e-Possibilities

UM System aims to close gaps between technology, academia.

By Janese Silvey

Sunday, July 18, 2010

They’ve never lived in a world without Windows. They were babies when cell phones exchanged the first text messages.

Traditional freshmen entering college this fall were born in the early 1990s. They’ve grown up in a technical world where digital devices are as familiar to them as Dick and Jane readers are to baby boomers.

When they get to campus this fall, those students will be required to buy bulky textbooks, even though most will read more Facebook statuses than pages over the course of the semester.

Some will sit in lecture halls and be asked to follow along as a professor writes on a chalkboard. That should work out — with his back turned, the instructor won’t see them texting.

Even if they land in a course where a professor uses computer presentations, most students will simply learn skills from yesterday’s marketplace for jobs tomorrow that don’t exist today.

The University of Missouri System wants to close that gap between technological advances and traditional academia. Steve Graham, vice president of academic affairs, envisions a modern academic landscape where faculty members incorporate interactive tools and videos and online resources into their courses to marry the technology students already use with the traditional curricula they learn on campus.

“I would love to see rich resources in the form of instruction and discussion among faculty members and a culture of supporting this,” he said.

There are barriers. On the Columbia campus, an online learning system already exists, and internal politics will likely snag any efforts to re-create an e-learning environment.

There will be faculty members who aren’t interested in embracing digital devices and might resist efforts to change.
There are market challenges, too: Not all tech-savvy students are ready to swap the type of college experiences their parents had for a new digital version.

“There are a lot of roadblocks,” MU Provost Brian Foster said. “It will be an evolution over a long period of time to respond to challenges, not the least of which is fiscal, and market challenges and the way we adopt new technologies.”

REWIND

Electronic education has been around for more than a decade, but only in the past several years has it been accepted as a legitimate way of learning.

Contrary to assumptions from higher-ed traditionalists who snubbed their noses at e-coursework, a U.S. Department of Education study last year concluded that learning that blends electronic and face-to-face interaction is more effective than a totally in-class or totally online course.

The research was just the push Robin Hurst needed to start incorporating online tools in her biology classes at MU.

Hurst, an associate teaching professor, had been struggling in the classroom for several years as students showed up with digital distractions. And even though she asked that cell phones be turned off, she wasn’t interested in using class time to police young adults.

“It’s hard to get the attention of 400 students when you have iPhones, text messages and laptops with complete Internet access,” Hurst said. “The off-task distractions are directly related to technology. They grew up multitasking, not that they’re good at it.”

Last year, she decided if she couldn’t beat technology, she’d join it.

Hurst — whose husband, Zachary March, recently became the university system’s director of e-learning — made her class hybrid, combining online work with in-class meetings.

She faced initial pushback: Some students complained that they hadn’t signed up for an online class. But the combination, which had students completing reading assignments and exercises online but also showing up to class twice a week, ultimately proved successful.

Hurst found external websites that helped breathe life into her lessons. Instead of just telling students how cocaine affects the brain, for instance, she links to interactive animation developed by the University of Utah that adds visual illustration and audio instruction.

And by putting slides and videos online instead of trying to show them in class, she no longer had to worry about classroom tech glitches that took time away from teaching.

Students who stuck with the course appreciated the flexibility, she said.
“Students have strange hours,” she said. “If they’re up at 3 a.m., they can look at the lecture or recover a PowerPoint.”

Performance went up, too. Hurst said more students earned higher grades in the class than the students who took the traditional version the year before. That doesn’t mean the work was easier, she said; the difficulty of the tests and assignments did not change. The only thing that did was the way she delivered the material.

WHAT’S HAPPENING?

There are multiple players at MU offering online options. Under the helm of MU Extension, there’s MU Direct, which provides graduate-level online coursework that mostly lets teachers and nurses advance their education. There’s also the Center for Distance and Independent Study, which provides online classes that let students work at their own pace. And there are a number of academic departments providing a hodgepodge of hybrid courses that blend in-class work with online features.

The system this year allocated money to create more courses with electronic features, offering nearly $500,000 in grant funding to entice faculty members to work with instructional designers to create new online options. The result will ultimately be 124 new online courses, most of which are certificate programs or graduate-level courses. At MU, the money will create a new respiratory therapy program, a doctorate degree plan for nurses and a handful of certificate programs in various sciences.

The e-learning focus is still on nontraditional students, those between ages 27 and 37, looking to return to school. But ultimately, March, the system e-learning director, is hopeful that the work trickles down to the undergraduate level.

