

## Jamie Isaac, MAT, The University of Texas at El Paso

Instructor of Mathematics — El Paso Community College

### Enhanced WebAssign® Tutors Students in Developmental Math

Jamie Isaac warmed up for her 20 years as a college math instructor with 26 years as a high school teacher. Today, she teaches developmental mathematics at El Paso Community College in Texas. To ease the burden of working with as many as 180 students each term, Jamie has used the Enhanced WebAssign® (EWA) online homework tool for five years. She prefers EWA over other online math products for the tutoring assistance it provides to her students. She also appreciates the trial period, which allows students to gain access at the beginning of the semester, even if they are still awaiting their financial aid.

#### COURSES AND PARTICIPANTS

Jamie teaches as many as six classes in a semester, all face to face, and each with an average of 30 students. Students are traditional and non-traditional learners, and most of them also have jobs, family problems — and busy schedules. The course incorporates both lecture and lab, with Jamie and tutors available to help students complete their homework online. Students are required to purchase Enhanced WebAssign, but not the printed textbook, because many of them use the eBook that accompanies EWA.

#### THE CHALLENGES

Jamie's key challenge is a common one — motivating students to engage in the material. "Sometimes in lecture I wonder if they are grasping anything that I'm saying," she says. "Their ability to focus and their attention span leave something to be desired. When I discuss a topic and present an example, many of them just sit there and wait for me to give them the answer. It's not until they get online and have to actually do the problems themselves that they want to hear about the necessary concepts and techniques. By then there's not enough time to give everyone the individual attention that they need." Though critical thinking is encouraged during the classroom lectures, most students aren't ready to listen to "how to" until they need to know—which happens as they work on their assignments.

Many of Jamie's students speak English as a second language, which intensifies their struggles with the material. In addition, Jamie says that various subsets of her students face financial issues or have trouble managing and prioritizing time to get their homework done.

Before Enhanced WebAssign, Jamie wasn't able to teach as many courses as she does now due to the time required to grade homework manually. In addition, students didn't receive feedback on their homework until the class had already moved on to new topics.

#### THE RESULTS

Enhanced WebAssign® supports problems and exercises from Jamie's Cengage Learning textbook with immediate feedback, tutorials, video solutions, and other resources that accommodate different learning styles. From their EWA Home page, students can access their assignments, grades, communication tools, a calendar, and their textbook in interactive eBook format.



#### CHALLENGES

- **Motivation in some developmental math students is hampered** by struggles with English, busy schedules, and finances.
- **Students often need problem-specific guidance**, which isn't readily available outside of class as they complete their homework.
- **Time required to create assignments and manually grade papers** can limit the number of students and courses that an instructor can handle.

#### SOLUTIONS

- Enhanced WebAssign®
- Waner, Stefan and Steven Costenoble, *Finite Math & Applied Calculus*, Vol. 1, Fifth Edition, Vol. 1

#### RESULTS

- **EWA engages students in active learning with immediate feedback and tutorial resources** that address various learning styles. Multiple takes (allowed at instructor's discretion) encourage students to practice concepts that they find difficult and re-work problems that they have answered incorrectly. EWA acts as a tutor outside of class, providing "Watch It" video solutions, "Practice It" step-by-step examples, and other tutorial resources to help develop problem-solving skills. It is like having your own personal tutor available 24/7.
- **Automatic grading of homework assignments** reduces the burden on busy instructors. Creating assignments takes just a few minutes.

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Jamie appreciates the instant feedback that EWA provides her students. “If students were turning in homework on paper, there would be quite a delay in time before they received their scores. With EWA they know right away if a problem is right or wrong,” she says. Jamie gives students at least two chances to answer problems, which she believes makes doing homework a more effective learning experience. Students are prompted when they make errors, and can receive guidance as they figure out what they did incorrectly before they try the problem again. Repeating the problem (with different values) provides the repetition that helps students to retain what they learn. Alternatively, students can receive guidance before attempting an answer for the first time.

“Watch It” narrated video solutions, which use different values than the assigned problem, are especially helpful for visual learners. “The ‘Watch It’ video problems are very good, because for the students they’re almost like having a personal tutor right there with them,” says Jamie. “Master It” tutorials guide students through the solution to a similar problem and provide feedback along the way. “Practice It” interactive examples (available for Developmental Math books) walk learners through solutions step by step; students view guidance until they feel confident enough to answer.

Jamie says that EWA engages her students in the material and that their grades improve as a result. Her course evaluations are consistently positive, and she attributes that in part to students’ liking Enhanced WebAssign. “My classes have a very low failure rate. Students fail only if they don’t do their work. Enhanced WebAssign actively involves them in doing their homework, so it definitely plays a role in their improved performance.”

Enhanced WebAssign allows Jamie to handle a larger teaching load than she would otherwise be able to manage. “Without EWA, I would be overwhelmed with grading and the number of papers going back and forth,” she says. The EWA gradebook automatically calculates students’ grades. Instructors can view class trends, check on individual student progress, and configure settings (such as number of attempts allowed). At the instructor’s option, students can view the class average to see how they are doing in relation to others in the class. In addition, creating an assignment only takes a few minutes, and instructors can draw from their textbook as well as from a vast test bank of questions from other Cengage Learning texts.

As Jamie sums it up, “Enhanced WebAssign is a life saver. It’s great for students and great for teachers.”

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