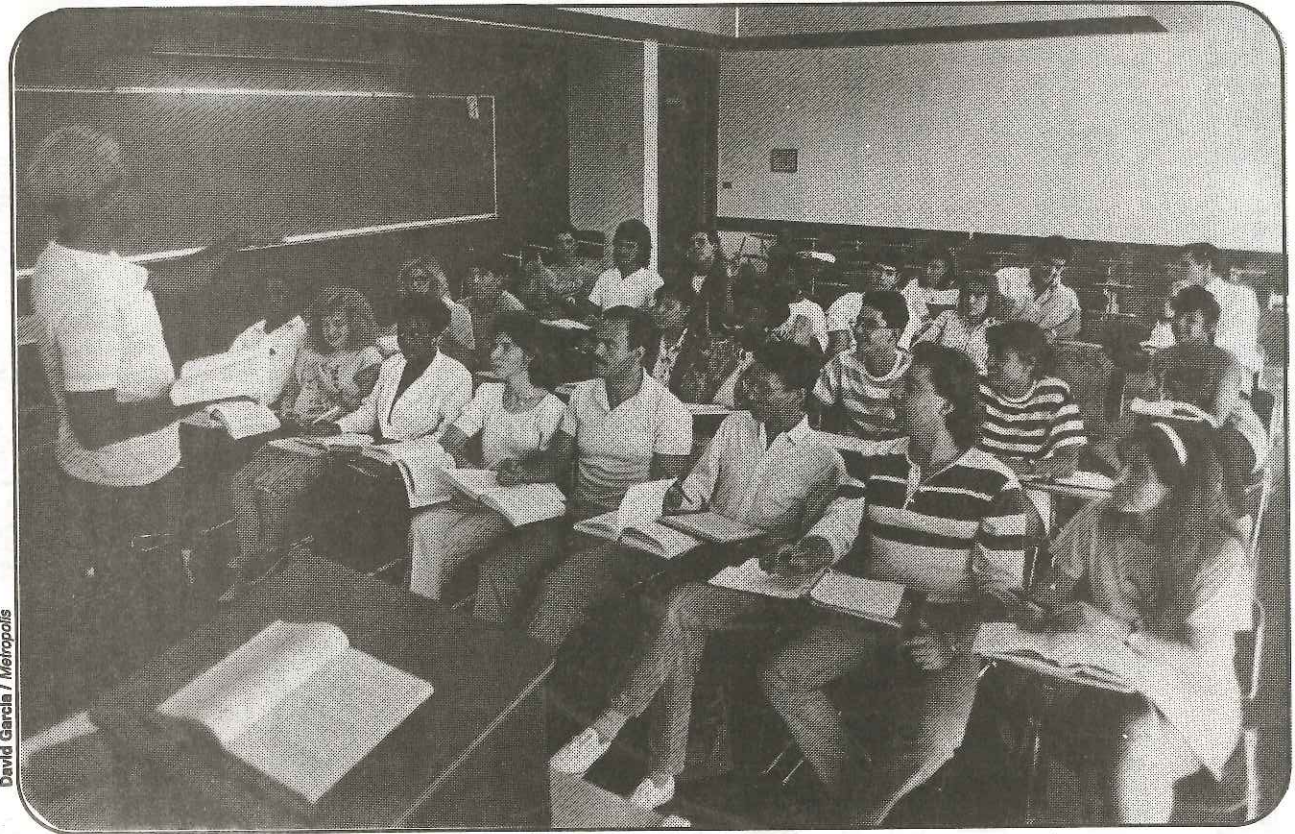
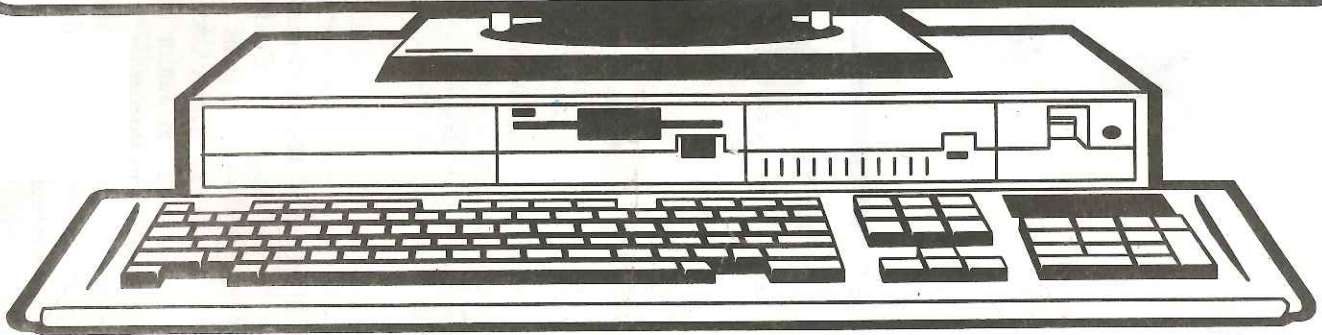


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## Virtual College: Education goes online

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At the Wolfson Campus of Miami-Dade Community College, students may often agonize over attending their classes if it means walking up those dreaded escalators in Building I or traveling from Building III to Building V with seconds to spare. But thanks to M-DCC's new Virtual College, a college-wide distance education program, students don't have to work up such a sweat to pass their courses. They can attend their classes from home.

