Philip Collins wins Excellence in Digital Learning Award

Collins is one of the pioneers of digital learning at UCI. His early efforts are helping make the current shift to online learning happen.
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n a recorded demonstration, Prof. Collins explains how optical fibers are used in telecommunications. Students in Collins' online courses get to see physics demonstrations far more clearly than is possible in a large lecture hall.

Picture Credit:
Phillip Collins

About ten years ago, teaching courses online was still in its infancy, and many people saw the practice as mostly "gimmicky," explains Professor Philip Collins of the UCI Department of Physics & Astronomy. But that didn't stop Collins from moving his classes online long before most others followed suit. He has worked to improve online course delivery ever since, and for his ongoing efforts Collins recently received the Excellence in Digital Learning Award from UCI.

"In 2009, an online class might be recorded lectures and course assignments," says Collins, a physicist who teaches, among other classes, the university's introductory physics courses online. "But content is only part of a good course. We've spent the past decade improving online instruction and making the best ideas and tools available to more faculty."

When he’s not teaching, Collins spends his time researching the properties of atomic-scale electronics and their practical uses. “We’re trying to shrink DNA sequencing technology to a single chip,” he explains, “so that one day DNA ‘fingerprinting’ can be done instantly by doctors at a clinic or police at a crime scene.”.

Collins brings the same inventive attitude to his teaching. “My other hat is as a teacher and an educator, and being one of the pioneers in online teaching is a lot like testing new concepts in the laboratory,” Collins says.

Collins’ ongoing experimentation with online teaching practices helped pave the way for the rest of campus to make a smooth transition to online teaching in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. Nowadays, Collins is guiding other faculty in their moves to online teaching, while continuing to experiment with his own courses. “The challenge,” he says, “is always how to help students and teaching assistants engage with each other in meaningful ways.”

“With the right design, I do believe an online course can be as good as an offline course,” Collins says.

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