

## Online Education

By Joel Seligman

IN MID-NOVEMBER THE UNIVERSITY ANNOUNCED that it had joined Semester Online, a consortium of universities created to explore the implementation of for-credit undergraduate online education.

The Semester Online consortium includes the University of Rochester, Brandeis University, Duke University, Emory University, Northwestern University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, University of Notre Dame, Vanderbilt University, Wake Forest University, and Washington University in St. Louis.

We have entered into this exploratory partnership so that we are better prepared to address potential opportunities to create quality online instruction.

Joining this consortium gives the University an opportunity to participate in conversations about the future of online education with peer institutions that see the same value in the residential experience as we do at the University of Rochester.

The University's participation in Semester Online is one of many approaches under consideration. Interim Senior Vice President for Research and Hajim School Dean Rob Clark is leading a University-wide task force assessing the current and future use of technology and digital media in the classroom.

This task force is undertaking a thoughtful review of the options before us. Whatever avenues we pursue, we are committed to providing academic quality on a par with the Rochester classroom experience and to doing so within a sustainable financial model, always coordinating with the schools and their faculties.

The success of the School of Nursing's online hybrid courses and degree programs



is one example of how the University is employing technology to offer quality, flexible, in-demand courses.

The school began developing hybrid online courses, which offer a combination of classroom content and online format, in 2000.

Rochester nursing students, many who are employed full time and would otherwise be unable to pursue educational and career advancement opportunities, are able to complete degrees in two of the school's programs. Forty-four other hybrid online courses are offered, and the school plans to launch two new hybrid online programs by 2015.

The School of Nursing's hybrid courses and degree programs meet a need. Today approximately 41 percent of all nursing course credits are offered online. Just as importantly, the programs operate under a sustainable, financially successful business

model. Twenty-six percent of nursing's tuition revenue, or \$3.9 million, is generated by online education.


As School of Nursing Dean Kathy Rideout explains, the challenge of sustaining and growing the current model is providing adequate support for online teaching and learning. Instructional design teams are needed to collaborate with faculty on development of courses. Faculty development programs are essential, and a team of technical specialists is critical.

Collaborations such as Semester Online are promising. With built-in technical and multimedia support, Semester Online has the potential to provide our undergraduate students with rigorous course offerings, taught by professors, and offered in small groups where students are surrounded by outstanding peers—much as they would be if they were on campus.

But there are challenges and much we do not know. In some instances, information technology has been oversold as the key to rapid cost reductions in higher education, without a serious analysis of quality trade-offs and focus on learning itself.

Online education can be a complement to the core mission of universities such as ours if done in partnership with faculty and deans.

Key strategic questions for the University will include how online courses can enhance the educational experience and faculty roles, influence degree requirements, and affect University budgets.

Our primary objective is unequivocal: How can we provide the finest educational experience possible for our students and faculties? This will be the standard by which we make decisions about online education and other future academic endeavors. 

**Whatever avenues we pursue, we are committed to providing academic quality on a par with the Rochester classroom experience and to doing so within a sustainable financial model, always coordinating with the schools and their faculties.**