Distance Learning Mentor Initiative

College of the Mainland
funded under TWC Contract 2915AEL002
Final Report for Period: 8/31/2015 to 9/30/2016

Summary

The Distance Learning (DL) Mentor Initiative afforded the four participating colleges mentoring from the College of the Mainland and the funding to test strategies and tools for which they otherwise lacked the resources. Hiring and purchasing technology consumed over half the project period and the implementation of technology was ongoing as of September 30, 2016. Despite challenges, there was considerable promise across the board in number of student participants, hours of engagement, and student progress. With adequate funding and incentives in place over a reasonable span of 3-5 years, a program would see a strong return on investment from the resources invested in DL.

SECTION I: (7.3.1) PROJECT DESCRIPTION

> 1. Describe the original vision of the project, including participating mentee organizations and the activities that were planned.

The result of the DL Mentor Initiative for all the participating colleges was a dramatic increase in DL participation both in number of participants and time on task for those participants. DL students were 20% more likely to have moved up at least one level.

It was the intent of College of the Mainland (COM) to build capacity and to improve the performance of Adult Education and Literacy (AEL Distance Learning (DL) initiatives in Texas by mentoring four (4) Texas community colleges:
- Alamo Colleges (Alamo)
- Houston Community College System (HCC)
- Lone Star College System (LSC)

- San Jacinto College District (SJC)

Other strategies specific to colleges included:

Alamo
1. Explore the use of wireless devices by students
2. Expand integration of DL strategies into Integrated Education and Training (IET) and Transition (CSA) classes

COM
- Expand DL enrollment
- Increase hour intensity
- Decrease face time in standard classes (due to DL offset)
- Explore other methods for increasing direct time with DL strategies.

HCC
- Use hybrid (blended) classes that require DL for class completion.

LSC
- Use hybrid (blended) classes.
- Develop online curriculum for ABE/GED and ESL classes.
- Use hybrid (blended) classes for ABE/GED and ESL.
- Increase DL enrollment.

SJC
- Design curriculum, training and a new structure for delivering instruction.

The DL Mentor Initiative played a significant role in providing the 2016 Texas Career Pathways Series which was a five day conference in Galveston featuring three topical areas: 1) Distance Learning Initiative, 2) Career Pathways Expansion, and 3) THECB Accelerate Texas. There were over 230 professional staff and teachers in attendance.

SECTION II: (7.3.2 – 7.3.4) PROJECT DATA

1. Total number of DL students served

   The 5 partner colleges served 1,184 students over the course of the July 2015- June 2016 year. DL participation increased from 2014-15 to 2015-16:
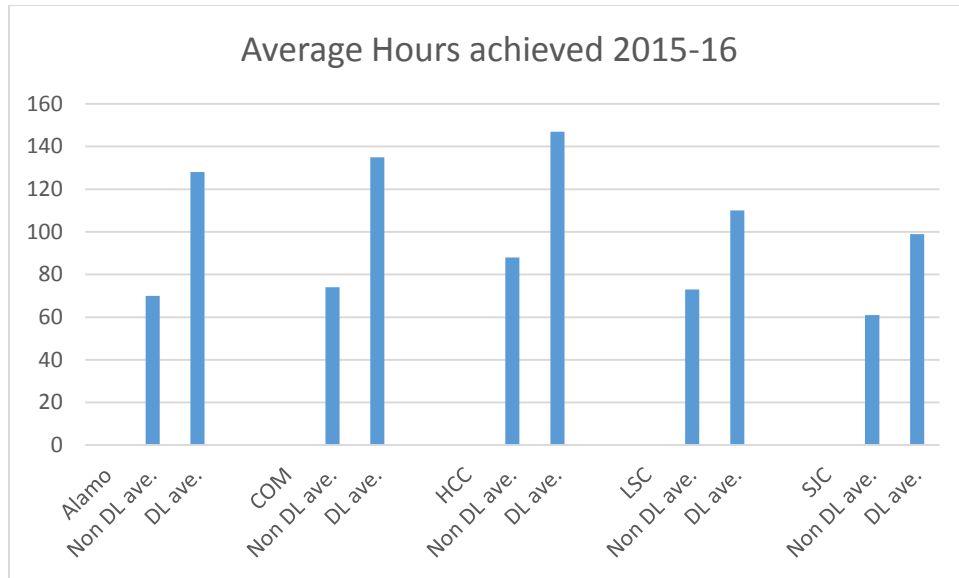
	Proxy	No Proxy	% w/Proxy
Alamo			
2014-15	2	429	1%
2015-16	255	413	38%
COM			
2014-15	197	1,005	16%
2015-16	385	974	28%
HCC			
2014-15	18	8,275	<1%
2015-16	296	10,445	3%
LSC			
2014-15	19	1,895	1%
2015-16	87	1,793	5%
SJC			
2014-15	99	524	16%
2015-16	161	562	22%

