SAINT LEO UNIVERSITY'S RENAISSANCE
MIXING ON-LINE, BLENDED COURSES, GAMING TO TEACH AMERICAN POLITICS, INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
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ABSTRACT

Saint Leo University since 1997 has enhanced teaching excellence and standardization at both its traditional campus and non-traditional Distance Centers by evolving new academic technologies for On-line, Blended and traditional courses. In three cycles (1997-2005, 2005-2015 and 2015-now), parallel models of academic experimentation developed new on-line technologies (with platform provider BISK) for both non-traditional students at its Centers and attract new students to its 8-weeks on-line courses, while using audio-visual technologies and standardization in campus classes. By 2005, the switch to a university-owned on-line platform (Learning Studio leased from Peterson) standardized both on-line and campus teaching with 8-weeks Master Syllabi and Internet resources for campus and Blended-courses, while redeveloping university-owned on-line courses-content (PIE, outcomes, assessments). Since 2015, on-line teaching shifted to a new university-owned on-line platform D2L and redeveloped courses, while imposing D2L also on-campus as multi-use skeleton platform for administration (grades, assessments), permanent content-loading and Blended-courses. Finally, while Business courses routinely apply Gaming to Blended-courses, since 2015 this was also introduced in some Political Sciences courses to teach U.S. Presidential Elections and International Affairs.


THE eLEARNING REVOLUTION IN THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

Since the 1990s, the Internet-driven technological revolution together with exponential public use of professional and public computer networks at rapidly lowering costs, has spurred the parallel fast growth of on-line e-Learning education first in Western educational systems (U.S.-Canadian, European and Japanese) and later also in the Third World among more advanced Developing nations. Such distance-Learning technology operates through faster dissemination of modern educational contents to free national education from the constraints of traditional physical classrooms and teaching techniques to reach students anywhere (urban, local, rural, regional or international) through new “Open” Universities. Western traditional universities had resisted at first encompassing technology in their national educational systems. For many decades since World War II, U.S. and European universities had enjoyed massive growth rates in enrollments by expanding their earlier reach among upper and middle-classes male-dominant students to new inflows of veterans, educated youth, women and non-working lower-class youths, which was enhanced by the post-war long “Baby Boom” of 1946-1960. Since the 1970s, higher inflations
rates in the operations-costs of higher education institutions were matched by rises in tuitions. Then as the 1990s ushered in a twin unexpected gradual decline of traditional enrollments and state contributions to public universities, all academic institutions followed the 1980s precursor example of George Mason University in embracing cost-savings by halving their permanent and tenure-track Faculty pool and replacing them with hires of large amounts of part-time Adjuncts, while expanding class-sizes. Finally, despite the nation-wide post-2000 positive rise in university enrollments ("Baby Boomlet") with consequent higher retentions and revenue-streams, all academic institutions have remained saddled with faster than average growths in operation costs, rising tuitions, declining state contributions to public institutions and smaller endowments especially for private colleges.

In this difficult environment, many U.S. and Western universities have embraced - despite initial skepticism - the Internet-based e-Learning academic revolution as a major cost-saving educational tool to quickly expand enrollments among traditionally under-served student populations, while overcoming locational constraints (nation-wide beyond campuses, remote areas, military bases and abroad). With new distance-learning delivery-systems and wide-range academic courses for credit coming first from “for-profit” business-academic providers (like Phoenixx, Argosy, DeVry, Keiser, Kaplan, American Public Universities, etc.) also many traditional universities have joined the e-Learning Revolution by accepting many credits-transfers from accredited on-line distance-learning providers, while developing more slowly their own “non-profit” academic blended classrooms and e-courses.

This e-Learning academic revolution has steadily percolated down most national educational systems world-wide to provide Internet-based access, computers in classrooms, various learning tools and basic on-line teaching skills at all levels, first from “Open” Universities to gradually encompassing both High Schools and Elementaries. By the 2000s, traditional universities now accept credits-transfers from any accredited on-line distance-learning academic provider, while many also offer since the 2000s their own on-line classes in conjunction with traditional campus ones. At the same time, this e-Learning Revolution within America along with the U.S.-led economic Globalization has steadily increased globally the nation’s technological profile and educational leadership according to ex-Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and international journalist Thomas Friedman. Computer-based education and web-design have benefitted from declining costs of technology (“hardware”, “software” and “Wi-Fi”) to widen e-Learning education through faster dissemination of modern on-line contents in Distance-Learning classes. Consequently, e-Learning has widened the student pool by attracting both technologically-savvy traditional on-campus students (who add some blended learning classes to their degrees) and predominantly non-traditional working professional students (for degree-completion from A.A.s to B.A.s or re-accreditation with graduate degrees or certificates). In turn, on-line education has also reached various sectors of population long marginalized by limited national education access, poverty and/or below-average national educational performance-levels by developing Charter Schools as technological turn-around pathways for failing students and failed public schools. This in turn has spurred within Western higher education systems (North America, Japan, East Asia, Europe) a growing competition between public, private and “for-profit” business-academic education providers to service new educational markets and incorporate professionals at work, working class, military personnel (on bases and abroad in the field) and low-income social groups (stay-at-home parents, urban poor, rural poor and immigrants). However, with stagnant or declining Western population rates this techno-educational strategy has mostly expanded the existing pool of non-traditional students with new on-line course-offerings at cheaper costs than traditional campus education, rather than systematically reduce rising operational-costs and tuition costs.

