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Faculty-Inspired Team-Teaching Makes Internationalization Affordable

By Aisha Labi

When Jon Rubin, an associate professor of film and new media at the State University of New York College at Purchase, returned in 1999 from a five-month Fulbright stint in Belarus, he was eager to share his experience abroad with his American students. They evinced little interest. Until, that is, he showed them short films that his Belarusian students had produced, which differed starkly from their own work. Suddenly, they were intrigued and wanted to learn more about their European counterparts.

"I wondered what we could do if there was a dialogue between the two groups," recalls Mr. Rubin. Out of those musings, he developed a course on cross-cultural video production in collaboration with a colleague at the European Humanities University, then in Belarus but since relocated to Lithuania. American and Belarusian students were paired up and, after selecting a theme on which to focus, alternated producing videos, each one responding to the previous project.

The course marked the first of a series of online-course collaborations between professors at SUNY College at Purchase and the Belarusian institution. Those collaborations, in turn, became the genesis of the SUNY Center for Collaborative Online International Learning, or COIL Center, created in 2006. Last year, COIL moved from Purchase to SUNY's new Global Center in New York, and the collaborative approach to online learning that Mr. Rubin developed at Purchase has become a central element of the vast statewide system's overall global strategy.

SUNY has long been committed to internationalization and, like institutions and university systems elsewhere, has been exploring new ways in which to do so, says Mitch Leventhal, SUNY's vice chancellor for global affairs.

The COIL project caught his attention, he says, in part because of how it developed. "This initiative did not arise out of some field which is highly technical," Mr. Leventhal notes. "It came out of the

humanities and was developed by faculty with very little prior experience in using education technology, who have developed an approach which has appeal and is relatively simple to adopt."

That approach won the backing of the National Endowment for the Humanities. It has awarded the center a \$250,000 grant for a three-year project to establish an Institute for Globally Networked Learning in the Humanities. Teams of humanities scholars of up to four people involved in international online-teaching collaborations will take part in workshops at the SUNY Global Center and develop courses that will be offered in 2012.

A Low-Cost Approach

The COIL Center's faculty-driven origins have enhanced its appeal among academics, says John E. Fowler, assistant director of the center, while its relative ease and low cost of implementation make it attractive to administrators. "It's seen as a way to bring about internationalization on a campus level with relatively few resources," he says.

Interest in the COIL approach was on lively display at a two-day conference this month on collaboration and technology in international online-learning environments. Dozens of attendees from throughout the SUNY system and institutions in the United States and abroad peppered Mr. Rubin and other veterans of COIL programs with questions about how they had set up their programsat logistical and administrative hurdles they had faced.

Questions ranged from the technologically specific, about which learning platforms instructors had used, to the more general, such as one from an administrator at SUNY at Stony Brook who asked what staff members in positions like his need to do to encourage and support such courses. The most common question by far was how those who had already set up such collaborations had gone about finding their international partners.

The archetypal COIL course involves two professors in two different countries who decide they want to teach a subject together. But locating a foreign counterpart is an often difficult first step. Between sessions, many participants were busy exchanging business cards and advice on reaching out to international colleagues.

Once they have decided to collaborate, the faculty members work to develop a joint syllabus and identify the technologies they will use to teach the course. Many rely simply on Skype while others have opted for more-tailored learning-management systems such as Blackboard. Logistical hurdles such as time-zone differences and

semester durations of varying length in different countries will affect how the course is structured.

One course, on the psychology of terrorism, taught by instructors at Purchase and at Dublin City University, faced a severe trans-Atlantic class-size imbalance. SUNY at Purchase limits enrollment in some courses, but the Irish institution does not, resulting in 20 Americans and 76 Irish students registering for the course, which posed problems like how to fairly allocate the work. Eventually, the number of Irish students dropped to 24.

Each collaboration is on a course-by-course basis, allowing for minimal institutional involvement in terms of administrative oversight. "Because there is no agreement to exchange credit, this is simply a way to allow faculty members to team teach, but one in which students develop meaningfully relevant friendships and relationships." says Mr. Leventhal.

Although attracting foreign students can be a significant source of income for institutions, Mr. Leventhal notes that the COIL approach "is not tied to revenue and is not tied to enrolling foreign students." Instead, he says, "this is a new way of fostering collaborations between institutions, professors, and students." In a system as large and varied as New York State's, the COIL method offers a real "strategic opportunity" for a broad range of institutions, including community colleges, he says, to broaden their international engagement.

The growing embrace of the system he helped to develop is timely, says Mr. Rubin. "The technology is so much more available and the idea of sharing things online is totally in the air," he says. "It's academia that is lagging, especially at the college level."



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