DL Participation (Head Count)
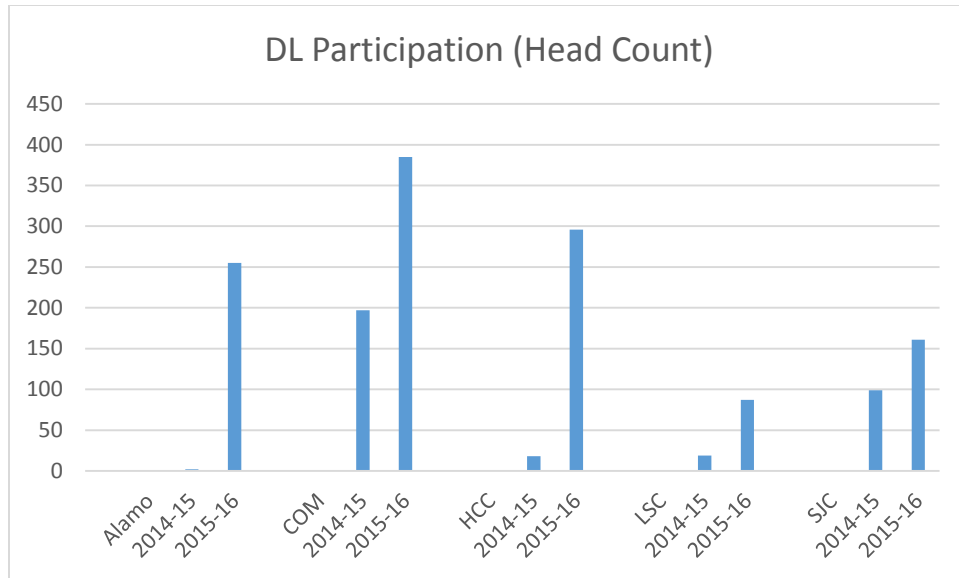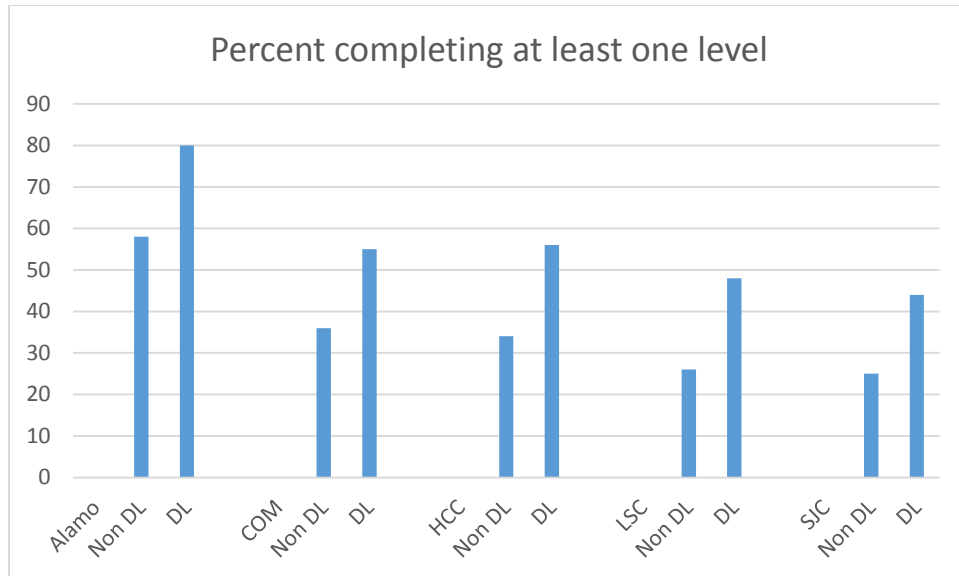
2. Total number of DL students advancing a minimum of one level

Across the five partner colleges, DL students achieved more hours when compared to non-DL students:

College	Ave Hours/year	Change
Alamo		
Non-DL	70	
DL	128	+58
COM		
Non-DL	74	
DL	135	+61
HCC		
Non-DL	88	
DL	147	+59
LSC		
Non-DL	73	
DL	110	+37
SJC		
Non-DL	61	
DL	99	+38

Average Hours achieved 2015-16

683 students moved up at least one level. DL participants were more likely to complete at least one level:

College	% completing at least one level	change
Alamo		
Non-DL	58%	
DL	80	+22%
COM		
Non-DL	36%	
DL	55	+19%
HCC		
Non-DL	34%	
DL	56	+22%
LSC		
Non-DL	26%	
DL	48	+22%
SJC		
Non-DL	25%	
DL	44	+19%

Percent completing at least one level

SECTION III: (7.3.5 – 7.3.9) PROJECT IMPACT

1. Improvements to the performance of AEL and DL - All colleges had the opportunity to implement DL software which in all cases required both teacher training and student orientation. Preliminary teacher and student response was encouraging. Alamo and COM initiated programs to loan students tablet computers equipped with data packages, allowing use anywhere served by Verizon wireless. The issue of student digital literacy emerged as a limiting factor and remained a central theme throughout all levels of implementation.

2. Improvements in DL capacity - Each college increased DL capacity through the addition of Burlington English, Aztec, and PLATO. Section II demonstrates the increase in DL students at each college. All agree that the mere availability of DL options is not sufficient to increase capacity. Training, support, and curriculum development are essential.