E-Learning digital modes of education-delivery are also viewed as “easier” to grasp and more “democratically” inclusive for non-traditional students who are not usually part of the dominant traditional education system, while also providing needed “critical-thinking” skills, rather than traditional regurgitations of knowledge. The high growth-rate and popularity of on-line education programs in the West is enhanced by adding blended on-line classes in both virtual universities and more innovative campus-based traditional academic institutions. By late-1990s/2000s, the West achieved the highest growth-rate and popular use of Internet-based e-Learning education and blended on-line programs side-by-side with traditional classrooms in both “Open” virtual universities and innovative campus-based institutions. In the 2000s, the on-line e-Learning revolution has been adopted also by several pioneering Third World academic institutions, who seek to emulate this rapid growth model also in Developing countries to widen their academic outreach to both traditional and non-traditional students of all social classes in over-populated urban areas and the “disenfranchised” masses in the rural areas. However, e-Learning growth in Developing countries faces a host of non-academic and structural limitations unknown in the West: preference for traditional Western-style academia, structural economic bottle-necks (taxation, poverty, over-population, corruption), limited communications networks, lagging technological investments to widen the Internet reach vs. local political instability and authoritarian regimes in Africa, Asia and Greater Middle-East.

But Internet-based e-Learning in higher education poses major techno-educational challenges to all academic institutions (from the West to the Third World) who seek to widen their educational pool beyond traditional urban campus universities, because it does not automatically provide the same content-quality level of traditional slower campus classes, nor professionally-accredited pools of full-time instructors trained to teach in specific disciplines. At the same time, scandals, financial recession and stricter government regulations have slowed the growth of eLearning in both “for profit” and “non-for profit” on-line universities.

II. SAINT LEO UNIVERSITY’S INTERNET-BASED eLEARNING

Today, most international educational systems have embarked on adopting cost-effective eLearning technological delivery systems to guarantee rigorous academic contents, stricter evaluation assessments, wide national dissemination, instructors training and basic national accreditations. To better assist internationally academic on-line learning in the XXIst Century, one of the best venues for practical solutions and problem-solving is mixing within streamlined on-line courses (in lengths capped at two- or four-months, rather than six-months) and Blended courses (combining both mostly on-line content with limited live-class meetings and video-
President Kirk was able to integrate this multi-level Strategic Planning into both the training and further education as leaders of its existing and prospective Management staff and Faculty on-campus and at Centers through his “Leadership Saint Leo” Initiative and annual Board of Trustees Meetings, as well as in detailed Annual President’s Reports and cyclical multi-years “Vision”-statements (draft-Vision 1999-2005 in 1999, draft-Vision 2008 in 2005, Vision 2010 in 2008, Vision 2013 in 2011, Vision 2017 in 2013), all written from a near-future vantage-point of successful accomplishment. Each of the university’s three Schools (Arts & Sciences, Business, Education) developed Strategic Plans that were integrated in a university-wide Strategic Plan process (the inverted funnel) and Saint Leo University’s 4 “Pillars of Success” (Mission, or the why; Values, or the how; Vision, or the where; Planning and Execution, or the Accountability). Strategic Planning also allows long-term husbanding of financial resources and debts/loans, while addressing short-coming (shrinking its traditional Military component; increasing on-line competition by regional Florida state universities and for-profit national universities; faster-tempo on-line technological change beyond Saint Leo’s financial capabilities) (see two Charts below).
In three cycles (1998-2005, 2005-2015 and 2015-now) Saint Leo University has developed parallel models of academic technological experimentation for its traditional campus and reach non-traditional students at its far-flung Distance-Learning Centers by attracting new students to its 8-weeks on-line courses, plus introducing audio-visual technologies, curriculum-content standardization of Master-Syllabi and rigorous assessments of both campus and on-line classes. All this allowed for Saint Leo’s transformation, differentiation, technological innovation and rebranding from the old “Pioneer College” to a new image as a leading Catholic teaching “Pioneer University” of international consequence in the XXI Century (the end-goal reaffirmed consistently from 1999 to Saint Leo University’s latest, Vision 2017). President Kirk always focused on all types of computerized and Internet technologies, which nobody used before, as an innovative visionary policy to quickly turn a failing “Pioneer College” into an on-line pioneer hub at the forefront of futuristic educational innovation. But rebranding an otherwise anachronistic rural college was no easy feat: most Saint Leo personnel had never heard of the Internet, nor who Bill Gates and Steve Jobs where, and nobody had computers in their offices, except few hardy Faculty toting around their own personal Laptops, while President Kirk’s first calls for a Mouse at Saint Leo was misunderstood by most as either a vailed warning of rodent infestation in the kitchens, or a new morale-boosting policy to take students every semester to free visits of Disney. By line-1990s, Saint Leo University successfully integrated all faculty, administration and students within an institution-wide Lap-top/computerized innovative educational settings for all B.A./M.A. programs. Since 1997-98 Saint Leo received full Internet wiring and Wi-Fi in all office buildings (campus and Centers) and campus student dorms, while developing closer organizational ties, constant interaction through phone, Internet and the 2004 state-of-the-art Video Teaching & Teleconferencing (VTT) system linking Campus with all Centers. Strategic planning incorporating continuous improvements in technology to enhance university-wide productivity, students enrollment, course offerings on-line and retention (campus-wide Internet accessibility through broad-band fiber-optic wires and wireless networks, plus modern computers to all staff and Faculty, video-conferencing and VTT Teaching, Staff/Faculty training from on-line administration to on-line teaching and course-development).