“There are two different audiences which we’re trying to hit, but we want to try to hit both,” he said. “We want tools to make the 19-year-old students want to come to class and be interactive and work harder, but we also need to give older students a way to” advance their education.

The UM System also hired extra instructional designers and is planning to create an online portal where students can view course options from all four campuses.

Implementing new online structures for the Rolla, Kansas City and St. Louis campuses should be relatively seamless — those universities don’t have pre-existing structures. MU, however, already has Mizzou Online, the portal where students can access the various online options. It’s unclear how new system initiatives will fit in with the current MU structure.

“The system’s interest to encourage the adoption of more teaching technologies is great, but there’s a group at MU already doing that,” MU Direct spokeswoman Dolores Shearon said. MU, she said, has been successful in online education for 14 years. “We have hundreds of courses and are growing at 15 to 20 percent a year. When you have a success rate like that in place, you want to enhance and build on what you already have.”
Still, she said, “We could benefit from some more strategic investments by the system, particularly in e-textbooks and new, more expensive learning technologies.”

There’s room for infrastructure improvement, at least according to one student about to lose 20 points in an online class because of what she called a technical glitch.

LaKeisha Gilcrease, who will be a sophomore this fall, is taking a psychology course this summer and is trying to convince her professor that she completed an online assignment last month. She said she responded to a discussion board thread as required but didn’t realize until weeks later that it did not go through.

“I don’t know what happened, and now I can’t do anything about it,” she said. “They need to go back and fix the glitches. It’s discouraging.”

Although Foster praised MU’s e-learning structure for serving thousands of students, he questioned whether it’s the best option for the future.

“Is it sustainable and expandable?” he asked. “Probably not.”

**STATUS UPDATE**

Columbia College has emerged over the past decade as a leader in online education, in part because of its demographics but also because the private, not-for-profit school has made it a priority.

The college has served military bases for 40 years and about a decade ago was asked to create an online system for soldiers being deployed to areas where campuses didn’t exist.

Administrators looked at their 600 courses and chose 10 to develop online. Today, the online campus provides more than 800 undergraduate course sections and 85 graduate-level classes.

One key to that success has been faculty participation, said Terry Smith, vice president and dean for academic affairs. From the onset, faculty members have played a key role in developing the online courses and continue to have a say in who teaches or redevelops their classes.

Columbia College uses a system that gives online students a one-stop shop that includes a profile page, a personal electronic locker and links to their courses, calendars and campus discussion boards. Each class has its own page that lists by week assignments and learning tools. A history class, for instance, might include an interactive timeline of military conflicts, a video of one of those conflicts credited to The History Channel and a discussion board where student are tasked with starting a topic and reading and responding to at least two of their classmates’ threads.

A couple of Columbia College employees, including Cheryl Stephens, director of registration and financial services, spent an hour Wednesday learning more about the online campus. Stephens has taken online graduate-level classes at MU and noticed a difference between the two systems.
“This seemed a lot more user-friendly to me,” she said, referring to Columbia College’s version. MU’s online system, she added, was tough to navigate, and her courses didn’t take advantage of external resources. “I’m amazed at all of the different things that can be done.”

MU uses a program called Blackboard to deliver online material. It lets instructors create weekly folders where students can find reading materials, class lectures, assignments and discussion boards. While instructors can use that system to add external virtual resources, it’s up to them to do so.

To make it easier to blend interactive tools, videos and other resources in with traditional lectures and notes online, the UM System is looking to create a centralized database of external resources, allowing instructors to more easily locate them by searching key words.

“The resources are out there, but it’s hard for everybody to keep up with without tech support,” March said.

FAST-FORWARD

Conversations about e-learning have revolved around online learning, but the discussion needs to be broadened, Foster said. Embracing technology in the classroom, he argued, is about more than just putting a textbook on an iPad.

Foster envisions transformative changes on campus, changes that would have to come from challenging everything people think they know about higher education.

For instance, instead of requiring students to sit in a lecture hall for three credit hours, he asked, why not let small groups of students use advanced technology to solve real-world problems?

The technology Foster imagines doesn’t exist, at least not at the level needed to be used in college classrooms. Perhaps the closest example — already used by some colleges — is Second Life, the website that lets users create an avatar and build homes and businesses in a virtual world. Imagine, Foster said, a program that would let students build and maintain entire ecosystems or manage virtual businesses.

