

Displaced students to continue work online

When Desiree Cook's family realized Hurricane Katrina was headed right for their home, they packed up their belongings and took a 14-hour drive west to Houston. Though the storm wrecked the University of New Orleans senior's house, her academic future remains unscathed, thanks to a consortium of universities offering free online classes to students affected by the storm.

This week, students began enrolling in the Sloan Semester, an eight-week online education program established by a \$1.1 million grant from the Sloan Foundation working to suit the needs of community college, university and graduate students whose studies have been interrupted by Katrina.

Cook, who is scheduled to graduate in May, was initially worried that she would have to put off her plans by at least one semester. She considered doing coursework at the University of Houston, but the school was too far away from her new residence and didn't offer the classes she needed. She's now looking forward to taking her classes online and continuing her studies on schedule.

"I heard that UNO should be reopened next semester," Cook said. "As soon as my online courses end, I'll be back at UNO."

Sloan Semester is offering more than 1,000 courses, free of charge, and a group of academic advisers works with students to tailor the program to their needs, said the program's brainchild, Ray Schroeder, director of technology-enhanced learning at the University of Illinois-Springfield. He said he hopes that 5,000 students sign up for classes, which begin Oct. 10.

The program is composed of more than 200 institutions ranging from state schools and community colleges to private universities with existing online programs.

Schroeder said the idea for an online program to help displaced students came early in the morning of Aug. 31 as he was chatting with a colleague from Illinois' Urbana campus while watching coverage of the hurricane.

"It occurred to us simultaneously that I had a proposal in to the Sloan Foundation to do a workshop on delivering curriculum in case of an emergency -- bird flu or something -- that might have to close a campus," Schroeder said. "This seemed like an opportunity to try out that concept."

The next day the pair had established a committee to investigate the feasibility of the project, and two days later the Sloan had verbally agreed to commit more than \$1 million to the project, Schroeder said.

He explained that students enter their information and academic histories into the program's Web site, SloanSemester.org, and their information is then sent to the Southern Regional Education Board, a government-organized group that promotes education in 16 southern states, to verify.

Advisers from the University of New Orleans, Xavier University and Tulane University are helping students figure out what classes they should take, Schroeder said.

"These students, when their dorms were closed, they were dispersed around the United States ... but the good thing about the online (program) is they can access those classes any place, even at a library," Schroeder said.

Schroeder said he's heard "heart wrenching" stories from students who only needed as little as 12 credits to graduate when Katrina struck New Orleans. More than 100,000 New Orleans students have been forced to continue their education elsewhere as the city rebuilds, Schroeder said, adding that online classes won't start

until October to ensure students are in a stable setting when they start their coursework.

"We set that deadline to give students time to get settled, to access the catalogue, to make sure they had time to get going," Schroeder said. He added that the classes will end Jan. 6 at the latest, to ensure coursework won't overlap if any New Orleans schools open for the spring term.

This fall 3 million students in degree programs across the country took their courses online, Schroeder said. He explained that an online course can include discussion boards, live audio, VoIP chat, streaming video and digital drop boxes for homework. Students usually take their exams online or at a proctored location, and some online courses even allow a professor to write on a "digital whiteboard." Some online courses are synchronous with a physical classroom session occurring simultaneously, while other online courses are autonomous and exist on the Internet alone.

Schroeder said information about Sloan Semester is being spread via Web logs and universities' Web sites. The Louisiana Board of Regents has also sent information about the courses to affected universities, he said.

Johns Hopkins University is among the schools offering free classes through Sloan. Its biotechnology and environmental-sciences program is offering eight online graduate-level courses to Katrina victims, said Dennis O'Shea, a spokesperson for the university. Though it's too soon to say how many students will register for the courses, a class will be offered if at least three students sign up, and all classes will be capped at 16 students.

Jennifer Hobbs, a 46-year-old New Orleans resident, had planned on taking 16 hours of pre-nursing courses this semester at Delgado Community College. Though Katrina put her school underwater, she remains undaunted and plans on taking 12 hours of online classes in anatomy and physiology, microbiology, medical terminology and algebra through Sloan. She said she has taken online courses before, and the process went smoothly.

"You have to be more self disciplined than when you're sitting in the classroom, and you have to search out a lot of the stuff on your own," Hobbs said.

As a mother of a high school senior, Hobbs said it would be difficult to relocate and transfer to another college, so the Sloan Semester is "perfect" for her.

The online system may not work for everyone though. Reina Wolke, a University of New Orleans graduate student perusing a master's degree in hospitality and tourism management, initially expressed an interest in the Sloan program. When she looked at the Web site this week, she learned there were no graduate courses offered in her field. Relocated to Olympia, Wash., Wolke says if her school does not wind up offering the courses online, she'll probably take a semester off.

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