



## Melinda White, M.Ed.

Instructor of Computer Programming and Office Applications

— Seminole State College of Florida

## SAM Invites Students to Observe, Practice, and Apply Microsoft® Office Skills

One of Melinda White's mottos must surely be "learn from your mistakes." A 25-year veteran of teaching, Melinda is an instructor of computer programming and Microsoft® Office applications at Seminole State College of Florida, where she has been since 2002. Given the myriad skills and commands required for Office proficiency, Melinda has a frontline perspective on the value of seeing mistakes and learning by correcting them. That's one reason why she has used SAM (Skills Assessment Manager) for years to support her Cengage Learning textbooks.

### COURSES AND PARTICIPANTS

SAM is required in Melinda's online Office applications courses. She typically teaches four sections, each with between 30 and 45 students that represent the spectrum of traditional and non-traditional learners. SAM is accompanied by an embedded MindTap™ Reader (an optional interactive eBook version of Melinda's textbook); some students use a printed version of the text.

### THE CHALLENGES

Finding time to do school work is a challenge for Melinda's students. "Many of them have one or two jobs, and/or small children," says Melinda. "I'm amazed at their responsibilities. It's very different from when I was in school, when going to school was my job."

According to Melinda, another issue is that students don't read as much as they used to, and need a nudge to engage in course materials. "Whether it's life responsibilities or the digital connections, students these days have many distractions."

As class sizes have increased, Melinda has needed more help with grading. "Back in the day, by the time I hand-graded students' Word projects we'd be covering Microsoft® Excel®. Students probably didn't even look at my feedback or know what mistakes they made," says Melinda. "Even so, I didn't allow multiple submissions because I had no time to grade assignments more than once, so students didn't have the chance to go back and learn from their errors."

### THE RESULTS

Melinda uses SAM trainings, projects, and exams. Students work through a tutorial in the eBook or textbook prior to doing a related assignment in SAM. Trainings offer three modes of learning. Students observe a brief video demonstration of the task, practice it with guided help, and then apply it independently to show their mastery. Projects ask students to integrate multiple skills and tasks. For instance, students might download a Word file and be asked to alter margin widths, modify font size, insert clip art, etc., and then resubmit the file.

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### CHALLENGES

- **Busy students with jobs and children** have difficulty finding time to do school work.
- **Learning Microsoft® Office applications requires repetitive hands-on practice** and reinforcement to assure skill retention.
- **Time-consuming, manual grading of assignments** means that students receive feedback too late to remediate gaps in understanding or skills.

### SOLUTIONS

- SAM (Skills Assessment Manager) online environment for Microsoft Office
- Shelly, Gary B. and Misty E. Vermaat, *Microsoft Office 2010: Introductory*

### RESULTS

- **SAM and optional MindTap Reader are accessible 24/7** on desktops, laptops, netbooks, and tablets. MindTap Reader offers engaging learning tools such as text-to-speech app for "on-the-go" students.
- **SAM trainings and projects provide an environment that help students master Microsoft® Office skills, and address multiple learning styles** by encouraging students to observe, practice, and apply. Feedback on projects tells students exactly what they did wrong and offers links to resources that encourage further practice and review.
- **Auto-graded assignments save instructors time** while offering students helpful feedback that allows them to complete homework whenever it's convenient for them. Ability to make multiple submissions promotes skill development by allowing students to practice tasks and learn from their mistakes.

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When students complete a project, SAM gives them a grade and a report that indicates what they did incorrectly. “I think most of us learn from our mistakes, so we give students five submissions. I have found that students learn best when they have more than one chance to correct an error and get it right.”

“We love how SAM grades projects, because it makes sure students complete the tasks correctly, and it catches things that we might not catch,” she says. “For instance, if they have a habit of hitting ‘enter’ multiple times to do a page break, SAM marks them wrong because they should use the ‘insert page break’ command.” SAM is ideal for Melinda’s busy students. “Students can put their kids to bed and then go online and do their work,” she says.

For Melinda’s students, convenience and engagement go hand in hand. “Electronic options make a difference because students can get to their work whenever they need to. Students are always close to a computer or tablet, so accessibility promotes engagement. And the MindTap Reader appeals to all kinds of learners. We’ve had students tell us that they listen to the book [using the MindTap text-to-speech app] while they drive to work. If they are visually impaired, they can hear the readings or adjust the font size.”

SAM also engages students by having a range of review resources instantly accessible. “If they miss something on a practice test, the study guide report [automatically generated by SAM at the instructor’s discretion for projects and exams] tells them what they missed and provides a direct link to training on that task. Students who want to learn have everything they need right there for them.”

Students submit their work to Seminole State’s Sakai learning management system (LMS). “We could easily see students’ grades in SAM, but we require them to go into our LMS and attach their reports for their projects and tests. This induces students to look at the reports and see what they did incorrectly, and, we hope, remediate.”

Seminole State’s retention over the past year has gone up about 10% in online classes, and Melinda gives SAM partial credit for being part of the college’s broad, focused effort. “We get a lot of positive feedback from students about how much they have learned, and I attribute that to SAM.”

By taking full advantage of SAM’s capabilities, Melinda’s students master the material and improve their grades. “Using SAM makes teaching Office Applications easier for me and is a great learning tool for the students,” she says.

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