‘New York Times’ Enters Distance Learning Market

The New York Times on Thursday announced a major push into higher education — with new efforts to provide distance education, course content and social networking. A number of colleges are already either committed to using the new technologies or are in negotiations to start doing so, evidence of the strong power of the Times brand in academe.

If successful, the enterprises could help some colleges start or expand distance education and might provide professors and students with information that might replace the need for some textbooks or course materials, college officials say.

In distance education, the Times will be providing technology and marketing for non-credit courses taught by college and university professors. Funds from tuition revenue will be split (with the precise formula varying) between the colleges and the Times. Among the institutions that are already part of the effort are Mount Holyoke College; New York, Northern Kentucky, Stanford and Towson Universities; and the Society for College and University Planning. Felice Nudelman, director of education for the Times, said that the list would soon grow significantly. She said that the emphasis would be on having a range of institutions and a range of high quality programs. Tuition rates are set by the colleges — in some cases with in-state and out-of-state rates.

The topics and approaches vary widely, from single seminars to multiple session courses. Mount Holyoke is offering “Inside the Art and Craft of Film,” taught by a film studies and gender studies professor at the college. Sessions are interactive and meet at a common time. Towson University is offering two project management courses, self-paced and taught by an actual project manager and a Towson administrator.

For Mount Holyoke, this will mark its first distance education offering. Patricia VandenBerg, executive director of communications and strategic initiatives at the college, said that as a residential liberal arts college, Mount Holyoke has not considered it viable to invest in the technology to offer distance education. “It’s a huge investment we’ve chosen not to make,” she said.

But alumnae have asked about distance continuing education, and many at the college believe that its liberal arts traditions should reach more people. With the Times picking up technology and marketing costs, “it’s made it much easier for us to offer courses,” she said. If there is demand, “our offerings could potentially be rich and deep,” she added.

Faculty members will be paid a stipend, but the teaching will be on top of a regular course load, so there should be no impact on regular undergraduate offerings, VandenBerg said.

Some of the online courses will also make use of Times content that is a centerpiece of the services being offered to colleges, on enrollment-based subscription plans. These packages will provide access to special packages of content — summaries of articles, interactive maps, video, audio, graphs — on a wide range of topics (the European Union, nanotechnology and so forth). Professors at institutions that subscribe would be able to make customized course Web pages, with their own content alongside these content packages. For the many topics covered on which there are updates, professors can elect to have material updated automatically or at the end of the semester. (Nudelman said that surveys of professors found that most did
not want mid-semester updates as they want to be able to link their syllabus to stable content.

In addition, the package will provide full access to services offered by Epsilen, a company that offers electronic portfolios, blogging and other software, and interactive teaching tools to allow for course discussions, professional social networking (a more grown-up Facebook), and other services. The Times is an investor in another company that has a long-term exclusive license to the Epsilen services. Some of the basic portfolio creating services will be available free for anyone with a.edu e-mail address.

Nudelman said that pricing will depend on enrollments, and how broadly an institution wants to use the services. An institution of 2,000 students wanting a limited number of courses to participate would be looking at less than $10,000 a year, she said, while an unlimited range of services would be less than $25,000 a year.

Robert L. Caret, president of Towson, said he sees the materials providing “a broader, richer educational experience to students.” He said he saw this as something Towson could do at minimal cost. The university plans to charge students the equivalent of a laboratory fee, maybe $100 to $150, for access to the Times materials. But he said student costs should not go up because he sees the online resources replacing some textbooks, and replacing them with material that is more current and more interactive.

At Old Dominion University, another institution that has been working with the Times on planning the services, other factors are in play. Nancy Cooley, vice provost for distance learning, said that while many faculty members there are engaged in interactive technology, many of the offerings require equipment set up in a limited number of classrooms so “departments are competing for slots.” The Times model is Web-based, she said, so the university believes it can encourage much more use of interactive technology, without creating many new high-tech classrooms. Old Dominion is also talking about a fee for students, if the Times materials can replace textbooks or other materials.

Nudelman said that the Times did not view its new offerings as course-management systems in competition with Blackboard or others, but as complements to those systems. Nudelman said that the target audience for the Times for these services would be every higher education institution. “This is an absolute fit. We’ve been doing work in education for over 70 years, and this fits in with our ability to partner with the universities, colleges, and K-12, to work on distribution of information, news and entertainment, and to convene communities around credible content,” she said.

Experts not involved in the new Times effort said that the publisher had strong advantages in expanding in higher ed. The Times is well respected in academe, has deep pockets and has a technology backbone.

Diana Oblinger, vice president for Educause, said she was particularly impressed with the idea of packaging content for professors. “The thing in this model that strikes me as really being useful is the aggregation of content,” she said. Based on National Science Foundation projects on which she worked, Oblinger said that “just having gobs of really good solid content out there wasn’t enough to ensure that users took advantage of it.” Since “information is not in short supply any more,” but “time is at a premium” for many educators, she predicted people will welcome high quality, related information in various media.

“A body of highly regarded legitimate content, where I don’t have to worry about errors, that brings a lot of value,” she said.

Oblinger said that the distance education venture sounded like Fathom, a for-profit project led by Columbia University and also involving several other top universities and cultural institutions. Fathom was created to offer online continuing education courses and seminars and was shut down in 2003, when it didn’t take off after two years of operations. (An archive of some of the free content the consortium produced is here.)

“We’ve seen over the last few years a substantial increase in self-service learning, where any and all of us go to the Internet as one of our first stops to find information on things that we are interested in or things we need to know professionally,” she said. “The strength of the Times brand would be a real asset in that.” Where Oblinger is less certain is whether people will pay. “With content being so readily available on the Internet, the question is: Are people willing to pay for non-credit content? Obviously they’ve done some research and think the answer might be Yes. I’m not sure. This also may be a way of cementing a relationship with a population, which has value in and of itself.”

Ann Kirschner, who led Fathom and is now dean of the City University of New York Honors College, said she thinks the timing is right for the model the Times is starting. “So many of the pieces were not in place in 2002,” she said, listing blogs, wikis, podcasts, among other features. “These were all on the horizon and we knew they were coming, but they weren’t
there,” she said, and limited the way people were using the Web.

Kirschner said that the division of labor appears to be similar to Fathom’s, but one that should make more sense now, especially with the marketing ability of the Times. “Universities tend to be marketing-impaired, so this is a brilliant complement to what the universities do well.”

— Scott Jaschik

The original story and user comments can be viewed online at http://insidehighered.com/news/2007/09/07/nyt.

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