Answering President Obama's Call to Improve Digital Learning

By Amber Smalley

It seems almost everything in our daily lives is going online – education is no exception. From the growing popularity of online college courses to virtual K-12 schools making their debut across the country, the unique skill of online instruction is one that many teachers must add to their arsenal. In summer 2011 the College of Education launched a certificate program to support teachers on the forefront of this growing trend.

The Blended and Online Learning and Teaching (BOLT) program includes four fully online courses designed to train K-12 teachers to apply principles of digital pedagogy and instructional design for e-learning, take advantage of available technologies and develop a comprehensive understanding of the impact and opportunities that their technology choices have on teaching and learning. The certificate program is open to current and future teachers and administrators, and is the only known program of its kind in the southeastern United States.

The National Education Technology Plan, released in November 2010 by the U.S. Department of Education and heralded by President Barack Obama, calls for an increased role for online learning in K-12 classes. It also directs education programs at institutions of higher learning to include online learning in their curricula.

"We were inspired by the President's charge to improve digital learning and are proud to be in line with his vision to transform education," says Pamela Carroll, associate dean of the College of Education and director of the BOLT program. "The virtual classroom can be very beneficial for students if instructors are adequately prepared to teach in this unique learning environment."

More and more virtual schools and virtual school experiences are being offered for students in elementary, middle, and high school settings today. One study estimates, that that by 2019, 50 percent of all high school courses will be delivered online whether in schools or at a distance (Christensen, Johnson, & Horn, 2010).

However, K-12 teachers are rarely prepared to teach in virtual or blended contexts. It is often difficult for a teacher who is accustomed to making decisions in a face-to-face setting to shift their instruction to an electronic space, adopt digital pedagogy and instructional design principles to e-content.

According to the results of the 2010 national survey of teachers already teaching online, 25 percent of brand new online teachers reported receiving no training – not even a workshop – and only 30 percent received some form of professional development for online teaching from universities.

"Our goal is to offer a program that prepares K-12 teachers to effectively teach learners in blended and online environments," says Dina Vyortkina, associate professor and director of the College's Office of Information and Instructional Technologies. "School leaders, including principals, counselors, psychologists, and media specialists will also be encouraged to participate, since their roles will [also] be enhanced with this knowledge,"

The BOLT program was established as a collaborative effort between the College's School of Teacher Education and its Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies. Courses offered in the online BOLT program can be taken as part of a regular graduate program of study, a certificate, or through enrollment as a part-time, non-degree-seeking student.

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