It will take more than a UM System grant and an instructional designer to create that type of technology, Foster said. Likely, they’ll be created by Apple or IBM or another tech giant for a wider marketplace.

When they do emerge, Foster is ready to experiment with them through new certificate programs created under the Mizzou Advantage initiative. That will allow him to explore new ways of learning electronically even while the current structure continues to serve online students.

“There’s a lot of potential,” Foster said. “It’s exciting. It’ll transform higher education, no doubt about that. But we don’t know where it’s going yet, and we don’t have the tools. We’re not going to just develop those tools in house.”
Behind scenes, Big 12 focused on public relations

E-mails demonstrate Beebe’s attempts to manage message.

By Joe Walljasper

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On Dec. 15, the day the Big Ten Conference announced it was considering expansion, Missouri Athletic Director Mike Alden sent an e-mail to Big 12 Commissioner Dan Beebe that portended the frenzy about to unfold.

“Just to alert you guys....we have been getting bombarded with questions from the media today about this thing,” the e-mail said. “Apparently, there had been some recent articles on ESPN.COM and other locations stating that if the Big 10 expanded, Missouri would be a/the team that should be considered. Nothing more than information, but wanted you to be aware of this stuff.”

Alden also forwarded the statement that MU Chancellor Brady Deaton had prepared on the topic, the one that said the school hadn’t been contacted by the Big Ten but “should there be an official inquiry or invitation, we would evaluate it based on what is in the best interest of MU, athletically and academically.”

Beebe responded by thanking Alden but said he would “appreciate a line about the Big 12” in Deaton’s statement.

Thus began a whirlwind six months in which Missouri appeared headed to the Big Ten, then seemed on the verge of homelessness, then wound up staying in a 10-team Big 12. Throughout the process, e-mails on the topic of conference realignment — obtained by the Tribune through an open-records request — included Beebe’s advice about presenting the Big 12 in a positive light to the media during a period when the league often was portrayed as a defenseless target about to be picked apart.

On Feb. 19, Beebe sent an e-mail to the conference’s chancellors and athletic directors that gave specific talking points when dealing with reporters, including one phrase that became very familiar to Missouri fans: “proud member of the Big 12.”

“I request that your public comments express the positives about the Big 12,” he wrote. “To the degree you feel you have to placate constituents who would like for you to express interest in another conference; I hope that you can indicate that your institution is a proud member of the Big 12, but that you will monitor the environment.”
On May 13, after Beebe appeared on Kansas City’s WHB radio and said he wanted to know “who’s going to be on the plane when we take off,” he sent another mass e-mail explaining his strategy.

“I was on the KC radio station last night with the host who posted the story earlier this week that the Big Ten invited institutions to join their league,” Beebe wrote. “In that interview, and in one that will appear in the Dallas paper, I indicated the benefits that the Big 12 has provided to all members, our tremendous ability to compete on the national stage in such a short time, my belief that we have a bright future and that we need to get clarity soon about who is committed to go forward without waiting for another conference to determine our fate.

“In the typical sensationalism of talk radio, my message was portrayed as throwing down the gauntlet. I think anyone who listened to the show would agree that was not my tone or intention. I intend to present to the Board at our June meeting a plan to make such a determination. I am now expressing, however, a strong position publicly because of the negative connotations and damage to our image resulting from the perception that our fate lies in the hands of others and on their time table. Many of you have expressed your dissatisfaction about that perception, and I share that concern.”

On June 3, Beebe pushed for Deaton to declare allegiance to the Big 12. Beebe sent an e-mail to Deaton after reading an Associated Press story about the Big 12 spring meetings that included a quote from Deaton that said, “We’re not shutting our ears to anything.”

Beebe wrote: “I admire you greatly Brady, but the quote at the end of this article, which is being written about throughout the country, is what is damaging us so badly. We have to have an unequivocal commitment in a few days!!”

Deaton responded: “If any university President is not open to all information and analysis that may benefit their university, they should not be in their job. Frankly, I do not understand or accept the line of reasoning being suggested. As our meeting demonstrated, every President at the Board meeting was looking out for their University’s interest. They should be applauded for that.

“Our job is to carefully examine the conditions and adjustments that can hold us together. We need to find common denominators that build a foundation for collaboration and mutual interest. I fear that process has been masked to some degree, but continue to hope that common ground can be found!