These constant reforms put technology in the office and classroom, forcing all staff and Faculty to become tech-savvy, more interconnected and increase Saint Leo’s productivity by learning new software (always changing to corner the best and most cost-effective contract), by advising students on the computer, by using exclusively on-line e-mails and attachments for all official and inter-office communications, by co-designing on-line classes and by teaching them in an accelerated 8-weeks schedule. By developing better-quality courses and an overall standardized, identical high-quality academic education template for the entire university’s multiple academic-structures (Campus, Centers/Bases and On-line) through repeated assessments, Instructors’ evaluations twice-a-year and generalized reliance on basic course-templates for use on-campus and on-line to train the legions of Part-time Instructors teaching on-line (LeoGuides, later called Master-Syllabi, plus on-line shell courses and on-line course developments). Another aspect of the university’s transformation into an on-line teaching institution was the innovative business model of comprehensive “free-leasing” to all 2,500 campus resident students of a Lap-top for their personal use throughout 4 years of courses (with the proviso that such Lap-tops be used also for classwork; that the university would repair minor damages or viruses, unless totally broken by the student who would pay them back) until graduation, when students could keep the Lap-tops as theirs at a discounted price or if returned, their software and memories would be deleted and retrofitted for use by new cohorts of incoming Freshmen restarting the cycle. This comprehensive “free-leasing” policy, together with the transformation of the entire Campus and Centers into a huge Wi-Fi zone, would allow any student to use their Lap-tops in every corner of the university anytime, rather than be restricted as in the past to the dorms, offices, classrooms and Library. Finally, in 2011-2015 the last two campus constructions are two newly-builttechno - “Green” mega-buildings of 48,000 square feet each - Tapia School of Business and Kirk Hall - which merge classrooms LED computer screens and mix-office/studying areas. All these changes made Saint Leo University by 2000 one of the first fully on-line traditional academias with all campus, Centers and on-line students, plus staff and Faculty fully integrated into its own “One University” vision, and integrated university web-site (a work constantly in-progress from its first unveiling in the 2000s to its full multi-visual format of 2014), regardless of different students and staff populations or multiple education delivery-systems. Moreover, since 1998 Saint Leo also became the third or fourth “non-profit” deliverer of on-line classes for other 5,000 Distance-Learning Centers and military students. In 1998-2005, on-line education was first introduced through a joint-venture contract with the “for-profit” technology company BISK to use its business platform and marketing outreach to recruit students. As web-platform BISK developed many on-line General Education courses with their own Web-Designers and a BISK to use its business platform and marketing outreach to recruit students.

All courses were also standardized in 8-weeks Master Syllabi for university-wide use, and Internet resources were provided to both campus and Blended courses, while using the PIE model to
redevelop university-owned on-line courses-content and strategies (outcomes, assessments). Within this context, in 2015-16 Saint Leo on-line teaching jetisoned Pearson’s serviced Learning Studio to shift to the new university-owned D2L on-line platform with fully redeveloped courses. D2L was also applied on-campus as a multi-use skeleton platform for administration (grades, assessments), permanent content-loading and Blended courses. Finally, while Business courses routinely apply Gaming to Blended courses, since 2015 this has been introduced in some Political Sciences courses to teach U.S. Presidential Elections and International Affairs.

