

LSUS hopes online emphasis will INCREASE ENROLLMENT

Head count could nearly double, chancellor says

By Mary Nash-Wood

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It's worked for Northwestern State University, and LSU-Shreveport officials hope online programs can do the same to help their campus.

The urban university for more than 30 years has struggled to increase its enrollment through traditional classroom offerings.



Paul Sisson

And while its head count continues to bounce around 4,200 students, LSU's interim Chancellor Paul Sisson sees online programs as the key to raising enrollment to

more than 7,000 students.

In fact, LSUS saw total enrollment decrease by more than 400 this academic year as standards required for students to enter were raised. However, a bright spot came in a 7 percent increase in graduate student enrollment — where the majority is choosing to take online courses.



Art history major Jennifer Fleming, of Bossier City, works on a computer during a typography class in 2012 at LSU-Shreveport. VAL HORVATH DAVIDSON/THE TIMES

"We're trying to meet the needs of our different students, and we recognize that not all of our students are students alone," Sisson said. "They have jobs and families, and that often is a large concern when they consider going to school. We need to make it as affordable and as attractive as possible

for them to get a degree."

In recent months and years, Sisson said, LSUS emphasized growing and integrating online opportunities into courses. Currently, as many as 90 percent of LSUS's courses have an online component — whether that is fully out of class, a hybrid of on- and off-campus in-

struction or coursework required to be done online.

"Take our MBA program as a perfect example," Sisson said. "This is a program we've traditionally offered on campus and had great success, but we've never had the interest

See ONLINE, Page 12

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Online

Continued from Page 3

we've seen as when we announced we would begin offering an online MBA beginning in January."

Students are taking note. Courses offered online often are among the first classes to fill up each semester.

"When we've chosen to offer a course online, the interest is amazing," Sisson said. "And we've had some programs that have doubled the number of students taking a class or interested in taking a class just for the opportunity to take it online."

In LSUS's case, the school is staking its future on its mix of affordability and efficiency. Many of

its online programs are now offered in an accelerated eight-week format.

LSUS recently was cited by Affordable Colleges Online for its low-cost programs. That ease and flexibility is of sizable benefit to the students LSUS is attracting, said John Vassar, interim provost. "The key is flexibility, but we are also taking advantage of the faculty we have and utilizing their talents to reach students in a way they already know.

"We aren't trying to reinvest the wheel," Vassar said. "But we do need to find a way to teach students in a way they connect with, and online offers us an opportunity to do that."

But LSUS – like so many other schools – must

prove itself against many for-profit online colleges, many of which have long had a corner on the market when it comes to online degrees.

Opponents of for-profit distance learning have cited both quality and affordability as drawbacks to the online model. Yet over the past few years, traditional colleges and universities, including Northwestern State in Natchitoches and LSUS, with proven quality have made online programs accessible through discounted tuition and assistance programs.

"Offering students great online programs is only half the battle," said Dan Schuessler, founder and CEO of Affordable Colleges Online (AC Online). "The colleges on our

list offer students quality, flexibility and affordability."

That's where LSUS believes it has the clear advantage, but it will take local students buying into an online degree from LSUS to make the model a success.

"It's certainly an area of growth for not only LSUS, but we've seen it really take hold at schools like Northwestern," said Johnette McCrery Magnier, executive director of Shreveport-Bossier Business Alliance for Higher Education. "This is something in which schools like LSUS have been a little behind in getting off the ground. So it's encouraging not only to see LSUS expand its online programs, but to see students taking notice."