3. Project goals achieved during the grant period - Although there were consistent gains across the board particularly in the percentage of student progressing a level, participation numbers came about toward the end of the year. The DL Mentor Initiative enabled programs to try out new technology and methods. Each is expecting greater results in the 2016-17 fiscal year. COM hoped for a 30% participation rate and achieved slightly over 28%. This was up from 16% the year before. The goal of 10% proxy hours was not met at 7% , BUT is currently running at 14% this year to date (16-17). It's expected that the other colleges will experience similar gains.

4. Obstacles encountered – Listed:
   a. Staff hiring and training was not complete until early 2016, which reduced the project period from 12 months to 6 months and in some cases less.
   b. All aspects of tool and program implementation took longer to plan and accomplish than we projected.
   c. Burlington English required considerable specific training for teachers and orientation for students.
   d. Use of online tools required a level of digital literacy that was not initially considered.
   e. Tablet computers were not received by Alamo and COM until September, 2016, thus having no measureable impact in the 2015-16 year.
   f. COM had recently installed a protected password program campus wide which necessitated a change in the Adult Education access process. Over half student user issues were related to logging in.
   g. All college had facility issues such as the availability of campus lab and the Burlington English requirement of a download to each workstation.
   h. Some teachers were not encouraging of DL opportunities and were reluctant to become familiar with the tools and software. Ideally, teachers will encourage student participation and provide the initial level of problem solving. Too often, they disengaged and awaited a DL specialist or coordinator to address the concern.
   i. Incentives for participation and disincentives for not participating became relevant, thus, access and the ability to navigate an online tool was not sufficient to generate achievement.

5. Positive outcomes – Across all colleges, students were positive and found their DL experience beneficial. More chose to work at home than we expected. Teachers who were actively involved, used the DL tools to "individualize" out of class activity. The measureable improvements will be forthcoming. Students became savvier with technology as they spent more time online.

SECTION IV: (7.3.10) BEST PRACTICES

1. Best practices implemented during project period

Alamo – Established best practices for:
1. Enrollment procedures'
2. Data entry
3. Program selection
4. Weekly student usage reports
5. Device distribution
6. Budget Management

COM – learned and implemented the following during the program period:

1. Burlington English could only effectively be introduced to students individually or in small groups of up to 4 students per instructor.
    a. Because the software involved a wide variety of activities, it behooves us to use of variety of common activities and actions during orientation.
2. A prepared and positive teacher is critical for DL students to persevere.
3. ==Contrary to our initial assumption, the majority of students prefer to work from home. This created a need for home support which was not initially considered.==
4. A basic level of digital literacy is necessary and cannot be remedied during orientation.
    a. Low to moderate digital literacy is a prerequisite for DL success
5. Teachers must be comfortable with the software before they refer to it or use it in class.

HCC-

1. Students who test higher were encouraged to use DL as a customized learning plan.
2. Customized handouts were produced through a mail merge to generate and distribute login information.
3. Students and teachers were trained together
4. Students had the opportunity to practice using the software before they were expected to use it off campus/at home.

LSC-

1. Included network login, college email, and other student skills in the orientation process
2. Conduct DL orientation and AEL orientation separately.

SJC –

1. Build an online community for DL learners.
2. Provide multiple training opportunities for both students and teachers.
3. Teachers who have a better understanding of distance learning and the blended curriculum develop student enthusiasm for DL.

SECTION V: (7.3.10) AREAS NEEDING IMPROVEMENT

1. Recommendations for curriculum selection/implementation

- Aztec's data management system is cumbersome and slow. Reports often must be repeatedly run and consistently include students not in the database. If they could fix one thing, it would be organizing student lists in alpha order by last name.
- Aztec could allow teachers to build a curriculum for individual students by moving module, lessons, drills, etc.
- ==Burlington requires a download for its speech engine on every device. Outside agencies are reluctant and poorly equipped to make an exception for the download which must also be available for regular updates.==
- Teachers struggle to integrate DL Programs in to their class curriculums
- Colleges must consider the technology access needs of the AEL programs.

- Online work must be included and expected as a part of the class.

2. Recommendations for future direction in training, implementation and evaluation of Texas AEL DL

- Teachers require training specific to the software they will be using in advance of teaching their assigned class. Classroom teachers are the key to outside of class productivity. They:
    - Must have some experience with the packages
    - Must be comfortable with the technology
    - Must integrate the package into their curriculum
    - Should monitor their students' progress (weekly)
    - Should refer to online resources in class
    - Be able to assign homework within the packages.
    - Be the first line of problem solving with student technology problems
- DL teachers should be exempt from the 19.5 hours per week limit.
- Include an introduction to DL software as a logical follow-up to DL Module 1.
    - Also discuss curriculum implementation.

3. Other recommendations - Programs should plan on a multi-year commitment of resources to realize the benefits of DL. The difficulty and time involved in hiring staff and buying specialized technology took from 6-8 months, before implementation could begin. All colleges experienced measurable growth.