from the department, college, and ISU distance education support team.”

Susan has four suggestions for faculty considering creating a distance education or computer-based course:

- Focuses on learning, online course instructors are challenged to become not only content experts but also pedagogical experts; they need to shift from traditional teacher-centered approaches to the learner-centered paradigm.
- Recognize interaction and collaboration as the centers of distance education. Increased student to instructor, student to student, and student to content interactions will enhance students’ in-depth learning and promote students’ course satisfaction. For example, the orientation sessions at the beginning of the semester help students become familiar with the course structure and promote interaction. Students evaluate each other’s research projects and provide constructive comments to build a strong learning community. Chat activities engage students to contribute their viewpoints, present research findings, and interact with others.
- Assessment is key. Carefully constructed and various kinds of assessment can best ensure in-depth learning. Tests should be facilitated in a proctored environment. Assignments should allow students to use external resources effectively and encourage critical thinking skills. Instructors should provide evaluation rubrics and give students opportunities to practice and apply skills and concepts.
- Student support information should be available within or external to the online course environment. Tutorials, learner orientation, FAQ pages, and the like are needed to provide support, and should be available in a variety of formats to accommodate students with different learning styles and disabilities.