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FOR EDUCATION SUPPLEMENTTelecollege brings world to distance education students

Sitting in a blue velvet chair, the psychology professor begins her lecture. The next thing her students see are pink flamingos from Africa and then children having a tea-party in a local daycare centre. Later, a North American expert on child development appears before them....

It can all happen within an hour through the Telecollege courses produced by Wilfrid Laurier University. For 10 years, Telecollege Productions Inc. has produced videos as an integral part of the courses provided through the university's distance education program.

And although the 12, hour-long videos used in one course are produced from the campus studios in Waterloo, they take their students around the world in their study of business, philosophy, sociology, psychology and other subjects.

This year, eight of the 24 courses offered through Telecollege were produced by Laurier.

Last year, Telecollege had 1,633 enrolments in its courses available for homeviewing through WLU or the Kitchener public library and on television through the TVOntario and cable TV channels.

Cliff Bilyea, WLU's director of part-time and continuing education, said Telecollege is an ideal way to earn university credits in the convenience of your own home.

"It gives you the flexibility to balance work, family and other commitments."

The courses have evolved from the "talking-head" format in which a professor simply lectures on camera to sophisticated productions.

The visuals have included role plays, footage borrowed from the U.S. Pentagon and NASA and Telecollege's own taping from a mental institution to city slums and university research facilities.

Earlier this summer, Telecollege interviewed six world-renowned scientists at an international conference on the environment in Toronto. The material will be used in an upcoming production of an introductory geography course.

Telecollege also travels throughout Canada and the United States and also obtains footage through co-operative arrangements with other universities.

From an outline submitted by a professor, an academic advisory committee makes recommendations on course content and potential interview subjects.

"If we're talking about a particular research finding, we try to get that researcher himself," said academic co-ordinator Dale Anderson.

While the crew tapes interviews and seeks out other visuals including computer-generated graphics, academic integrity takes priority.

Anderson uses material provided by the professor, course texts and her own research to prepare a script for the video.

Then the host professor's portion is taped -- often in different settings and using props appropriate to course content.

Director and technical producer Werner Lindschinger said the crew offers professors as much coaching as possible. "It's different when you have to sit in a studio and talk to a lense instead of a classroom full of students."

Later, hours of tape must be edited to use in the hour-long segment and then finishing touches such as titles and soundtrack are added.

Telecollege also prepares a resource binder which guides students through their studies and integrates the video and texts.

The production of one course takes a crew of five people about 15 months to complete. Over 10 years, about 75 faculty members have participated in the production of 24 courses.

Telecollege students also participate in two teleconferences with the professor and other students. As well, they are able to telephone the professor at any time with specific questions.

About 88 per cent of Telecollege students complete their courses.

Students pay \$167 for a half-credit course and \$324 for a full-credit course, plus \$20 for resource material and the cost of any required texts.