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In class, anytime

Coppin State is among a growing pool of universities putting professors' lectures online for learning anywhere

BY JILL ROSEN

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Getting a college degree isn't easy for Watina Green.

She's juggling a heavy course load of entertainment-management classes with a full-time job as an executive assistant.

Despite her best efforts, every once in a while she can't make it to class. But that's not to say she misses a class.

She can log on to her computer at home and with the push of a button, hear the voice of her professor, possibly see him or her in action, and watch the same presentation her classmates were able to experience.

"I very rarely miss a class because classes are very important to me," Green says. "But recently I did miss a class, psychology, because of something going on at work that I had to be involved in. I got home and that night I was able to log on and listen to the class, take notes and when I got back in class the following Thursday, it was like I had never missed a class."

Green's university, Coppin State, is one of a few hundred across the country that's using the lecture-archiving system called Tegrity. In Maryland, the University of Maryland Eastern Shore, Salisbury University and the Community College of Baltimore County are using it, too. School officials say the technology is not only helping students stay on pace with course work, it's taking away a prime reason for dropping out.

At institutions like Coppin with large populations of nontraditional students, being able to miss classes without consequence can make all the difference for people trying to hurdle educational obstacles like commuting to campus, holding down full-time jobs and raising families.

"We had a student who was deployed and he was able to finish his degree. We had students who were hospitalized who were able to not miss any lectures. We had students who had children out ill but [they] did not have to miss the class," says Ahmed El-Haggan, Coppin's chief information officer and vice president of information technology. "Tegrity has afforded us a lot of flexibility."

Putting college lectures online isn't revolutionary. Schools such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of California, Berkeley, have recorded campus events and speeches by star professors and loading them onto popular Web services like YouTube and iTunes. But anyone can go online and watch those videos, unlike Coppin's lectures, which are only accessible to students enrolled in the classes.

Coppin was one of the first schools to try the Web-based Tegrity, which essentially tweaks what used to be a distance-learning technology into a study tool. Students enrolled in regular classes are using it not only to catch up on missed classes, but to review before exams and to fill in holes in their notes.

Professors, too, are enjoying the freedom Tegrity allows. They're able to upload lectures even if they're sick or out of town. One professor, says Sadie Gregory, Coppin's vice president of academic affairs, records lectures early in the morning while she's enjoying coffee in her robe and slippers.

The robe-and-slippers option works because most professors don't record videos of themselves - though they can if they wish. Most teachers choose audio-only presentations supplemented with PowerPoint slides. So, instead of seeing a professor moving about in front of a class, students who log on to Tegrity hear the professor talking and see all the slides, charts and graphics he or she used in the lecture.

The only equipment needed to make that happen is a computer with a microphone hook-up.

Data captured by the school and the company show that last year, Coppin students tapped into the network of archived lectures 2.5 million times. And they're logging on at all hours of the day and night.

Because a typical lecture lasts about an hour, and students stayed logged on an average of 15 minutes, officials know that students aren't necessarily using Tegrity to get away with cutting class; they're using the lectures as a pre-exam refresher and a fallback for less-than-perfect notes.

Green, for example, says she's gotten home, opened her notebook and realized with dismay that she couldn't read her own handwriting.

"Memory has its limits," says Tegrity CEO Isaac Segal.

Chris Brittan-Powell, a Coppin State psychology professor, who says he's not at all a techie, was at first reluctant to bring Tegrity into his classroom.

"You see a lot of these IT fads," he says. "I'm kind of reluctant, a little hesitant, a little skeptical of what are they trying to sell us now. ... I said I'm not going to incorporate this unless I see pragmatic uses for myself as an instructor and for the students."

And he did.

"The way I think of it is back in my day as a student, I'd have a tape recorder, take my notes, then go back and listen to the lecture again," he says. "It's kind of like that, but with the video and some of these cool techie features. It's not reinventing the wheel entirely, it's the same strategies but with technological wizardry to help out with it."

Brittan-Powell found that in classes where he used Tegrity, students had better grades and were less likely to drop out midterm.

"If a student can make up having missed a class, they don't have to get per se behind," the professor says. "They'll be less hesitant about coming to the next class, less concerned about being embarrassed or not being able to keep up with the material."

Neither the company nor the school wanted to talk about how much Tegrity costs.

Segal said the annual flat fee his company charges varies, depending on the size of an institution and its student body.

Gregory said Coppin doesn't charge students to use the service.

The way Tegrity is structured, the technology only allows students enrolled in a class to listen to a lecture. Students cannot download a lecture and e-mail it to another student.

That said, students can access the course material and listen to it at home on a computer, in a library, or even on an iPod when they're out and about.

Some of the Coppin departments where it's most popular, Gregory says, are math, English, psychology and nursing, where professors supplement their regular classes with lab-prep material on Tegrity.

Though Coppin doesn't require professors to use Tegrity, about 80 percent of them are using it.

"Faculty members are actually coming to us asking for Tegrity training," Gregory says. "Some of them catch on faster than others."

Both the school and the company say the technology isn't enabling more students to cut class.

Segal says that if a student is inclined to go to class, Tegrity won't change that. But if a student is inclined to skip, Tegrity might make that a little more likely.

"If you are likely to watch the class at some point anyhow, there is benefit to being in the classroom where it's more interactive," Segal says. "Why do it late at night in your room when you can be with other students and professors?"

Gregory compared the situation to this: If you had tickets to a concert or a Ravens game, would you just throw them away and watch it on TV?

"Absolutely not," she says.

Watina Green agrees. She finds that the only drawback of listening to a class on Tegrity is that she can't ask the professor a question.

But, she adds with a laugh, "You hear other students asking questions. If I have questions, I always write them down and ask them later."

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