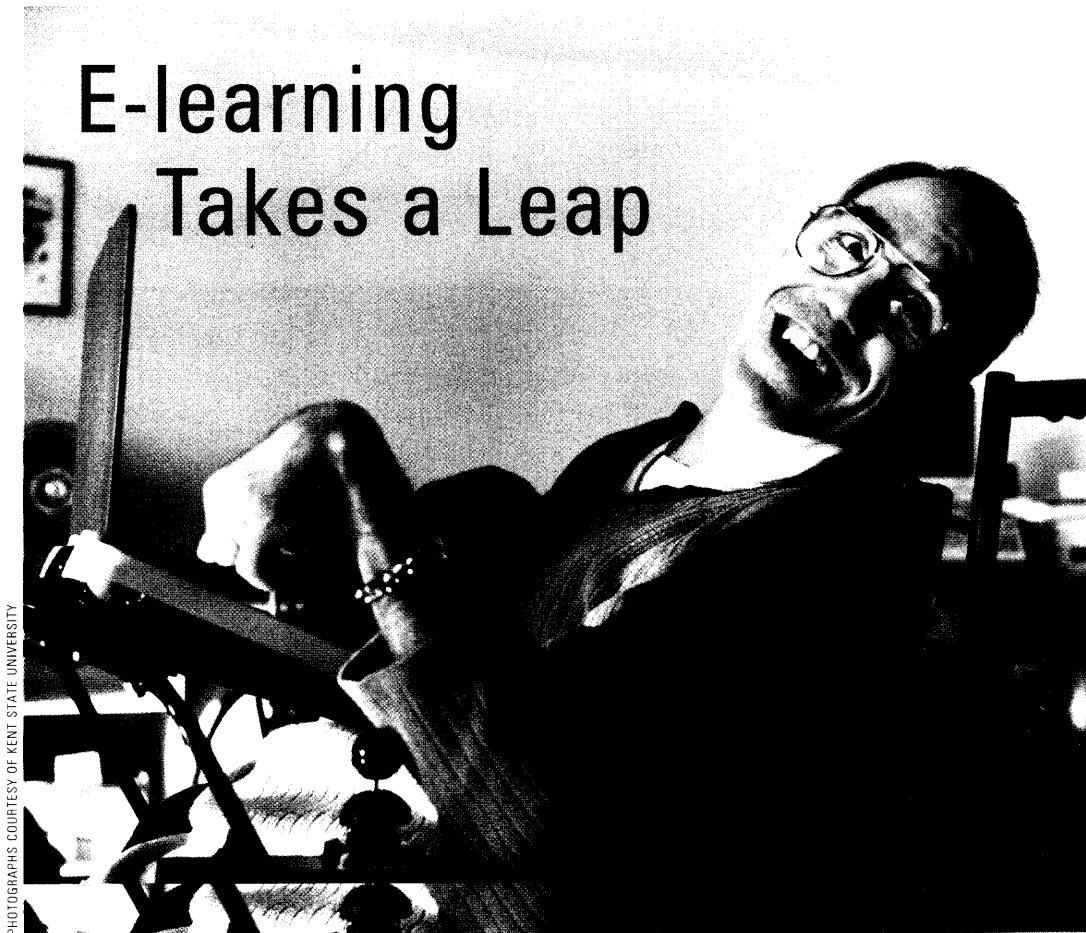


inventing the future

E-learning Takes a Leap



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Open enrollment: Anyone can attend courses offered in cyberspace classrooms.

Kent State prepares to launch an ingenious online master's degree designed for homebound caregivers – and people who can't see, hear or operate a mouse

BY ANTON ZUIKER

In the age of the Internet, a postgraduate education no longer needs to be tied to a physical campus. Three years ago, Professor Joe Drew found himself thinking about the kinds of individuals who, though unable to trek to Kent State University, where he teaches public administration, would nonetheless flock to a virtual campus.

The cyberspace classroom he imagined would include working public officials and nonprofit employees – such as police officers, social workers and managers of community agencies: those without the flexibility to enroll in university courses held during daytime hours. And then he

thought about other adults with full-time responsibilities, like women who leave the workforce to care for children or an elderly parent. For many, that gaping hole in their resume can become a chasm they will have difficulty bridging later.

“I imagined a caregiver being asked in a job interview, ‘What have you been doing for the last five years?’” says Drew, who speaks in language that is both formal and sensitive. “And she answers, ‘I’ve been caring for my family ... and earning my master’s degree online.’” Drew suggests she would have a better chance of winning that job and of advancing her career, regardless of the

lapse in work experience. And it’s that possibility, he decided, that Kent State, as a public university, has an obligation to nurture.

