

University of Florida to Present Results of Online Learning Research

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The University of Florida (UF) has announced some early results from a nationwide education study that suggests that online learning and state-led virtual schools can be as effective as live classroom teaching methods.

The research resulted from a three-year \$600,000 grant by the AT&T Foundation -- the corporate philanthropy organization of AT&T Inc. Marshall Criser III, AT&T Florida president, today awarded UF education officials the second installment of the grant and toured the College of Education's computer lab.

UF researchers are developing standardized methods for evaluating the effectiveness of online education for students. State-led virtual schools in nine Southeastern states, including the Orlando-based Florida Virtual School (FLVS), are participating in the study, and online schools in other states have been invited to join the study.

"AT&T's investment in the University of Florida's online learning study will provide the tools to evaluate the success of new curriculum delivery methods," Criser said. "These techniques, coupled with the use of new technologies, will bring educational opportunities to everyone regardless of where the classroom is located."

UF and AT&T officials jointly announced the preliminary findings of the study in partnership with the virtual schools, which students reach from their home computers. UF researchers are now using their new evaluation tools to identify the best teaching practices and strategies for online instruction.

"Like some earlier studies, we're finding that learning through online schooling is effective," said Dr. Richard Ferdig, associate professor of education technology at UF's College of Education. "But the UF study moves beyond that, focusing more on when and how online instruction works most effectively. Teachers are finding innovative ways to engage students online, and virtual schools are demonstrating that they can be at least as effective as traditional, face-to-face instruction."

As a result of the latest installment of this grant, UF will increase the number of participating state-led virtual schools. UF has also hired seven doctoral and master's education students to assist in teaching and collecting and analyzing data from the additional participating schools. Researchers are currently reviewing data from virtual schools, including FLVS, in four of the largest participating states and will evaluate the remaining schools during the next two years.

UF's in-state partnering school in the study -- FLVS -- was created by the Florida Legislature in 1997 as part of the state's public education system. FLVS is the Internet-based school for some 35,000 middle school and high school students. "Our aim is to provide a comprehensive set of tools for regional virtual schools to improve the quality of online instruction and student performance," Dr. Ferdig said. "The intent is not to replace live, face-to-face schooling but to provide access to reliable online education options for students with limited access."

The researchers' e-learning tool kit includes a new Web site, <http://vs.education.ufl.edu/>, that serves as a national clearinghouse for all teachers and schools involved in Internet-based education. Virtual schools afford researchers access to saved online data that can be used to compare the effectiveness of a variety of approaches to education, enrollment and student achievement.