“We really never discussed the principal basis for the ostensible instability. That basis in no way can be that our Presidents are open to listening to alternatives that are in their university’s best interest. We have to go beyond that. An informative meeting for sure!”

A week later, the Big Ten extended an offer to Nebraska and not Missouri. What contact MU officials had with the Big Ten remains unclear. The Tribune’s open-records request asked for any e-mails between Missouri officials and representatives of the Big Ten or any of its members, but none was released.
That might mean there was no e-mail contact between Missouri and the Big Ten, although not necessarily. Kathleen Miller, the university system’s interim chief of staff and custodian of records, said some e-mails regarding conference realignment were deemed to be closed records because they were “related to a negotiated contract until a contract is executed.”

The nature of that negotiated contract wasn’t specified.

Reach Joe Walljasper at 573-815-1783 or e-mail jwalljasper@columbiatribune.com.
LEITER: Now is the time to switch to clean energy

By John Zamarripa, Columbia
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Just imagine Columbia's streets being free of coal-hauling trucks. Just imagine, no more smoke stacks clouding our view of the horizon and reminding us of an age gone by. Imagine it being clean energy that lights our stadiums and fuels our campus. Just imagine if this could all be done, if it could all be true. I think that it can, and here is how.

The MU Power Plant is about to invest in a new coal-handling system, one that will cost tens of millions of dollars. I say, move toward the future, and stop buying into the past. Now is the time to make the change to clean energy. The amount of funding and public support has never been higher.

Natural gas is clean and is becoming more and more abundant, while methane gas technology is advancing everyday. Some day, perhaps, our Missouri hog farms can be a source of clean energy, as well as bacon, etc.

But none of this will happen without you. If this clean energy future is worth having, it is worth fighting for. So call the campus, call the state, start writing those letters and ask "why not?" Why not move forward? Why not lead? If this is something you want then "show me."
Students promote fair trade practices in Columbia businesses

COLUMBIA — This summer, six Columbia high school students and eight college interns are participating in a student-led campaign to promote and expand the sale of fair trade goods in downtown Columbia.

"In simple terms, fair trade is transparency of the product," OPTFair Campaign Director Nadege Uwase said. "From artist to vendor to customer, you know where the product is coming from."

In association with the Global Issues Leadership Development program, Central Missouri Stop Human Trafficking Coalition and MU Stop Traffic, the OPTFair campaign is advocating for socially responsible business practices, including fair trade and buying goods closer to home.

In fair trade, artisans and farmers receive a fair price for their products and work in safe environments. Forced labor, a type of human trafficking, is prohibited. Fair trade also aims to eliminate the middleman and deal directly with the producers of goods whenever possible.

"The OPTFair campaign is important because it's going to make an impact locally in Columbia, as well as in communities abroad," OPTFair head marketing intern Lisa Lovell said.

It’s important for merchants and consumers to know the sources of their products, said Jessica Canfield, executive director of Mustard Seed Fair Trade.

"Fair trade is a preventive measure when it comes to the issue of human trafficking," she said.
Rock Bridge students participating in OPTFair come from the school’s Global Issues Club, which works with the Global Issues Leadership Development. In the club, students pick a topic about which they are interested in learning, then a country and an organization.

This past year, the students chose to look at human trafficking, which the U.S. Department of State describes as forced labor, sexual exploitation and modern-day slavery. During the first semester, the students focused on human trafficking and sexual exploitation in the Democratic Republic of Congo and raised money for Heal Africa, which helps survivors of sexual violence.

In the second semester, the emphasis was on human trafficking and fair trade in India. Then, the group worked to raise money for Free the Children, which works to help children living in poverty.

“We’re here to advocate for people who can’t advocate for themselves,” Uwase said.

There are four full fair-trade stores in Columbia: Mustard Seed Fair Trade and gifts shops at the MU Anthropology Museum, First Christian Church and Community United Methodist Church. Many coffee shops, such as Dunn Brothers, Kaldi’s and Starbucks, offer fair trade coffee, Uwase said.

The campaign members plan to use blogging and social media to communicate their message to the community. Uwase said they hope to hold a benefit concert toward the end of the summer and are considering creating a Google App that would locate the fair trade stores in Columbia.

Uwase said fair trade is important because it promotes freedom.

“Freedom to me is not just about the shackles,” she said. "It’s about living in a way that respects and enhances other people’s freedom.”
Missouri Show-Me Games' strength is participation

By Tracy Greever-Rice
July 16, 2010 | 8:00 p.m. CDT

COLUMBIA — Ken Ash, executive director of the Show-Me State Games, is proud of the fact that the Games are thriving.

