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In Case of Emergency, Break Tradition—Teach Online

By Jeffrey R. Young

If an outbreak of swine flu or some other crisis closes its campus, Northern Virginia Community College plans to still be open. The college is training classroom-based professors in the basics of online teaching as part of its emergency plan to shift large numbers of courses to the Web.

"You don't want to shut your institution down and say 'Sorry'—especially with the technology and tools that we have," says Steven G. Sachs, vice president for instructional and information technology for the college. Northern Virginia has established a set of "minimum competencies" for Blackboard, its course-management system, and has scheduled a training in early September to help professors meet them.

The college is one of several institutions updating their emergency plans to include teaching in virtual classrooms if physical ones become unusable for a few weeks.

While many colleges have worked on emergency planning in the past few years, many have focused on warning students and professors of danger and on protecting people and data. Now that those arrangements have been made, institutions are turning to contingencies to keep courses going after an initial crisis passes. Some college leaders are working to start a national center to help institutions develop "academic continuity plans," as such blueprints are called.

A Flood Tests One College

Valley City State University, in North Dakota, recently struggled through a temporary switch to online teaching when floods threatened the campus and much of the city was evacuated. In April, with just three weeks left in the spring semester, officials closed the campus and sent an e-mail message to students announcing that the remaining classes would take place online. "This is certainly not an ideal situation, but we are left with very few alternatives at this point in the semester," said the message,

from the university's president, Steven W. Shirley.

The university had a general emergency plan in place, but not one that covered a move to online instruction, says Doug Anderson, director of marketing and communications. But the campus did have a requirement that every student own a laptop computer, and that every professor put at least a syllabus on the university's course-management system. Like many universities, Valley City had taken those steps to encourage traditional students and professors to use technology to augment courses, not as part of an emergency plan. But in the midst of the crisis, administrators decided that they were well positioned for a temporary move to cyberspace.

Despite their comfort with computers, professors and students struggled to adapt, officials say. Some professors scrambled to record podcasts of their remaining lectures, while others typed out and posted the text of lectures they had planned to deliver in person. "Any faculty member you talk to on the campus would say, Yeah, it was really difficult to rethink classes as online only," says Margaret Dahlberg, interim vice president of academic affairs.

And some students had trouble finding reliable Internet access. Some had no connections at the places they were staying while the campus was closed, or only dial-up links that were too slow to handle audio and video, says Ms. Dahlberg. "We're a pretty rural state," she added, noting that many homes are not served by high-speed Internet carriers. Many students—and some professors—had to travel to coffee shops or public libraries to log in.

Several courses—including a few music courses—were deemed too tricky to teach online, and so the college skipped the last three weeks of them and gave the students the grade they had earned so far.

Ms. Dahlberg's advice to other colleges planning for such situations is to make sure professors are familiar with online systems in advance. "The most important thing that worked for us was that everyone was familiar with the system and was using it in some minimal way," she says. "I don't think it would work if you had to do a lot of training in the midst of the disaster."

Identifying Key Courses

That's the theory behind Northern Virginia's latest training push. Officials there expect 200 to 400 professors to attend the workshops in September, which are not mandatory but are

"strongly encouraged," says Mr. Sachs. This fall administrators plan to assess which courses could be most easily moved online and encourage professors teaching those courses to either go through training or prove they are cyber savvy.

It's unclear how many other colleges are taking similar steps, though several are highlighted on a [Web site](#) created by the Sloan Consortium, a nonprofit group that encourages technology use in education.

John Sener, director of special initiatives for the consortium, points to Fairleigh Dickinson University as a good example, noting that officials there have developed a "quick start" [faculty guide](#) to continuing instruction during an emergency.

The consortium, along with the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, has proposed creating a national center, to be based at a college, that would organize seminars and offer other information on academic continuity.

The groups have experience with using online instruction in the aftermath of a disaster. Just weeks after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, they created the Sloan Semester, an effort that brought together 153 colleges to offer distance-education courses to keep hurricane-displaced students on track academically. Hundreds of courses were opened for free to students whose campuses were disrupted by the storm, and some 1,800 students participated.

"That success allowed us to sit back and think a little bit about whether there is a model that should be made more permanent," says A. Frank Mayadas, who is a program director at the foundation.

Now the foundation is trying to identify a college to play host to the center, and to line up more money to support it.

The biggest challenge for colleges who want to craft such plans is to raise awareness on campus and persuade people to take the time to participate in planning and training. "Who wants to go around and be the Cassandra?" asks Mr. Sener. "It's not a very appealing role."