Brittany Bright

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SAM's Hands-On Environment Boosts Computer Competency at University of Arkansas

Brittany Bright teaches two online computer competency courses at the University of Arkansas' Sam M. Walton College of Business. For as long as she has been there (since 2009) she has used SAM (Skills Assessment Manager) — an online learning environment for Microsoft® Office and computer concepts. Brittany has used another online product, but prefers SAM. "I find that SAM is more user friendly for both professors and students," she says. "I have also found that the content in SAM is much more in-depth and allows for a deeper assessment of student skills."

STUDENTS LEARN SKILLS ESSENTIAL FOR COLLEGE AND CAREER

All students at the university must demonstrate computer competency; new students are assessed and placed into one of two courses. The more basic course, designed to ensure that students have fundamental working knowledge about applications such as Microsoft® Word and Microsoft® Excel, relies on SAM 2013 trainings and assessments. The higher level course is a prerequisite for all other courses in the business school, and leverages the full scope of SAM — training, projects, assessments, and the MindTap Reader for *New Perspectives on Microsoft Office 2013*.

Whatever the future course path for her students, Brittany wants them to be prepared, and SAM is an able partner. "The computing course is the students' first online course, and they're typically freshmen. Students struggle the most with Excel, so we focus heavily on it, covering its layout, functions, and pivot tables. We also cover PowerPoint® because students will have to use it in presentations for various classes, and of course we cover Word."

Students work on SAM assignments in class to learn skills that they must demonstrate in other projects: They develop a fictional budget with income and expense fluctuations, record a PowerPoint presentation and upload it to Blackboard, and create a resume and cover letter (in Word) for companies that they have researched, and then do a mail merge.

SAM guides students and reinforces their learning as they observe, practice, train, and then apply their skills live in the application. "If they have gaps, they can typically work through them with SAM. Students enjoy the training assignments," says Brittany. "The MindTap Reader, with its multimedia and interactive activities, gives them additional resources to support the training assignments that I can create based based on chapters in the book."

CHALLENGES

- Students with varied computer backgrounds and skills require a learning environment that supports all proficiency levels.
- Gaining computer competency requires hands-on practice, repetition, and reinforcement.
- Instructors of large online courses don't have time to grade assignments in a timely manner and give all students the individualized help that they may need.

SOLUTIONS

- SAM 2013
- *New Perspectives on Microsoft Office 2013, First Course* by Ann Shaffer, Patrick Carey, June Jamrich Parsons, Dan Oja, and Kathleen T. Finnegan

RESULTS

- Working at their own pace, students build Microsoft Office and computer skills vital to their success in college and beyond.
- Having the ability to repeat and re-submit assignments allows students to practice tasks and learn from their mistakes, which promotes proficiency and retention.
- SAM logins remain active after students complete their computer competency course, allowing them to return to the program to brush up on skills at a later date.
- Instructors save time on grading, and can use SAM's flexible reporting tools to easily track student progress, identify trouble spots, and consequently focus teaching efforts where students need the most help.

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SAM ENABLES MORE PRODUCTIVE TEACHING — AND MORE EFFECTIVE LEARNING

SAM's easy-to-use interface gets instructors and students up and running quickly. Its streamlined course set-up process enables customized assignments that map to the learning objectives of the book in use. "Being able to quickly set up SAM assignments allows more time to focus on the students," says Brittany.

With as many as 1,000 students in the fall semester and about 400 in the winter and summer, it would be impossible for Brittany to grade assignments and provide individual feedback to all students in a timely manner. SAM solves this problem with hands-on, real-world practice that includes auto-grading and immediate, quality feedback that truly allows students to assess their skills. "Students can repeat a problem as many times as they need to in order to become familiar with the concepts. They can explore topic areas, whether familiar or new, and work at their own pace," she says. "SAM actually adapts to students' skill levels and helps them improve. They review the assignment and how to go about accomplishing it, then do a project and submit it. Instant feedback points them to areas in the MindTap Reader where they can get more information and practice if they need it. Once they make corrections, they can resubmit the project for a better grade." Brittany also appreciates the fact that SAM allows the university to keep students' logins active even after they leave the course, so they can return to the online solution for refreshers as needed.

SAM's flexible reporting tools, which track and report details of students' progress at the student or section level, save Brittany time and energy while providing helpful information. "SAM's reports are handy. I can easily go in, look at the questions on a test, and see immediately which questions are presenting problems or which are missed most frequently. That allows me to make sure I focus my attention where students need the most help."

Brittany believes that her students get a lot out of SAM and are able to apply computer concepts and skills more easily as a result. "SAM makes learning more fun for the students; they're not just sitting there reading a computer screen or textbook – they're interacting with the program."

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