The idea may sound unusual to some people but certainly convenient to others. All of the campuses at M-DCC have devised a way for students to achieve college credit for their courses, via technology. These distance education courses provide students the opportunity to attend classes anywhere and at anytime. Through the use of a telephone, a fax machine or even a computer, students can turn in their assignments without having to visit their campus daily or attend a class at a specific time or place.

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# Distance Learning gets even closer to home

❖ continued from front cover

"These courses were designed to help students manage their time effectively," said Faculty Coordinator Chris Migliaccio. "Nowadays, everybody has responsibilities that include holding down jobs and maintaining social lives. It's understandable that these factors be their first priorities, but education shouldn't take a backseat."

Many students at M-DCC are finding themselves in this sticky predicament and are opting to choose the latter. Nearly 60 students are currently enrolled in the four courses that are being offered this term through distance learning. Those subjects that students are literally sitting home through are English (ENC 1102), Chemistry (CHM 1033), Humanities (HUM 1020), and Psychology (PSY 2012). Although it's already too late for students to enroll this term, the next semester is already being planned out, with Social Environment and College Algebra as the next possible courses to be offered.

"My initial concern was that distance learning was going to be too impersonal or remote," said Thelma Altshuler, who is teaching Humanities in the Virtual College. "I enjoy meeting with people face to face, but it's important to realize that we have to respect and preserve a student's privacy."

One of those private Virtual College students happened to e-mail Altshuler a message, where she praised the opportunity she has to attend classes through distance learning and voiced her concerns about her professor's availability hours.

"Coincidentally, I've received various suggestions on how we can make distance learning the best learning experience for students," said Altshuler, "and many have commented that teachers should try to be as accessible as possible."

M-DCC follows in the footsteps of the Florida High School, a statewide online high school that received funds two years ago. Educators in Alachua and Orange counties presented the idea to the Florida Department of Education. In January, 600 students are expected to enroll.

M-DCC received similar support for their Virtual College.

Three hefty grants were awarded to the

institution, which will eventually pave the way for the installation of a video production facility that will enable students to watch a live broadcast of a professor's lesson at any campus. Students don't even need to take notes. Rather, they can just video record the lesson and take it home with them.

Courses at M-DCC's Virtual College are taught by faculty members from every campus. Students who request help can visit any of the Distance Education centers, located at the Wolfson Campus and all of the other campuses, except InterAmerican's. Their center opens in the Winter term. These DE centers provide students with a number of services, including advisement on how to locate materials for a course and training in Virtual College technologies.

"No technological skills are required," said Migliaccio. "A student can very well e-mail his or her assignments or send them through regular mail. This is a great opportunity for students to demonstrate how motivated and responsible they can be. By successfully passing these courses at the Virtual College, a student is just preparing for real challenges in the workforce."

Several students may want to take advantage of distance learning but their reasons may be more sinister than genuine. Since Virtual College students are required to make only a minimum of campus visits to take tests, how can professors know if the work they receive is really from the student? Migliaccio believes that those students expecting to journey on a free ride are out of gas.

"There may be students who will try to con their teachers, but it won't work," said Migliaccio, "because when it comes time to take the tests in person, the work won't match and they'll be exposed."

Although distance learning has several benefits, it's certainly not for everyone.

"Some students feel more comfortable in a classroom setting and that's perfectly fine," said Migliaccio. "Virtual College will not replace the traditional forms of education that students and faculty are accustomed to. We're just asking them to expand their horizons and consider other options."

Cheryl M. Clark, the English department chairperson, acknowledges the advantages that busy, hard-working students have in Virtual College.

"Today's students lead complex lives that require innovative solutions to meet their educational needs," said Clark. "I applaud the creativity of my colleagues who have worked so hard to develop the Virtual College. Students will benefit from the opportunities offered through distance learning."

Unfortunately, the English professor isn't so quick to accept that distance learning is the best answer. She believes that true learning is more than just information handed down to the student.

"As a teacher, I am concerned that perhaps the most important element of a student's college education could be neglected if the necessary ingredient of the classroom itself were removed from the learning equation," said Clark. "The spontaneous spark of insight that ignites when a classroom discussion catches fire is an experience that I feel is the real mark of the educated individual."

Ana Bernal, a psychology major, agrees. "Students need to be in a classroom environment where their questions can be answered and their thoughts can be heard immediately," said Bernal. "It's not the same to pick up a phone or e-mail a message to your teacher than raising your hand to speak your mind on the spot."

No matter what opinions are expressed about distance learning at M-DCC, it's quite clear that students have a choice regarding their education. Whether the choices seem old fashioned or reflect the new age of technology, students are at least finding some time to squeeze in a class or two, which is exactly what Virtual College coordinators want.

"Miami-Dade has the technology, the talent, the motivation and the energy to make this work," said Migliaccio. "We have high hopes that this program will grow and succeed."

\*Students and faculty who are interested in participating in M-DCC's Virtual College can visit the Wolfson Campus Distance Education Center in room 3506 or call Chris Migliaccio at 237-3269.