



Align Virtual Learning Solutions

www.alignvls.com

Going Virtual? *Building a Virtual Campus*

Teaching in a face-to-face classroom is easy. You walk into a room filled with eager participants, impart knowledge and leave.

Well, obviously, there's more to it than this, but you get the idea. In a typical face-to-face setting the instructor focuses on what he or she does best – promoting learning. Everything that enables this – the creation and maintenance of the overall learning environment – is pretty much transparent. So in going virtual it's easy to overlook the administrative and organizational framework required for an effective and engaging virtual learning experience. It's natural to focus on the virtual **course** and ignore the virtual **campus** that supports it.

Consider what's necessary for a successful face-to-face class. Obviously, there must be a classroom or a learning space. It has to be populated with the tools (chairs, tables, whiteboard, projector, markers, etc.) and materials the instructor and students need. These must be arranged in a way that makes learning possible (e.g., the seats should face the instructor, there must be adequate lighting, etc.). Everyone needs to know what to do in case of emergency (i.e., the appropriate exit strategy). Students have to know when and where to show up and what they have to bring to class to succeed. They also need to be comfortable with both the physical environment itself and the various technologies they'll be using. In a face-to-face class these technologies usually mean paper and pen (or a laptop and smartphone), which are unproblematic.

The same is true for the virtual classroom. There must be a virtual learning space that contains the tools and content the instructor requires. It must be organized in a way that makes navigation – both by the instructor and the participants – seamless rather than an ongoing distraction. If the technology goes wrong, everyone needs to know what to do. Students need to be notified well in advance concerning when and how to access the virtual classroom and they need to be made comfortable, before the session starts, with the tools required for virtual learning. In moving from pen and paper to virtual whiteboards and online chat many participants – and instructors -- enter an unfamiliar environment that itself steepens the learning curve. Imagine attending a face-to-face class underwater using scuba gear. In a virtual classroom there are analogs to the familiar face-to-face model, but nothing is quite the same.

In considering a move to virtual learning, it's critical to decide who is responsible for these critical extra-curricular tasks and build the procedures that enable them. It's easy and perhaps natural to assume *the instructor* will do this. But instructors are seldom asked to construct their own face-to-face classrooms, develop fire drill procedures, carry in their own overhead projectors, alert students to meeting specifics or teach their students to use pens and laptops. The appropriate environment is a pre-requisite for learning. This is no less true for virtual learning than learning in a face-to-face classroom.

When you're going virtual, building your virtual campus is no less important to your organization's success than creating the courses that populate it.

For more information contact gkessler@alignvls.com