

Crafting Resilient Futures by Looking to the Past: 25 Years of Online Learning at FSU and Illinois

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ABSTRACT

For 25 years, the iSchools at Florida State University (FSU) and the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign have been leaders in online learning, providing education to students who might not otherwise have had access to a master's-level degree. This panel, made up of faculty and staff from FSU and Illinois, will discuss the history of online learning at these schools, the challenges faced and lessons learned, and the positive impact their online programs have had on access, equity, diversity, and inclusion.

The landscape of higher education and of the information professions has changed significantly over the past quarter century. The rise of the Internet, organizational realignment and mergers in higher education, and the iSchool movement have all had an impact on the information professions and the ways we educate students to become information professionals. In the mid-90s, FSU and Illinois began offering online programs as a way of contributing to the resilience of the information professions, especially librarianship, and ensuring the resilience of their own programs. Both programs were pioneers in offering online learning, and from the outset they employed unique strategies: both use a combination of synchronous and asynchronous learning, while Illinois also uses a cohort model. Online learning at both institutions has fostered resilience by increasing access for students; promoting equity, diversity, and inclusion; encouraging innovative uses of technology; and inspiring scholarship that bridges online learning research and practice.

This panel will consist of four 10-minute presentations by faculty and staff from FSU and Illinois (see below for specific presentation titles and descriptions). The session will also feature a discussion with the audience organized around three questions:

1. What have been your best successes with online learning?
2. What have been your greatest challenges, and how have you dealt with them?
3. What is the future of online learning—both at your institution and in general?

Presentations

“Crafting Resilience Through Engagement: Synchronous Online Learning” – Kathleen Burnett (FSU): Today, there are numerous options for learning management systems and applications to support interaction online, but in 1996 when FSU and Illinois began their programs, these simply did not exist. At FSU, what became one of the earliest research programs to investigate interaction in online learning, began as a collaborative effort to construct the best environment we could to meet our goal of serving the

geographically and socio-economically diverse population of Florida, without uprooting them from the communities they called home.

“Crafting Resilience Through Community: The Cohort Model in Online Learning” – Linda C. Smith (Illinois): A distinguishing feature of the Illinois Leep online option for the MS/LIS degree has been the emphasis on shaping a cohort identity as a means of building community and enhancing retention and student success. The program provides students flexibility both with courses they take and the pace at which they move through the program. Cohort identity is not defined by taking a large number of courses together, but instead by forming relationships that remain a strong source of support throughout the program and beyond. The collaborative spirit that infused cohort 1 in 1996 continues to characterize cohorts today.

“Crafting Resilience Through Access: The Role of Technology” – Jill Gengler (Illinois): Technology can be a tool that enables access for anyone who wants further education. Early on in the Illinois Leep program, the support staff chose solutions that allowed students to overcome barriers to earn their degrees. Staff worked with campus partners to make the program accessible to individuals with disabilities. Our program remained committed to a caring approach to ensure all students felt supported in order to overcome feelings of isolation in a distance education program. The goal was to make technology as simple as possible to enable our outstanding faculty and students to collaborate effectively.

“Crafting Resilience By Connecting Research and Practice in Online Learning” – Michelle Kazmer (FSU): Early research about knowledge- and community-building through synchronous classes and residency requirements at Illinois demonstrated the importance of the residency to student success. Ongoing research in FSU’s program, which avoided an on-campus requirement, showed how community could be supported for entirely-remote students. Simultaneously, scholars throughout the discipline generated a robust body of research about online learning in LIS. This research helped promulgate the open-minded approaches to evidence-based technology experimentation and implementation that were fostered by the early-adopter programs and have shaped 25 years of resilience in LIS online education.

Panel Participants

Don Latham (moderator), Professor, School of Information, FSU. Don was a student in the master’s program at FSU when the online learning program began. Since joining the faculty, he has taught a number of graduate-level online courses using a variety of platforms.

Kathleen Burnett, F. William Summers Professor and Director, School of Information, FSU. Kathy’s first faculty meeting at FSU was held in July 1996, following the announcement that the then School of Library and Information Studies would offer the first comprehensive distance learning degree program at FSU. Although her contract had not yet started, she eagerly darted down the rabbit hole of online learning, where she can still be found teaching and problem-solving 25 years later.

Linda C. Smith, Professor Emerita and Interim Executive Associate Dean, Illinois.

Linda taught online from fall 1997 through spring 2019 and coordinated the Leep online option for the MS/LIS degree. With Bruce Kingma of Syracuse, she co-founded the WISE (Web-based Information Science Education) consortium.

Jill Gengler, Director of Alumni Affairs, Illinois. After earning her MS from the School of Information Sciences, Jill spent 10 years supporting the technology for the Leep program followed by 10 years managing the iSchool’s Help Desk. She is currently the Director of Alumni Affairs for the iSchool since her favorite aspect of her technology jobs was always talking to the students.

Michelle Kazmer, Professor and Associate Dean, School of Information, FSU. Michelle was the first online TA in the Illinois “LEEP3” program in 1997, and joined the faculty at FSU in 2002. She has conducted research in community processes in online learning, and continues to relish teaching online after (almost!) 25 years.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

administration; education programs/schools; online learning; pedagogy.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

cohort model; instructional technology; research in online learning; synchronous online learning.