



The Need: Delivering On Campus Quality to Online Learning

West Los Angeles College (WLAC), founded in 1969, is one of nine campuses under the California Community College system. While its physical campus is located in the hills of Culver City, its online campus is sprawled along the entire state of California and neighboring states. In fact, 80 percent of the students in WLAC's information technology (IT) program take their courses online, an easier option for older students who in many cases are balancing school, work and family.

Four of the school's 65 associate degree and certificate programs are major vocational training programs, with the Microsoft and Cisco training being one of them. Within the Microsoft and Cisco training is three categories – networking (with security), database and web development. Courses during each 15-week semester prepare students for MCSE and CCNA certifications.

While the majority of courses in the IT programs are now online, this wasn't always the case. "I didn't want to go online based on popular demand," said Marcus Butler, assistant professor. "Before we went online, we wanted to ensure that we were able to deliver the equivalent or better learning experience online than we do on campus. Our students wouldn't expect anything less."



The Solution: LabSim Takes WLAC Online

"LabSim gave us what we needed to bring our courses online," Butler said.

In 2000, Butler and the school's other IT instructors began using the integrated LabSim hands-on labs, instructor videos and practice exams that originally came bundled with an older textbook. In 2003, however, they purchased LabSim as a separate product and haven't looked back.

"We've built our entire syllabus around LabSim for both the online and the on campus classes," Butler said. "Each week, I assign a specific assignment that includes which videos to watch, which online labs to do, which practice exams to take. As a result, we feel that between the LabSim materials, the optional textbook TestOut offers, and the online course portal, our students have a very robust online environment that offers a comprehensive and integrated online experience."

The online labs in LabSim allow students to experiment with a wide variety of IT functions. Students aren't limited to a prescribed pathway for completing tasks. Nor are they simply faced

with a series of screen images. Rather, they are able to freely work within a wide variety of virtual environments to accomplish their tasks and build their skills.

Each online student is required to spend a minimum of 30 hours in LabSim and thanks to the online reports, he gets much more than just his students' verbal commitment on that. LabSim also enables instructors to monitor the progress of their students in real time. "This is a great feature," Butler said. "About every 2 to 4 weeks, I check out their progress. I can tell exactly how long they've spent and how well they are doing in all of the labs and other learning resources. If they aren't viewing the lectures or doing the labs, then they just aren't going to master the materials."

Students are invited on campus nearly every week during the 15-week semester for optional lectures or to practice what they've been learning online on the school's physical Cisco lab. According to Butler, about half the students come to the optional lab each week. "For many, though, visiting campus just isn't practical," Butler said.

The Results: Practical Skills in an Online World

"My students mainly use LabSim to get the hands-on experience they need to enhance -- or prepare for -- their careers," Butler said. "It would be nearly impossible for them without it."

Take Roy Carlisle, for example. As the economy began to suffer in 2008, the now 51-year old refinery worker was laid off from his job as a contractor for a refinery near his home in Palms, Calif. Carlisle had always enjoyed working with computers; in fact, he had taken time off from refinery work in 1998 to get training in various IT specialties (MCSE, CNA, A+) and for four years worked various contract jobs supporting computer systems and telephone technical support. When the IT bubble burst, he went back to the refinery business. When he was laid off again in 2008, he decided to go back to computers. "We guessed that working with computers would provide a better quality of life and better employment opportunities," Roy said.

West LA College offered the certification and degree programs he was seeking in computer networking and security and it was close enough to Carlisle's home that he could meet with the teacher once a week. The rest of the course took place online at home. "I knew I needed retraining to become knowledgeable and employable in the computer world and that Cisco Certifications would provide me a more competitive edge towards a network technician, field technician or system administrator position."

"I ordered many TestOut certificate programs as part of my WLAC courses and began to study day and night, weekends, holidays and semester breaks," RoyC added. "I liked the TestOut curriculum because I am able to practice tasks I wouldn't be able to do on my own, then review online lectures and study questions over and over until I felt comfortable with the material. If I found a concept I hadn't memorized, I could return to the study materials to review."

Over the past year, he has passed the CompTIA Network+ and Security+ certifications and most recently passed the Cisco CCNA 640-802 certification in July. His goal is to get a job as a network field technician in the medical or education field where he can continue his education in computers (getting his Associates degree next year) but not "be strapped to a desk and chair."

In addition to helping his students receive valuable practical experience online, Butler loves the significant savings in time and money that LabSim has provided the school. Because of the LabSim online labs, WLAC doesn't have to set up its physical labs to support all of the different courses every semester or update equipment quite so often. "Prior to LabSim, I'd have to install at least four operating systems per student per server, which is very tough to manage. I definitely couldn't do that online either. LabSim has definitely simplified the work for us all."