



PENN FOSTER

The Need: Expand Course Offerings for Distance Education Students

Penn Foster Career School—headquartered in Scranton, Pennsylvania—is a school of independent study. With a purely distance education model, all Penn Foster students have the flexibility of taking courses whenever and wherever they choose, interacting with instructors by phone, email, and through Webinars. Because there is no physical campus and no classroom, students receive their course materials—textbooks, study guides, and related software—by mail at home, and they work at their own pace and on their own time to complete lessons. In fact, this self-paced study is what makes a Penn Foster education so attractive to many students. Most Penn Foster students are full-time employed adults who work part-time toward a career diploma or certificate with plans to further their career. That is what Penn Foster was founded to do, and it serves distance learners with more than 80 different programs of study.

It's no wonder then, that LabSim self-study courses are such an ideal fit for Penn Foster. In 2007 a TestOut representative contacted Penn Foster's Jeff Orr, director of product development, about LabSim courses for information technology (IT). Then, the representative happened to mention there was also a LabSim course for crime scene investigation. Orr was intrigued; Penn Foster didn't offer a CSI course at that time, but Orr was always looking for ways to expand the course offerings and make additional programs available to students, especially for topics as popular and current as crime scene investigation. Orr was particularly interested because the LabSim CSI training wasn't just another textbook, but hands-on simulations that allowed students to realistically experience what they were taught. Penn Foster began a trial with the LabSim CSI training and developed an entire course around it: "Intro to Crime Scene Investigation." Students may take the 3-credit course and apply it toward a diploma, or they may choose to receive a stand-alone certificate of completion at the course's end.



The Solution: Distance Education Students Excel in LabSim

What does LabSim offer that makes it such a good solution for distance education and for schools like Penn Foster? Every LabSim course combines multiple teaching approaches, including video instruction, written lessons, hands-on lab simulations, and practice exams. All the pieces can be used effectively in a traditional classroom, a computer lab, or by individuals working at home. For Penn Foster's distance program, where all students are working individually, any course curriculum must be able to support that model. "LabSim was perfect for us to teach a CSI course because we have no interior lab or place for students to do the activities," Orr said. Because LabSim CSI is a computer-based training course that teaches the procedures and principles of crime scene investigation using videos and hands-on simulations, students are able to complete the course on their own time, in their own home—"making it especially good for distance education schools," said Russell Day, Penn Foster CSI instructor.



Hands-on Experience

For a subject like crime scene investigation to be taught effectively, there has to be a way to give students hands-on experience practicing the carefully defined procedures that are part of the criminal justice field: handling evidence without contaminating it, taking fingerprints, documenting a crime scene, etc. While finding a way to offer hands-on experience is a challenge in traditional classrooms—setting up a physical lab is time-consuming and expensive—it is an even greater challenge for a distance school like Penn Foster, where setting up a physical lab isn't even an option. This is where LabSim really shines, giving students hands-on experience through realistic simulations they complete on their computer. According to Day, "Students have read the theory in the textbook, and they can gain an understanding of the theory, but textbooks don't give them any hands-on experience. With LabSim, they can actually go to the crime scene, walk through the steps, and process the crime scene information, something that simply wouldn't be possible without this course."

The hands-on experience LabSim provides is the product's most valued feature. In fact, it was after seeing LabSim's real-to-life simulations that Penn Foster liked the product so much and developed the whole CSI course around it. "With the number of activities in LabSim, students get a lot of in-depth exposure to the elements of the crime scene investigation process," Orr said.

Video Training

The video trainings in the LabSim CSI course are recordings of industry-expert instructors, speaking directly to the student, teaching and diagramming important concepts, and demonstrating the correct way to complete tasks. The LabSim instructional videos are one of the reasons Day likes LabSim for his students; "Students do so much reading from texts already, but with texts there's no visual interaction. The LabSim videos are an interesting piece and provide visual learning," he said. Students can view the videos as many times as they want to be sure they completely understand the content or to review it before taking an exam.

The Results: A New Distance Course That Could Only Be Taught with LabSim

The LabSim course has provided a distance curriculum that works well for Penn Foster CSI students and instructors alike. "LabSim's self-grading process is great for faculty because the software charts the students' progress. It's the only way we can teach it," Orr said. LabSim software tracks students' actions, and instructors can view students' progress and scores on the labs, quizzes, and exams. Instructors are also able to see how much time each student has spent viewing the videos and the written lessons, making it possible for instructors to assign any number of LabSim components and be able to evaluate the students' work. "I let the students go through the lessons on their own, and then I check to make sure they're all completed," Day said.

Penn Foster says that LabSim has helped them solve the challenge of offering a course such as crime scene investigation to distance students. "How could you do it without hands-on experience?" Orr said. "LabSim provides this realistic hands-on experience and the ability for us to actually evaluate how our students are doing working through these simulations. A course like CSI would have been impossible without these capabilities."