Under President Kirk’s first trying years in 1997-to-2000 stopped the College’s complete decline and fully modernize enrollment techniques to push total numbers up by a thousand from 7,403 to 8,720, with campus declines finally halted at a flat level of 802-to-833-to-817. Military students also flat at 4,954-to-5,070-to-4,965, and Center Civilians hovering now at 1,500-to-1,638 (since its main jump of 1997 from 1,120 to 1,420. By late-1997 he opened the first Saint Leo experimental in-house Distance-Learning On-line class (DL) with just 8 students, followed in 1998 by the Center for On-line Learning (COL) who partnered in a challenging joint-venture for on-line education with the “for-profit” technology-platform-provider BISK, that would market and attract students to Saint Leo’s on-line educational contents. The consequent fast numeric jump of COL in just three years from 6 in Fall 1997 to 300+ in 1999 and 1,040 already by 2000, confirmed President Kirk’s earlier bet on on-line education as the way of the future in both generating new enrollments. In context, the transition to M.B.A./graduate programs rose graduate enrollments from 0 in 1996 to 200/250 yearly since 1997. Moreover, by relying on BISK’s on-line platform, course-designers and expert administrators, Saint Leo would educate its own Faculty into both developing and teaching 8-weeks-long on-line courses through pioneer Internet and Wi-Fi technologies, which would link instructionally through COL’s courses both far-flung Centers and most importantly the deployed Military students in the field. Later, the introduction of blended courses (part in class at campus and Centers and part on-line) allowed a wider degree of course experimentation. Initially the joint-venture with BISK opened-up immediate massive influsions of revenue through increased student enrollments in the fast-tempo 8-weeks courses that from a tentative beginning in-house with Distance Learning first on-line class of 6 students in Fall 1997 allowed COL to attract up to 4,000 new students by 2008 when Saint Leo University, increasingly unhappy at BISK’s control of 60% of their joint revenues, took the even bolder initiative to end the partnership with BISK by “going solo” since 2008 and develop in-house at COL all relevant structures. Since 1997-98 major restructuring and modernizing of Saint Leo’s Admissions Office and recruitment strategies to reflect modern practices across the nation, bolstering overall Freshmen recruitment, together with athletic enrollments and fellowships, while also boldly embracing since 1996 additional enrollments through on-line education and degrees (at first in partnership with leading on-line industry BISK, then totally independently through Saint Leo’s in-house dual programs of the Center of On-line Learning(COL and Distance-Learning(DL)). In few years both Saint Leo’s total university students applications and enrollments rose at record levels with a 200% growth rate during the 1997-2007 decade, at a 5%-to-10% annual growth rate, rising total students from 7,400 in 1997 to 9,931 in 2001 to 12,677 in 2004 to 14,700 in 2007 and 16,349 in 2014. With DL and COL, Dr. Kirk had finally found the right techno-educational key to reach out to all deployed U.S. Military anywhere in the world, and allow the university to remain relevant as a provider of Military education regardless of international conflicts. By aggressively marketing On-line education also to civilians, including Campus students (limited to a course per semester), Saint Leo could now also blend Distance Learning education in Centers and Bases to both its key Military and civilian student populations, reaching by 2015 over 3,000 COL students, most Military students deployed abroad (including far-away Afghanistan), and in some way touching a total of 12,000 students annually with at least one On-line class per term. All-in-all, both the military and the On-line civilian student populations benefitted from Saint Leo’s commitment through the years of engaging advisors, faculty and retention experts sensitive to the Military and professional students’ different educational backgrounds, to help them attain their maximum potential and graduate, overcoming any locational and psychological difficulties.

**SAINT LEO UNIVERSITY ENROLLMENTS, 1989-2010**

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<th>University College (Campus) vs. Centers/On-line Programs (not U.C.)</th>
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<td>Not U.C. means non-university college, which includes Distance-Learning Centers &amp; College of On-line Learning (COL)</td>
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Within these multiple pathways of educational enhancement and constant growth in enrollments, President Kirk’s bold decision in August 1998 to turn the old College into a University was heralded as morale boost and symbol of future ambitious technological growth as a “Pioneer University”. But the real change was the next technological step to acquire in-house leading-edge technologies in Internet-based on-line education to expand further Saint Leo’s educational reach, whose re-branded on-line image emerged by 2003 as the 3rd largest non-profit U.S. academic provider of on-line education and degrees.22
Among the major university initiatives in 1997-2015 Military enrollments remained central to expand its 40+ years-service with the U.S. Military as one of the institution’s traditional cornerstones (with the coveted designation in 2014 as both “Military-friendly” and “Veteran-supportive” university), while successfully reinventing itself as a technologically-innovative academic leader also in this field since 1997-98 with On-line education.

Despite President Kirk’s success in expanding all enrollment sectors (traditional students, Civilian Centers, on-line COL/BISK, graduate degrees and military students), it all came to an abrupt shocking halt on 11 September 2001 once the United States was attacked in both New York and Washington D.C. by four airplanes hijacked by Osama bin-Laden’s Al-Qaeda’s Islamic Fundamentalist terrorists, destroying the World Trade Center 7 buildings-complex and 10% of the Pentagon with 3,000 deaths. Beyond the immediate psychological drama and violation of national security the real crisis had just been averted by a thin margin: the U.S. government and financial hegemony had not been decapitated as planned. In Washington D.C., President George W. Bush Jr. was away from the White House on a domestic tour in Florida, while the White House itself was missed by the third hijacked terrorist airplane which then exploded against the façade of the larger Pentagon destroying 10% of the building and killing just 150 employees, instead of the entire building and national military command center with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, while the fourth hijacked airplane aimed at the U.S. Congress and immense Capitol Hill dome crashed in Pennsylvania once its passengers attacked the terrorists. In New York, Al-Qaeda’s destruction of the World Trade Center with the first two hijacked airplanes failed to destroy (as was planned) also Wall Street’s world financial telecommunications and cellular networks on the Twin Towers: the main repeater on top of the Twin Towers had been recently doubled with a back-up one in New Jersey since the overblown fears of the unrelated 2000 “Y2K” Cyber-crisis, thus its destruction knocked-out “only” 20% of Wall Street financial telecommunications and 40% of New York communications, while a second receiver in New Jersey controlled 80% of financial telecommunications and was temporarily shut-down due to city-wide break-downs in the electricity grid. For Saint Leo University and President Kirk the shock was also in the gravity of both potential and immediate repercussions on the institution’s still fragile enrollments and financial balance, risking a repeat of the sudden financial and enrollment crisis of the 1990-1991 First Gulf War: on one hand, had the entire Pentagon been destroyed, it would have destroyed for an undetermined period of time the bureaucratic paper-plies of all Military students enrolled in distance Learning and the Military education offices providing control and payroll to the affiliated university-providers (like Saint Leo); on the other, like during 1990-1991, the U.S. re-enlisted the support by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a Coalition of other states and the United Nations (U.N.) to immediately launch an anti-Terrorist Global War and related Second Afghan War in 2001-2002, followed by a long bloody U.S./NATO peacekeeping in 2002-2015, while soon engaging also in the 2003 Second Gulf War against Iraq with its larger and bloody U.S./Coalition peacekeeping in 2003-2011. For Saint Leo University the risk of losing its vital Military students and related tuitions, either by the averted risk of a total loss of the Pentagon or by the sudden re-deployment of most of its forces in the distant Middle-East (Afghanistan and Iraq) too far from regular Distance Learning classes, was also compounded by the post-“9/11” Crisis mandated shut-down for a decade of all U.S. Bases to non-Military personnel and contractors, which isolated Saint Leo’s Centers located within now permanently locked-down Bases (like MacDill in adjoining Tampa, Florida) that left Civilian students and Faculty outside. 

