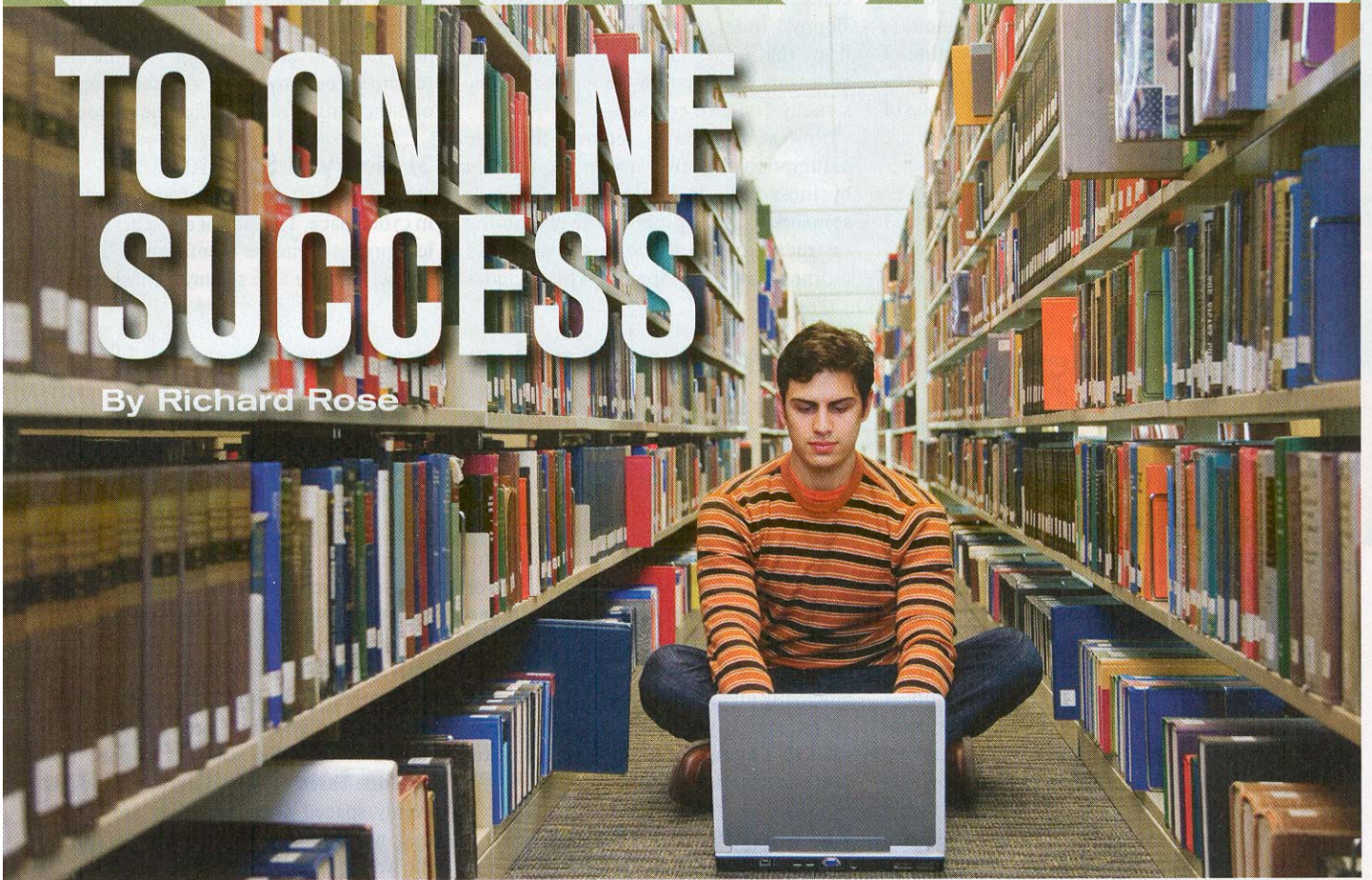# 6 EASY STEPS
TO ONLINE SUCCESS

By Richard Rose

Against his better instincts, an educator at West Texas A&M University shares his school's recipe for developing a successful online learning program.

IT'S HARD KEEPING PROMISES. Thirty years ago I promised myself I'd lose 30 pounds, with no progress to date. I resolved never to get annoyed at the puppy, with limited success. And I absolutely swore I would never write one of those "Six Easy Steps" articles, for one simple reason: Never write what you don't like to read. I am fundamentally averse to tackling complicated issues with a one-size-fits-all approach. ▸

But I can't help myself. The online Master of Education program in instructional design and technology at my school, **West Texas A&M University**, has more than doubled its admissions during the last two years, even as similar programs nationwide have struggled. This is because we consistently honor six very simple practices in every course in the program. During my career as a senior instructional designer at Microsoft and Boeing, these practices were universal for online instruction. I have been shocked to learn how many online college courses incorporate none of them. So, with apologies, here we go:

1) Clean up Your Act!

