Using Microsoft Office Specialist Certification to Enhance Employment Opportunities for College Students

According to Don Hutchinson, Secretary of Economic Development for Louisiana, the current challenge of our new economy is the development of a knowledge-based workforce. In Louisiana's Vision 2020, sustained economic development is said to depend primarily upon technology; this means we must focus on developing a technologically trained workforce or we will be left behind. Responsibility of this workforce has been given partially to institutions of higher learning.

The focus of this paper is strategies used at a rural public university to develop and assess competencies in the use of technology, specifically in the use of Microsoft Word, Excel and PowerPoint among college students. Not only must students become competent in the use of these products but we must also find a way to demonstrate that competency to potential employers.   The primary focus of our work was the best way to accomplish both of those goals.

For several years, students have been able to take COMP 1020, a course designed to introduce them to the basics in Word, Excel and PowerPoint. This course was designed to fulfill the technology component of the university's mission statement. In the past, the students followed a set of structured tutorials and practice assignments during the semester. Using conventional testing methods (both knowledge-based and application based), a grade was assigned and credit given. One of the problems with these past student assessment methods was that potential employers had no way to confirm the student's competency. What exactly did a "B" in the course indicate? Was the student able to produce a document using advanced word processing skills? Could the student use formulas and create charts?

In 2001, we began using the electronic supplement Skills Assessment Managers (SAM) available through Course Technology.   This supplement offered more structured tutorial assignments and created a way for instructors to more accurately assess each student's ability to use office software. However, this still left the problem of evaluating competency outside the classroom. What was needed was a way for our students to demonstrate software competency using a widely recognized and respected standard.

Microsoft Office Specialist (MOS) testing was added as a component to the course in 2002 along with a Training Online Manager (TOM), also available through Course Technology.   Students could take the MOS exam and obtain Microsoft certification in Word. They were encouraged to do so but the certification was not a mandatory component of the COMP 1020 course at that time.

Many students did not immediately recognize the importance or value of MOS certification. So, in 2003, students were required to take the MOS Word Core exam and their score was part of their final grade for the course. A strong correlation evolved between scores on the MOS test and performance on other course requirements. MOS certification provides employers with strong evidence of a potential employee's competency in the use of the Microsoft Office software and enhances the likelihood of employment.

Despite our efforts students found the MOS Word Core exam difficult and the pass rate, although higher than the average MOS testing center, was still not at the level we had hoped to achieve. As a result an additional electronic supplement in the form of

test simulation software was added to support the students in their preparation for the MOS testing.

In the Spring of 2004 students currently enrolled in COMP 1020 were surveyed regarding their opinions of MOS exam requirements.   Students were asked to give feedback on various course components and their value in preparing for MOS certification. Students were asked to rate the importance of SAM/TOM, textbook tutorials, test simulation, course instruction, and previous experience. Demographic data about students were collected so we could disaggregate results by gender, classification, previous software experience, and/or traditional and non-traditional students.

The survey will also be conducted during the summer and fall of 2004. Preliminary results indicate that the most valuable components according to most students were course instruction and test simulation. The results of the surveys will be a factor in deciding the future direction of the COMP 1020 course. Data results from student surveys will be presented in detail.