Saint Leo University was immediately mobilized to stop the short-fall: renewed university-wide financial cut-backs and expense restrictions were implemented, while COL and DL on-line education and advisors were expanded to transition most Military students from Centers classes to blended on-line ones abroad for all U.S. forces to be deployed overseas, together with quickly renting new Centers buildings outside all locked-down Bases to immediately reposition Civilians and Base Military to new nearby Centers’ classes with minimal locational dislocations. Moreover, Saint Leo University’s gained two years of precious extra-time by benefiting from a much slower than anticipated re-deployment of massive U.S. forces to the Gulf until 2003 (since Fall 2001 only a smaller U.S. contingent of Special Forces was engaged in Afghanistan, while the Spring 2003 Second Gulf War involved only 150,000 U.S. forces compared to the 600,000 of the 1990-91 First Gulf War), while throughout 2003-2011 overall U.S. forces in post-war peacekeeping combat against insurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq were halved together with NATO/Coalition forces. Thus, in the 2001-2003 total enrollment numbers crept-up from 9,381-to-10,721 (campus students flexed down to 913 before jumping finally past the symbolic 1,000 mark; Military hovering at 4,900-5,057; Civilian Distance Learning flexed from 1,594-to-1,451, but on-line COL students jumped from 2,277 to 2,860 and Graduate students from 250 to 350). By 2003-2005, total enrollments jumped to 12,190-to-12,677 (campus students jumped almost 250 from 1,033 to 1,284; Military students jumped a thousand to 6,237-6,378; 2005-2006; Civilian Distance Learning flexed from 1,594-to-1,451, but on-line COL students jumped from 2,277 to 2,860 and Graduate students from 250 to 350). By 2003-2005, total enrollments jumped to 12,190-to-12,677 (campus students jumped almost 250 from 1,033 to 1,284; Military students jumped a thousand to 6,237-6,378; 2005-2006; Civilian Distance Learning flexed from 1,594-to-1,451, but on-line COL students jumped from 2,277 to 2,860 and Graduate students from 250 to 350). By 2003-2005, total enrollments jumped to 12,190-to-12,677 (campus students jumped almost 250 from 1,033 to 1,284; Military students jumped a thousand to 6,237-6,378; 2005-2006; Civilian Distance Learning flexed from 1,594-to-1,451, but on-line COL students jumped from 2,277 to 2,860 and Graduate students from 250 to 350). By 2003-2005, total enrollments jumped to 12,190-to-12,677 (campus students jumped almost 250 from 1,033 to 1,284; Military students jumped a thousand to 6,237-6,378; 2005-2006; Civilian Distance Learning flexed from 1,594-to-1,451, but on-line COL students jumped from 2,277 to 2,860 and Graduate students from 250 to 350). By 2003-2005, total enrollments jumped to 12,190-to-12,677 (campus students jumped almost 250 from 1,033 to 1,284; Military students jumped a thousand to 6,237-6,378; 2005-2006; Civilian Distance Learning flexed from 1,594-to-1,451, but on-line COL students jumped from 2,277 to 2,860 and Graduate students from 250 to 350). By 2003-2005, total enrollments jumped to 12,190-to-12,677 (campus students jumped almost 250 from 1,033 to 1,284; Military students jumped a thousand to 6,237-6,378; 2005-2006; Civilian Distance Learning flexed from 1,594-to-1,451, but on-line COL students jumped from 2,277 to 2,860 and Graduate students from 250 to 350). By 2003-2005, total enrollments jumped to 12,190-to-12,677 (campus students jumped almost 250 from 1,033 to 1,284; Military students jumped a thousand to 6,237-6,378; 2005-2006; Civilian Distance Learning flexed from 1,594-to-1,451, but on-line COL students jumped from 2,277 to 2,860 and Graduate students from 250 to 350).
enrollments annually to 880 then 1,260 and 1,444. The long-term success of Graduate programs, was due especially to the unending MBA success (on-campus and the first commercialized also on-line and internationally) under the leadership of Dean of Business Michael Nastanski (since 2012 also Assistant-Vice-President of International Relations, then promoted in 2015 as new Vice-President of Academic Affairs) (see Chart below) (5).