So in August, KSU will inaugurate Drew’s brainchild, an online-only degree program that leads to a master’s in public administration. In two years, students can earn a complete graduate degree – with all the same instruction and coursework found in a traditional program – without ever having set foot on campus.

Other universities offer online courses these days, and more and more are creating online-only degree programs, many of them targeted at full-time

workers. "They're looking at the busy people," says Drew. The Kent-MPA online degree program reaches out to an audience most Web sites forgot: the physically disabled. Drew's innovation was to create an online program that would also be available, not only to the homebound, but to the visually impaired, the deaf and hard of hearing, and people with limited fine motor skills. The Web is a highly visual medium, and the e-mail, chat room and discussion board functions that constitute most e-learning Web sites demand good vision and fingers that can type quickly. So Drew insisted that the Kent-MPA Web site be designed to accommodate special tools that allow disabled students to participate in online discussions, complete assigned readings on time, and hear taped lectures.

Of the ten or so online MPA programs (offered by, among others, the University of Colorado Denver and the University of Nebraska), only KSU's is designed to be accessible to persons with physical disabilities.

"It would be the first," says Michael Paciello, the author of *Web Accessibility for People with Disabilities* and award-winning creator of the Web Accessibility Initiative of the World Wide Web Consortium. "There's no university today that can functionally offer an online degree program that is totally accessible to individuals with physical disabilities.

"While it's not a new phenomenon," says Paciello, "it is a relatively new area that is getting increased publicity because of new federal and state laws." Drew has been boning up on the Initiative's guidelines as well as new regulations that affect federal Web sites. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 prescribed that all public facilities be barrier-free and otherwise handicapped-accessible. A recently revised section of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 more directly specifies how advanced technology must address disabilities, requiring that all federal agencies and departments ensure access to electronic and information technology. A 1996 U.S. Department of Justice policy confirmed that the ADA applies to Internet Web pages. And Kent State University, as a recipient of federal education and research grants, must

comply with Section 508 by an August deadline.

Drew has pushed hard to make this deadline and to do so in a detailed way that will produce a template for other online programs.

"I'm concerned about the isolation of the handicapped at home," he says. In one sense, Web-based courses may only increase their isolation, since these students might otherwise have been drawn to the campus, where they would no doubt have had other beneficial experiences. "But I believe the two years [spent online] will be well worth this tradeoff," says Drew, who is convinced that graduates of the Web-based program will more easily find work in nonprofit agencies and government (the principal employer of disabled persons). And this in turn will diminish the public's own isolation from the handicapped.



E-learning pioneer Joe Drew: addressing the isolation of caregivers and the handicapped

The new accessibility guidelines mandate higher standards for Web page design, such as labeling all graphics with alternative text, providing closed-captioned transcripts for all audio and video files, and keeping all navigation elements (links to other pages) grouped together. Web pages designed with the disabled in mind can seamlessly interact with adaptive technologies like automatic Braille readers, text-to-voice screen readers and head-pointing systems that allow persons who can't use their hands to manipulate a computer. In a pilot project, disabled students who enroll in the Kent-MPA program will be able to

borrow this equipment from the university, which will acquire it from the state bureaus of vocational rehabilitation and visual services.

The primary objective of an online course, says Drew, is to emulate and enhance a traditional classroom-based course while minimizing the impersonality of computer-based interactions. Drew's challenge has been to assure the university deans and his own colleagues that e-learning is precisely comparable to a traditional classroom course. "In my mind, it is a regular course, with the same levels of intensity, the same questions, the same lectures."

Kent State is heavily committed to implementing an accessible online program, says Drew, for two important reasons: to maintain a flexibility toward nontraditional students and out of a fear of losing students to other forward-looking institutions. Still, Drew says he has faced resistance, because many professors fear the move to the Web.

"Web-based programs diminish the 'sage on a stage' approach to university education," he says – an approach that "assumes and presumes that people can't learn any other way." Drew argues that the academic literature indicates that those students who are reticent to speak in a classroom setting are often more willing to speak up in an online discussion.

The Kent-MPA courses will be limited to between fifteen and twenty students, same as a classroom seminar course. Drew expects to enroll forty students each year, and the mix of students – agency workers, caregivers, disabled – will depend on the market for the degree, says Drew. "We'll see who comes in." Even sailors on an aircraft carrier could one day enroll in this program, says Drew, though initially the program will be marketed to northeast Ohio residents only.

This isn't for everyone, he warns. "It takes discipline to learn on your own and to become adept at using the computer interactively." But, thanks to KSU and Joe Drew, individuals once blocked from furthering their education will now have the opportunity.

Former editor Anton Zuiker covers the frontiers of technology for Northern Ohio Live.