



### **Does a Fiscal Austerity Measure Mitigate Academic Excellence?**

Sustaining academic excellence in lab science classes amid fiscal austerity measures is a formidable task. With existing and imminent national and local fiscal programs dwindling and impinging upon the limited academic resources for learning communities, it is time to focus on the impact of these actions on academic excellence in lab science classes. Organized thinking and assessment are warranted and should involve everyone affiliated with instruction. Specifically, educators, administrators, and students should seek and ultimately find amicable resolutions to sustaining academic excellence in lab science classes.

Specific changes in financial aid must take into consideration that even a moderate increase in tuition and fees leads to a drop in enrollment—a trend now familiar in both two-year and four-year colleges. With the increasing costs associated with textbooks, lab manuals, and additional academic materials, students are deprived of resources to meet the larger collection of financial obligations required to achieve their scholastic goals.

Additionally, lab sciences instructors must comply with budget constraints in the purchase of animal tissue specimens for dissections, computer-simulated software, and instrumentation for laboratory exercises. Preset budget limits cannot address or meet the increasing costs of lab supplies for lab science and create a serious dilemma: How can we achieve a balance between need and affordability? Traditionally, securing funding through peer-review grant processes, from the National Science Foundation, or from a private charitable foundation presents a puzzling challenge to administrators and instructors.

Should enrollments continue to increase in lab science classes, lab supplies will not be sufficient to meet the required course objectives and core curriculum. Once the allocated amount is spent, procuring the supplies to sustain the standards in the curriculum is impossible in current budget cycles. A key to resolving the situation is to remain focused, patient, and open to alternatives. One alternative is to consider the opportunities afforded by Generation X students, flooded with iPads, iPods, iPhones, personal laptop computers, and social networking (e.g. Facebook, MySpace, blogs, texting, screen streams), all operating at increasing network speeds. These alternative opportunities include potential online-based learning and testing as viable sources to incorporate into problem resolution.

Excellent online resources for science classes, including Human Anatomy & Physiology, General Zoology, and Microbiology, include: [www.webmd.com/](http://www.webmd.com/); [www.mayoclinic.com/](http://www.mayoclinic.com/); [www.mdconsult.com/](http://www.mdconsult.com/); [www.getbodysmart.com/](http://www.getbodysmart.com/); [www.mhhe.com/sem/apr3/](http://www.mhhe.com/sem/apr3/); Interactions: Exploring the Functions of the Human Body, 3.0; Practice Anatomy Lab™ (PAL™) 3.0; Power Phys CD-ROM; PhysioEx™ 9.0: Laboratory Simulations in Physiology.

Having viable measures and means to validate and verify the identity of the online user of the resources offers a secure and affordable alternative. In addition, collaborative learning is an effective method for overcoming the financial strain of increasing costs of books and user fees. A fiscal austerity measure need not negatively affect academic excellence in lab science education, provided the adoption of online resources and easy-to-share lab science simulation exercise software are provided by publishers.

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Suanne D. Roueche, Editor  
August 31, 2012, Vol. XXXIV, No. 16  
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*Innovation Abstracts* is published weekly following the fall and spring terms of the academic calendar, except Thanksgiving week, by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD), Department of Educational Administration, College of Education, 1 University Station, D5600, Austin, Texas 78712-0378, (512) 471-7545, Email: [abstracts@nisod.org](mailto:abstracts@nisod.org)