

# Carolina Hosts First Meeting of Distance Learning Advisory Board

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Distance Learning Specialist

In July, Carolina hosted the first meeting of its Distance Learning Advisory Board.

The board met for two days at the beautiful O. Henry Hotel in Greensboro, North Carolina. Board members were drawn from colleges and universities as well as accrediting organizations.

They discussed the challenges faced in teaching online science, best practices for distance learning, and ways for us to move toward being a leader in providing distance learning science solutions. They toured our shipping and kitting facility, saw painted lady butterflies and tarantulas in the Live Biology department, and visited the lab where we produce mounted slides.

The board identified several key trends.

1. **Course completion is a huge concern in distance education.** Participants identified reducing student frustration as key to keeping retention rates up. Strategies for reducing frustration included:

- Reduce the number of clicks required to obtain course material
- Enable materials to be viewed on multiple platforms
- Give clear instructions for labs with procedural videos at key steps

#### How Carolina helps

We integrate as much material as possible into a customer's learning management system. Our manuals (PDFs) are viewable on multiple platforms. Procedural videos are available to assist students, and our

customer service team is ready to help with any issues with orders.

#### Plans for the future

We continue to identify steps where additional videos or training would benefit students. Ongoing upgrades to our digital platform should soon allow instructors to add digital materials and videos to their learning management systems while maintaining licensing agreements.

2. **Interactivity enhances student engagement, as does context.** Engaging students with interactive materials, both physical and digital, helps to keep them focused and moving forward.

#### How Carolina helps

The lab kits themselves are an interactive material. Students set up experiments, propose hypotheses, and record results.

#### Plans for the future

We're actively searching for digital simulations to enhance our investigations.

3. **Assessment needs to be able to provide evidence of outcomes.** The advisory board sees a trend toward competency-based assessments. Students need to be able to demonstrate skills and knowledge—especially in the distance learning environment where fact recall is more challenging to assess without expensive proctoring. Immediate feedback for the student is preferred.

### **How Carolina helps**

We design lab manuals with instructions to assist students in demonstrating mastery of lab activities. Instructors are provided with assessment questions that are oriented more toward comprehension than recall.

### **Plans for the future**

We continue to expand our assessment resources for instructors, including introducing alternative assessment modalities.

4. **Data analytics are an important tool for administrators and accreditors.**

Other metrics are less technical but no less useful. Members of the board from accrediting agencies stressed the importance of being able to estimate and document contact hours.

### **How Carolina helps**

We test our lab manuals to give accurate estimates for the time it takes to complete lab activities.

### **Plans for the future**

Many learning management systems incorporate sophisticated analytics. Working toward a single sign-on (SSO) option for our digital resources will simplify the process of gathering data, keeping it all on a single platform.

5. **Having a choice is extremely important.**

The ability to tailor kits to meet learning objectives, and keep face-to-face courses and distance learning courses comparable, was of the highest importance to board members.

### **How Carolina helps**

We base our distance learning kits on choice. All schools, regardless of the size of their kits or their projected enrollment, can create the courses they want from our extensive list of investigations. As a leading supplier of science materials, we can respond quickly to the needs of individual programs.

## About the Author

Julie Stubbs holds a BS in Ecology, Evolution, and Conservation Biology and a BA in the Plan II Program from the University of Texas at Austin. She earned her MS in Marine Science at the Virginia Institute of Marine Science. She has spent time in research labs developing molecular diagnostics for several diseases and taught biology at Thomas Nelson Community College and environmental science at DeVry University.

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