The year 2008 proved to be another significant crisis year, in part expected and planned because President Kirk had convinced the Upper-Leadership and Board of Trustees on the need to quit the financially debilitating on-line joint-venture with BISK and build instead an initially weaker, but totally “Leo-owned” independent COL system. Therefore, the University would implement a post-BISK new business model for COL on-line education, while seeking to contain costs and losses of markets by planning just a 10% revenue impact in 2008. Yet, the post-BISK recovery of on-line student market-shares by COL were delayed by the unexpected parallel flooding of the international educational systems by both non-profit and for-profit on-line academic rivals), but in equal part surprisingly unexpected by all with the Fall 2008 U.S. Financial Crisis on Wall Street, which lasted until 2012 at least. After the Fall 2008 near-meltdown and long crisis of the U.S. and international financial system, alongside the 2005-2013 U.S. Housing Crisis and 2010-2015 Eurozone Debt Crisis, a somber President Kirk went to great pains to warn to the university community who remain unaware of Saint Leo’s commitment, but are always well appreciated by the Pentagon itself in dealing with the university and also in accidental ways: in May 2002 when Professors Marco Rimanelli and Hud Reynolds lead a group of campus and ROTC students on the first EuroTour Field-Study Abroad, they accidentally crossed paths at night in Paris, France, with ex-Joint Chiefs of Staff and then-U.S. Secretary of State, General Colin Powell, who was stepping out of his limo into the hotel after a Presidential State visit to France’s President Jacques Chirac and against the warnings of his staff decided to cross the deserted street to shake hands with the few cheering students yelling: “U.S.A! U.S.A! U.S.A! Saint Leo University!” (yet all blissfully unaware that they were also being quickly surrounded by very nervous Secret Service and French intelligence agents in plainclothes) and he complimented them with a big smile saying: “Oh yes, I know Saint Leo University! All U.S. Military know Saint Leo University’s educational outreach to our bases! Have a great time in Europe!”.

in U.S. forces since 1991, which were supplemented by longer deployments of Reservists and Coalition/NATO forces, plus private military contractors, like Blackwater. Also COL fell to 2,836 in 2008-2012, due to its difficult restructuring after the planned, but contentious split from BISK, but this was partially countered by the growth of campus enrollments to 1,700, plus Centers’ Civilians to 1,830 and Graduate programs to 1,750. During 2009-2012, these trends levelled out within a generalized growth pattern across all enrollment components, with totals rebounding to 14,335 then 15,691 (campus students rising 1,444-to-1,860-to-1,925; Military at 4,610-to-4,860; Centers’ Civilians at 2,360-to-2,800; COL flat at 3,195-3,200-3,900; and Graduate programs rising to 2,378-to-2,895). Finally, the 2012-2015 period brought back optimism and stable growth with enrollments up to 15,930-to-16,440 and campus students up to 2,167-to-2,300 (see Chart below).
on maximizing military-students enrollments in “Military Friendly” universities, required also the sudden reintegration of thousands of discharged veterans returning to campus and civilian life. After over a decade of three wars (War on Terror 2001-current; Second Afghan War 2001-02, Second Gulf War 2003) and related bloody peacekeeping operations (Afghanistan 2002-15; Iraq, 2003-11), the withdrawal in 2011-15 of most U.S. forces from both Iraq and Afghanistan together with generalized troops draw-down has led to discharges for thousands of U.S. veterans upon their return to America, while their hasty reintegrations with families and communities has also propelled recently hundreds of U.S. colleges and universities to compete in attracting this highly-sought student population and make-up the difference from the institution’s actual costs and the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill tuition benefit. But in times of economic hardship, many “for-profit” and “non-profit” academic institutions limited themselves to helping veterans just meet their financial obligations within the Yellow Ribbon Program, or rely on aggressive marketing targeting to enroll them into minimalistic education programs or worse in ones without value in the real world after exhausting their entire G.I. Bill tuition benefits. Moreover, returning Veterans have extremely different views, ethics, life experiences and for many also serious injuries or psychological trauma (PTSD), compared to traditional “shallow” student peers. Indeed, these two student-populations barely interact or meet, despite sitting in the same classroom because most student-veterans quietly reject their less-committed younger peers.

Veterans often seek academic institutions that provide support services and actively engage their students, while in most academic institutions it is only Faculty-veterans who end mentoring their student-veterans on both course-work and the challenges of meeting academic requirements, while the institution provides access to local “non-profits” and Veterans Affairs facilities for additional support. Instead, Saint Leo always distinguished itself and its values by not being just “Military friendly” with related programs, but by actively providing critical support to transitioning military-students, as well as requiring all its Faculty to commit to good teaching, advising and mentoring for all students, and especially as necessary for student-veterans. Moreover, Saint Leo University’s long history of over 40 years of service since 1973 to tens of thousands active-duty military and veterans in an expanding network of 20 dual-use Military/Civilian Education Centers at bases in 7 states across America and globally via its Center for On-line Learning (COL), allowed it to continue to thrive, when on April 2012 U.S. President Barack Obama’s Executive Order 13607 curbed other institutions’ (especially “for-profit” ones, while killing Cappella and Trump University) over secret deceptive educational practices against veterans’ benefits.20 Saint Leo achieved in earnest most of its Vision 2010, Vision 2013 and Vision 2017 goals and was honoured twice in 2010 and 2011 by joining the selected list of 60 U.S. universities officially labelled as “Military-friendly School” by G.I. Jobs magazine, while being ranked 12 in among 50 most-popular military tuition-assistance schools by the Military Times Edge magazine.30

