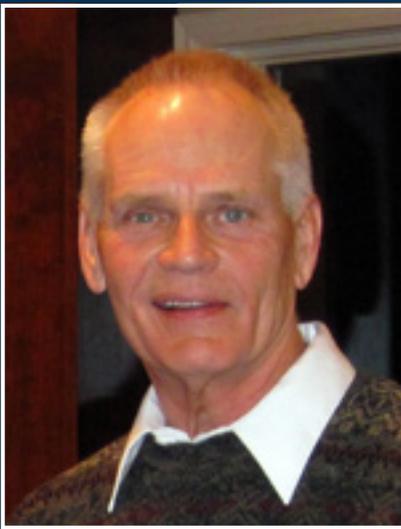


Lee D. Cornell, M.S. (Minnesota State University, Moorhead)

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Increasing Student Engagement and Reducing Instructor Workload with SAM

Professor Lee D. Cornell has been teaching Computer Information Systems and Technology courses for many years, and has been at Minnesota State University, Mankato, since 1986. In addition to Computers in Society, Introduction to Programming, and Software Development, he teaches an Introduction to Information Systems class that is required for all business majors. Lee finds that his biggest challenges are keeping students motivated and engaged enough to do the necessary work outside of class, and managing the workload that comes with up to 350 students enrolled *per section*.

COURSES AND PARTICIPANTS

Because this course is a prerequisite for all courses in the College of Business, the typical student is a first- or second-year student who is planning to major in business, though there are a few students—less than 5%—who take the course as an elective or to upgrade their skills. Most students in the course work part-time or not at all, though there are occasional older, returning students and those who work full time. “Most of the students are typical 18-20 year old college students. Some are serious. Some less so. The good news is that by having large sections, I can better appreciate how good the vast majority of the students really are.”

THE CHALLENGES

Through the years, Lee has seen firsthand the demise of the traditional class lecture and the way today’s students grapple with this change. With the old paradigm, he notes, students were either bored because the lecture covered topics they’d already read in the text, or they would not bother with the reading at all, figuring that the concepts would be covered during the lecture. But at least students knew what to expect. Lee says his students’ biggest challenge is that—since material in the book is not automatically covered in the classroom anymore—students are now responsible for doing the reading on their own—and making sure they understand the material, since it will inevitably appear on quizzes and exams.

A lot of today’s students “aren’t used to just being turned loose like that,” says Lee, adding that many of them have never had to create and follow a reading schedule to ensure they’re getting all the necessary content prior to quiz or exam time. “At the beginning of the semester, particularly, we have a lot of students who say, ‘Well, I forgot.’ And then they learn that, ‘Well, you got a zero,’ and that behavior sort of corrects itself fairly rapidly for almost all of them.”

CHALLENGES

- **Students are not used to the new class paradigm**, in which textbook material is not covered in class, and need frequent assignments to keep them engaged and up-to-date on the topics.
- **Students may not get feedback in a timely manner** when instructors grade and manage assignments manually.
- **Instructors struggle to keep up with grading**, when class enrollments range from 200-350 students per section.

SOLUTIONS

- SAM (Skills Assessment Manager) online environment for Microsoft Office
- Stair, Ralph M. and George Reynolds, *Fundamentals of Information Systems*

RESULTS

- **SAM allows instructors to give frequent assignments**, so students stay engaged, get plenty of practice, and keep up-to-date on course concepts.
- **Available 24/7**, SAM covers Word and other Office applications, as well as technology concepts and issues, via real-world simulations and auto-graded assignments. Students work at their convenience and get instant feedback so they can home in on the areas in which they most need help.
- **Automatic grading and instant feedback** save instructors time while allowing students to proceed at their own pace. After exams, students can generate reports that direct them to areas needing further study.



“[SAM] allows students to have continual practice and learning with the different aspects of Microsoft Office.”

Lee D. Cornell

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Lee’s biggest challenge in teaching the class is in keeping up with all of the grading and administrative tasks that come with teaching a course that can include anywhere from 200 to 350 students per section. “If you don’t have a tool like [SAM], then it becomes impossible to do something like that, because if you had 600 papers to grade, even if they were really simple, it would take you way too much time.”

THE RESULTS

Lee has been using SAM for the last 3 years, along with the *Fundamentals of Information Systems* textbook from Cengage Learning. Of course, its online grading feature is a huge boon to Lee in staying on top of grading, but the benefits extend to students as well, as it allows Lee to give weekly assignments, which ensures that students stay on top of the material. “Because there can be frequent assignments,” says Lee, “they don’t have a chance to say, ‘Well, I am going to ignore this class for two weeks or three weeks...’; the students are forced to do a lot more practice,” keeping them engaged and the concepts fresh in their minds. Students have told him that they really like that SAM gives them feedback right away. “Typically, I allow them to redo an assignment up to three times,” Lee says, so students can turn in assignments, immediately see where they lost points, and go back to redo and resubmit the work, should they so choose.

Besides staying engaged by virtue of the frequent assignments, Lee has found that SAM also increases student engagement by providing a variety of group activities that cover some of the real-world software systems—like Excel, Access, and Google Docs—that they’ll be using both in subsequent classes and in business. “We try to pick topics that they are going to find particularly challenging, but also particularly useful.” Lee believes SAM is indeed useful and notes that instructors teaching the classes that follow his in the curriculum say that students coming from his class have a much better grasp of the fundamental aspects, particularly of Excel and Access.

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