

Have You Driven a Hybrid Course Lately?



By Henry DeVries

Fuel prices and a concern for sustainable energy are causing Americans to change more than their automobile preferences. With ongoing pain at the pump and dread of global warming, interest in another type of hybrid is soaring. Students and universities are awakening to the multiple benefits of the hybrid online course.

According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, hybrid courses and hybrid certificate programs promise the best of both worlds, offering some of the convenience of fully-online courses without the complete loss of face-to-face contact with instructors and fellow students.

In fact, Graham Spanier, president of Pennsylvania State University, calls the convergence of online and face-to-face instruction “the single-greatest unrecognized trend in higher education today.”

Continuing education students at UC San Diego Extension can choose from increased offerings of hybrid courses and certificate programs, which are taught partly in the classroom and partly over the Internet. Hybrid courses and certificates allow the student to benefit from both methods of teaching: online and face-to-face.

“If you think taking a course online means that you won’t get to interact with people, you’re in for a surprise,” says Director of Online Education Beth Meyer. “Our online courses are designed to engage. They start with the best instructors and add rich media like audio and visual lectures, meaningful discussion board conversations, topical readings gleaned from current web resources, portfolio portals, video tutorials and more.”

In a nine-week hybrid course, students interact with their instructor and classmates either during in-person class sessions or online class sessions. The mix is typically half and half, although any mix of online and in-person class sessions are acceptable. For a hybrid certificate program, students take a combination of face-to-face and online classes.

“Your classmates, instructor, and the online team are only an email, text or instant message away,” adds Meyer. “Many students comment they experience an increased amount of interaction with their online classmates and instructor as compared to a face-to-face class.”

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Big Fuel Savings

Taking a hybrid course or certificate can be a big savings in fuel costs for students, since typical courses require nine trips to a classroom. Cutting down on classroom time also reduces the energy used to run campus facilities, such as lights, heating and air conditioning.

Currently UC San Diego Extension offers 295 courses that are online and another 29 hybrid courses. Meyer predicts those numbers will double this year.

“If we are to assure a globally competitive talent pool for the region, then we need to be innovative in how we deliver continuing education during these days of accelerating energy costs,” says Extension Dean Mary Walshok. “All of our academic units are being strongly encouraged to transition traditional courses to the hybrid, online and intensive formats.”

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While interest in classes that are totally online also continues to climb, many students prefer hybrid courses because they offer the convenience of online learning along with networking opportunities of being face-to-face. Some hybrid courses that are being offered include:

- Corporate Social Responsibility
- Clinical Trials Administration
- Legal Communications

Not all students learn the same way, so presenting materials in a range of formats can help make sure every student is fully engaged in at least some class activities.

“Face-to-face is not the gold standard that it’s held up to be,” says Chris Dede, professor of learning technologies at Harvard University’s Graduate School of Education.

“Many people find their voice in distance media in a way that they don’t in face-to-face sessions,” he says.

Dede points out that shy students or international students without a full grasp of English, for instance, might feel uncomfortable participating in a classroom environment. However these same students might frequently comment in online forums where students have more time to think before they speak.

Other Eco-Friendly Trends

While most continuing education courses still take place over a three-month quarter, UC San Diego Extension offers intensive and short courses that allow students to finish their studies in a month or even a few days. The courses are the same number of instruction hours but less commutes to campus, which translates to lower transportation costs.

Students can also save gas by taking courses at an off-site center located closer to where they work or live. For the convenience of working adults, most courses are held evenings and weekends on the UC San Diego main campus and three other locations: the Extension Sorrento Mesa Center and the Extension Mission Valley Center. ■