Especially, the 2005 bold Strategic Narrative of the future Vision 2010 predicts that Saint Leo University’s “renaissance” in 1997-2003 would expand its overall enrollment (Campus, Centers and On-line) by Fall 2010 to 15,565 students (just 500 less than projected in Visions 2010), including 1,860 on-campus students (on-target with Visions 2010) from the U.S.A and 26 (not 36) foreign countries, as well as 60,000 alumni. Vision 2010, like its successors Vision 2013 and Vision 2017, envisaged correctly that much of Saint Leo University’s future enrollment growth would be financed by building 6 new Student Dormitories/Apartments (plus the 2013 donation of the previously leased two Marmion/Snyder Residences), while the university budget expanded, net assets more than tripled and the Endowment doubled after a massive donor campaigns.34

By 2016 the growth of Saint Leo University campus had reached 30 buildings planned and coordinated through a University Master Plan: 15 new buildings of which 11 on-campus (Dorms and Academic Halls) and a new Saint Leo COL On-line/Graduate Admissions Channelside Building downtown Tampa, all built over 13 years in 2002-2016, plus and 19 renovated buildings, plus retrofitting the 2 ROTC pre-fabs, while 3 unsalvageable structures were torn-down.35 In view of these events, the vital decision to finally expand staff and Faculty to meet rising students’ enrollments started first with the 1998 rapid growth of the on-line COL/BISK joint-venture, and continued in the same line by early-2000s with substantial Full-time Faculty hires, once campus classes were expanded to match rising enrollments. Growth was always strongest in on-line staff and cheaper Part-time Faculty (given the technological gap and unwillingness of 70% Full-time campus Faculty to teach on-line, while the 30% tech-savvy remaining full-timers mostly added work with COL and DL as special permission to teach there additional courses outside their normal full campus load.

Another smaller parallel driver for Faculty and Staff hiring increases through the early-2000s was SACS’ relentless push that its twice re-accreditation of Saint Leo University in 2001 and 2011, be also tied to making all Centers fully integrated within the University (already achieved by President Kirk with his “One University” strategy) by mandating a number of Full-time Faculty at the Education Centers both as heir Directors and as a minimal permanent teaching presence in each to supplement the larger, cheaper Part-time Instructors. Saint Leo University’s total Faculty which in the 1990s had traditionally hovered at 50/80 with few Part-time Instructors, now rose 36% by 2004 with almost doubling to 100 Full-time Faculty (75% with Ph.D. or Terminal Degrees) and then re-doubling to 218/240 by 2015 (200 or 80% with Terminal Degrees), while Part-time Instructors jumped to 832 in 2004 and again to 1,170/1,130 by 2015.22 In this way, the Saint Leo “Pioneer University” continue its recent tradition of strong technologically-innovative leadership, with shared Values and Benedictine beliefs, cooperative leadership with staff and Faculty, kind stewardship over its entire Community and historic religious brethren from Saint Leo Abbey, while striving to sustain academic quality, enrollments and revenues.

Today Saint Leo is the historical, premier Catholic University of Florida; 5 largest Catholic University status in the Southern Regional University in “2012 Best College/University; 2 largest private College/University in Florida by enrollments; 3 largest Catholic Business School; 5 largest provider of university degrees to the U.S. Military; Saint Leo University since 2004 has 33% of students from Minorities; 36th Southern Regional University in “2012 Best Colleges” by U.S. News & World Report; and twice in 2013 and 2014 awarded Honor Roll status in the Chronicle of Higher Education’s “Greatest Colleges to Work For”; and 25th best Benefits/Cost value of U.S. private College/University according to Consumer's Digest (2007) with competitive tuitions, and lower costs for services, while students-Faculty teaching ratios ranging from 14:1 to 1:25 on-campus and on-line, with greater student learning success-rates and traditional strong one-on-one interaction/advising with Faculty.37
III. GAMING AND BLENDED TEACHING OF AMERICAN POLITICS AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

Within this context, the 2015-2017 Saint Leo shift to the new university-owned D2L Canadian-style platform with fully redeveloped on-line courses and on-campus as a multi-use skeleton platform for permanent content-loading and Blended courses. This provides new opportunities to use D2L to integrate also gaming case-studies beyond standard business courses that routinely apply Gaming to Blended courses.