He also thinks he can explain why the Missouri Games are so successful: "We think it ought to be fun. We're more interested in participation than competition."

At the height of the state games movement in the mid-1990s, 37 U.S. states hosted annual amateur athletic competitions, down to 34 today, according to the National Congress of State Games.

In the early 1980s, then-Missouri Gov. Kit Bond heard about New York's Empire Games, an Olympic-style athletic festival for amateur athletes that was the first state games in the country. He brought the idea home, established the Governor's Council on Physical Fitness and Health and charged the newly-formed group with finding a location and creating a culture that would make the Games work in Missouri.

MU agreed to operate the Games, bringing the competition to Columbia. The Governor's Council and MU determined early on that the right focus for Missouri's games was "health, fitness, family and fun." They then set about building both the culture of the Games and a business model to ensure sustainability.

Ash, who has worked for the Games since 1989, acknowledges that it took the first few years to find the right mix of events, facilities and partners to encourage athletes from around the state to travel to mid-Missouri to compete.

Ash also knew that the Games would need to be self-funding.
While the University continues to provide administrative and overhead support for things such as office space, accounting services and event facilities, the remainder of the revenue needed to actually operate the Games is generated through a combination of donations and sponsorships, entry fees, fundraising events and merchandising.

"The total university's in-kind gift is around $80,000 this year," estimated Ash, "The university is one of our biggest sponsors, but currently the Missouri Lottery is the largest."

This is a business model that worked in Missouri, though other states have tried different strategies for both financing and operating the games.

"It was (then-Missouri Governor) Ashcroft's idea not to get the state of Missouri directly involved in supporting the games. It was probably the best decision there ever was," Ash said.

Some states, like New York, have directly funded all aspects of their state games. However, in January 2009, the Empire State Games' entire budget was eliminated from the state budget, forcing cancellation of the summer 2009 games. A scaled-down version of the Empire State Games is being held in Buffalo, N.Y., this week, funded through a $500,000 gift from a local bank.

The Missouri Games, on the other hand, wants to encourage a sense of investment, or buy-in, from athletes by charging reasonable entry fees, which are similar to the cost of competing in tournaments and leagues throughout the state.

"We try to hit the median, not the highest and not the lowest (in the sport)," Ash said. "But (we) also insure it's affordable for families and kids."

In turn for their investment in participation, all Show-Me State Games athletes are welcome and encouraged to compete throughout all phases of events, both qualifying and finals competitions.

Missouri's approach is a departure from other state games that are more focused on the competitive nature of the sports.

Ash describes the Empire State Games' 2009 financial problems as a cautionary tale of over-stressing the competitive aspect of amateur athletic games.
"They had a $2.7 million dollar budget and people went free to their games. They only qualify about 5,000 or 6,000 for the finals, whereas we qualify everybody for the finals," Ash said. "They eliminated a lot of people. Our idea was to add people."

The Games' philosophy of inclusiveness extends to its home communities, Columbia and mid-Missouri, too. For both the public entities and private donors who contribute to the Games, putting on the annual Games is like throwing a big summer party for the rest of the state.

While the Games receive donations and support from corporations and organizations with a statewide mission or market, the bulk of dollars, donated goods and services and volunteer sweat equity invested in producing the Games is local.

In addition to MU, local governmental bodies that invest dollars and in-kind support include the City of Columbia, Boone County Commission, Columbia Convention & Visitors Bureau and Columbia Public Schools.

Private local investment comes from businesses such as the Columbia Daily Tribune and Mediacom as well as from major mid-Missouri employers like Shelter Insurance.

The return on investment for the community is worth it, according to Lorah Steiner, executive director of the Columbia Convention and Visitors Bureau.

"The Show-Me State Games has a very strong infrastructure here," Steiner said. "That would be very hard to duplicate somewhere else."

Steiner explained the success of the Games in terms of the community's early awareness of the value of the Games as an anchor to grow Columbia's convention and festival market. Columbia's geographic location and numerous facilities and amenities related to higher education make it a go-to overnight, weekend destination.

The reward to the local tax base and business' bottom lines is an influx of tourist dollars during a time of year that has traditionally been slow.

Since 2005, the Games estimate that athletes and their spectators have spent approximately $5 million per year while participating in the games. The overall economic impact is even greater as those dollars circulate throughout the local economy.