



## SUCCESS STORY

### Merlin Amirtharaj, MBA, MS in MIS

Associate Vice President, School of Business and Technology —  
Stanly Community College

## SAM Delivers Self-Paced Learning of Microsoft® Office Skills, 24/7

Merlin Amirtharaj has seen many changes in her 24 years of teaching computer courses at Stanly Community College (SCC) in Albemarle, North Carolina. One is the growth of hybrid and online courses — the formats of her Introduction to Computers and Microsoft® Access® classes. To support her Cengage Learning textbooks, Merlin looks to SAM (Skills Assessment Manager), a self-paced learning environment that helps students master Microsoft Office (MS Office) skills through interactive assessments and real-life simulations.

Stanly has a robust distance-learning program — ideal for online resources such as SAM, which the college first used in the 1990s. More recently, it has used the system in its 2007 and 2010 versions and plans to use SAM 2013. Merlin says SAM has been successful in engaging both motivated and unmotivated students, who appreciate the learning flexibility that it provides. She counts on SAM's auto-graded assessments to evaluate proficiency, step-by-step trainings, and cheat-proof projects that ask learners to use an Office application to communicate, solve a problem, or make a decision. SAM also offers computer concepts labs on topics including computer hardware, networks, and security.

### COURSES AND PARTICIPANTS

Stanly serves a diverse group of students whose ages range from 18 years to 70 years and older, and whose backgrounds, skills, and needs vary accordingly. Enrollees in the college's online and hybrid computer science courses include technology-savvy young adults, working singles and parents, and displaced workers who have been out of school for years and seek training for a new career.

### THE CHALLENGES

The traits that make SCC rich in diversity are also the source of Merlin's greatest teaching challenge — the disparate knowledge levels of her students. "We have people who are well versed in computer applications, people who think they are well versed but are not, and people who have never touched a computer. It's difficult when we put them all together in one room," she says. Many of her students have schedules that make it difficult to attend traditional classes, so online courses and learning tools are the only viable option for them.

### THE RESULTS

With self-paced training and projects that address multiple learning styles, SAM has helped level the playing field for Merlin's students, allowing them to work through their assignments as slowly or as quickly as their level of expertise allows. "We were first attracted to SAM for our online courses because it accommodates students' variable

### CHALLENGES

- **Students with diverse learning needs and backgrounds** require an environment that accommodates all proficiency levels.
- **Non-traditional students with family and work responsibilities** need flexible, self-contained learning options.
- **Time spent** manually grading assignments or posting materials for students who miss class can divert instructors from more productive teaching activities.
- **Varied content and test items** across seated, blended, and online sections make it difficult to maintain grading consistency across sections.

### SOLUTIONS

- SAM, online learning environment for MS Office
- Oja, Dan & June Jamrich Parsons, *Computer Concepts, Illustrated Brief*
- Clemens, Barbara, *Microsoft Windows® 7: Illustrated Essentials*
- Duffy, Jennifer, *Microsoft Word 2010: Illustrated Brief*
- Reding, Elisabeth Eisner, *Microsoft Excel® 2010: Illustrated Brief*
- Adamski, Joseph J. & Kathy T. Finnegan, *Microsoft Access 2010, Comprehensive*

### RESULTS

- **SAM accommodates multiple learning styles and needs**, offering real-world simulations, hands-on trainings, and instant feedback that help students develop practical skills in MS Office.
- Students learn at their own pace, 24/7, without having to wait for an instructor to grade assignments.
- Auto-graded assignments save instructors time, allowing them to focus on helping students who need more individual attention.
- Using SAM assures consistency in course content because the same training and quizzing is available to all sections.



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**Merlin Amirtharaj**  
Associate Vice President,  
School of Business and  
Technology,  
Stanly Community College

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schedules by being available day and night,” says Merlin. “The trainings include videos and hands-on exercises that are engaging, particularly for traditional students who don’t want to just sit and read a textbook. When students have something to watch and interact with, it keeps their attention so that they can learn more effectively.” Merlin notes that the videos are also helpful for students who have difficulty reading, either due to poor reading skills or partial visual impairment.

For the college, the use of SAM assures consistency in course content and assessment across 30 seated, hybrid, web-based, and online sections in the Introduction to Computers course. In Merlin’s seated/hybrid course, SAM “sits in” as a substitute lecturer for students who can’t always make it to class, while saving time she would otherwise spend recording and posting class lectures. SAM also eliminates the need for instructors to alter their online courses every time there is a change in Microsoft Office software, because Cengage Learning, which hosts SAM on its website, makes all the necessary updates to content, exercises, and simulations. Users link to SAM seamlessly through the Stanly College learning management system (LMS).

“SAM is very user friendly, and students like it,” says Merlin. “SAM grades projects instantly, so it doesn’t matter if students are working at 8 a.m. or 2 a.m. They can receive guided help, see what they did wrong, review as needed, and complete the project at their own pace without having to wait for me to grade the assignment.”

Merlin believes that SAM promotes student engagement, particularly among older students who are very motivated to learn. “Students like the projects and trainings because they can approach the material and practice it until they get it right,” she says. “If they have technical problems — for instance, when setting up their account or joining a section — the SAM Tech Team is available to assist them.”

Merlin also senses that SAM can improve retention by providing students flexibility in completing their assignments. They can study at home, whenever they want, or catch up easily if they miss a class. And because SAM simulates the Office environment, students can gain Microsoft Office proficiency even if they don’t have Office software.

“We’re enthusiastic about recommending SAM. It’s way ahead of other available products, and it aligns well with the Cengage Learning textbooks that we use. We’re looking forward to experiencing SAM 2013, which I hear has many enhancements.”

Stanly Community College  
Albemarle, North Carolina



Source Code: 13L-CE0519



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