Every new technology begins with a period of permissiveness. When typewriters were new, people expected spelling and gram-

kindergartener had thrown them together. Every professor struggled just to get something usable on the web. So what if there were a dozen different fonts, text sizes, and bulleting styles on the same page?

Marshall McLuhan, a prominent professor and media analyst, once proclaimed that "The medium is the message," and he was right. Students will not respect your content if its presentation is awkward or sloppy. Today, universities and design firms that understand the importance of appearance are setting the bar for professionally designed courses.

Professors need to get over the stale assumption that they are in the content business and its appearance online is somebody else's problem. Every online instructor needs to become a specialist in online course development. This includes

single source of positive comments on my course-evaluation forms. Students' gratitude for a timely response to their administrative issues and technical problems is overwhelming. It is the central pillar of the program's reputation, and the reason why current students refer a healthy number of new students to the program every year.

I don't always have the answer in 24 hours. An e-mail reply need only say that the request has been received, steps have been taken to address it, and that the matter should be resolved in a certain number of days. This always satisfies the customer.

3) Plenty of Structure

Online students are often afraid of drifting in cyberspace. The lack of a teacher's physical presence makes them wonder if they are going to be able to stay on task. I give

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mar errors in typed letters. After all, it was difficult to make corrections, and people knew their correspondents would understand. When e-mail first emerged on handheld devices, people added "Sent from my BlackBerry" to excuse brevity and errors— no one was expected to be an expert two-thumb typist. Eventually, as technology and expertise improve, the tolerance evaporates. Typed letters must be accurate today, and the standards for text messages are sure to go up over time.

The same evolutionary timeline applies to online courseware. The earliest web-based college courses often looked as if a

learning how to use tools such as Photoshop, Fireworks, Illustrator, InDesign, or their equivalents. By tapping just 20 percent of these products' functionality, you can develop 90 percent of your courses efficiently and attractively. The remaining 10 percent is what you can legitimately refer to a computer guru in your institution's instructional design center.

2) Answers in 24 Hours

E-mail is the lifeblood of online teaching. Every student e-mail is entitled to a response within 24 hours. I clear my e-mail queue three times a day. This is the greatest

my graduate students a choice of taking courses structured around deadlines or at their own pace. The deadline-based option has an assignment due every Sunday night, whereas self-paced students can turn in work anytime during the semester (only the midterm and final projects have due dates). Almost all students choose the deadline-based option. Without a series of evenly spaced deadlines, they are afraid they won't have the self-discipline to get the work done.

The best way to increase each student's comfort level is with lots of clear structure. The weekly format for the online study guides is the same for all 10 courses in the two-year rotation, so students don't need to figure out how each new course works. Instead, they can dive directly into the content.

4) Formal Phone Conferences at Midterm

Every student has one formal appointment with the program chairman each semester. Since the majority of students live more

than 50 miles from campus, these are done by phone. I post a table of available days and times using Google Docs, and each student claims an open slot.

Everyone looks forward to these 30- to

nology can't do well is to make maximum use of what it does exceedingly well, such as providing infinite rewind capacity. Each student in my courses gets about 15 hours of instructor-generated video dem-

6) The Perpetual Best in Show Contest

After students hand in projects, I post the best work in the LMS for all to admire. I also archive the semester's best projects

The only way to make up for what technology can't do well is to make maximum use of what it does exceedingly well, such as providing infinite rewind capacity.

60-minute appointments, including me. Sometimes we discuss a research project that the class is working on. We always talk about the student's life, how his work is going, workplace challenges, and his plans after graduation. Then we discuss what is or is not working for the student in the program, and what adjustments might help.

These sessions are indispensable to the growth and evolution of the program. They have been the source of many innovations that otherwise would never have been considered. Seminal ideas for totally new courses have also come from these sessions. The appointments are popular with students, too, most of whom are more comfortable sharing via phone than e-mail. Don't be surprised if you come away from these interviews thinking, "I had no idea how cool these people are!"

5) Do Online What Online Does Best

Though considerable smoke is often blown around the issue, even the most ardent supporters of online courses will admit in private that online is a compromise between certain elements of quality and economic reality. It brings in tuition-paying students who otherwise would not make it to campus. It allows professors to teach more students than could fit in the biggest available room. It saves on the heating and air-conditioning bills. Still, no amount of e-mail or computer networking can take the place of face-to-face interaction between student and professor, or replicate the experience of a group of students settled in a circle in the library, enjoying each other's company while they hammer through a knotty problem set.

The only way to make up for what tech-

onstrations. The videos go far beyond what the textbook offers. Students tell me they watch these videos three and four times each. Some students like a sneak preview before they try the work themselves. Others watch after they have done the work to verify that they did it the most direct way. Still others work along with the videos every step of the way.

online for future classes. When a student is struggling for an idea or to understand what a project should look like, it often helps to give him a peek at some of the best work from previous semesters. **CT**

Richard Rose is the program chairman for instructional technology and design at West Texas A&M University.