Games as a tool for human entertainment, role-playing and education is as old as history, due to Mankind’s “innate drive to play” or Spieltrieb (Friedrich Schiller, 1794) as Homo Ludens (Johan Huizinga, 1938). According to these concepts, gaming has evolved especially in Law Schools and Business Schools as an effective role-playing educational tool for Mock Trials and case-studies. Gaming covers several sub-fields (Law School Mock-Trials; Tailor-made educational games in Business; playing commercials-off-the-shelf games; programming and coding learning; games to promote social inclusion of marginalized groups) and are recently enhanced by the impact of using multimodality and on-line education to apply several concurrent modes of presentation/communications. Especially in recent years, the much-touted future role of the Net-Generation of children and youth who have grown-up with computer games since age-2 should find a natural educational outlet in Gaming, but this has resonated mostly in the entertainment field, rather than in university education (at times with negative psychological costs in cases of “loneliness”, “boredom” or “confusion”) or in computer coding and programming, where Gaming (both on-line and face-to-face) has had only marginal effects, due to the students’ inability to grasp theoretical concepts, poor preparation or poor motivation.26

In Political Science gaming and role-playing has developed in Graduate schools out of earlier military war-games to be reapplied to the study of Model United Nations, international crises and U.S. Presidential politics. Thus, Saint Leo University’s Political Science faculty (Dr. Marco Rimanelli & Frank Orlando) first started to expose students since 2010 to education gaming based on free-standing Model U.N. at local and regional competitions (Florida Southern College and University of Pennsylvania) through the training of more motivated student-members of the local chapter of Pi-Sigma-Alpha (Pi-Sigma-Alpha) Honors Society for Political Science & International Affairs. This was followed in 2014-2017 by the creation of specialized Political Science courses where Frank Orlando applies Gaming through the “Alternate Reality Learning Experience” (ARLE) concept to teach both U.S. Presidential Elections and Mock Trials for the two new Minors of “Campaign & Elections” and “Legal Studies”.

In 2015-2017, Saint Leo University’s Political Science students have participated in an “Alternate Reality Learning Experience” (ARLE) dealing with the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. In 2015, Instructor Frank Orlando’s new POL-300 “Presidency” class first launched this project, and repeated in 2016 also in his new POL-3XX “Campaigns and Elections” class as part of the learning experience. While many Political Science programs take part in some form of experiential learning or simulation based on political phenomena, there are a variety of factors that made this a unique experience for the students involved. The vast majority of simulations in Political Science classrooms are contained within the confines of a single course, but at Saint Leo University, the experience took place across classes, departments and schools. While Frank Orlando’s courses provided the chief players, up to nine other courses were involved in the planning and execution of a campus simulation that involved over 100 students. Faculty participation was coordinated by Dr. Jeff Border, Chief Innovation Officer at Saint Leo University, with his Teaching and Learning Innovation department providing the funding for all classes involved to obtain the resources needed to make this experience a success.

Saint Leo’s Social Sciences Department is always striving to create more opportunities for its students to engage in experiential learning, and the 2015 “U.S. Presidential Election ARLE” simulation was the first of its kind at Saint Leo University. It involved not only his “Presidency” students, but also a “Communications” class that aided the campaigns in honing their message, a “Psychology” class that ran analyzed the effectiveness of the rival campaign strategies, two classes on “Social Media” that helped to handle the Twitter, Facebook and Instagram pages for the rival candidates, a “Multimedia Management” class that filmed campaign commercials and filmed the climactic debate event, an “Education” class (at a Center campus hours away from our University Campus) that acted as an education interest group, and an on-line “Criminal Justice” class that provided a security plan for the event. There was such interest in the event that the only negative feedback received was from faculty members that were disappointed that their classes were not invited to participate. Still, those faculty members that were hoping to be more involved were tabbed as external resources for policy experts to work with to create party-platforms.

In order to plan the event, all involved faculty met weekly from March through Fall 2015 when the event took place. Facilitating cooperation between the students in each of the classes was of utmost concern, especially because most of these courses met at different times (and some at remote campuses or in different learning environments). Thus, a meet and greet kick-off event was planned for all participants, featuring local politicians, party members and journalists expressing their perspectives on U.S. political campaigns. After this, it was off to the races! Even though several classes were taking part in the 2015 “U.S. Presidential Election ARLE”, the “Presidency” students were the focal point of the experience. Students from that class provided the rival Presidnetial candidates, Vice-Presedential candidates, Party Leaders, Campaign Managers, Communication Directors and policy experts. Students were allowed to apply for whichever positions and party teams (Republicans vs. Democrats) they wished, but final “casting” decisions were ultimately made by the Instructor. The Presidential candidates were the centerpiece of the experience and needed to act in commercials, conduct interviews and participate in several debates. Vice-Presedential candidates had similar duties and participated in their own Vice-Presedential debate. Party Leaders were responsible for compiling their respective party platforms and shaping general policy. Campaign Managers were tasked with coordinating strategy. Communications Directors were in charge of media requests and messaging. Policy experts focused on specific issues and wrote reports that eventually comprised their party’s platform and researched topics that were useful in debate preparations. It is important to note that these students were not just imitating real life politicians, and there was no requirement that the ARLE Simulation’s political platforms needed to align completely with their counterpart in reality. In order to protect the students involved and separate their personal life from the ARLE Simulation, the Presidential and Vice-Presedential candidates were given fake-names
The ARLE “U.S. Presidential Elections” simulation ran for almost the entire 2015 Fall Semester. During that time the campaigns were afforded a great deal of autonomy to pursue the strategies that they best believed would lead to victory. Along the way, both campaigns performed in debates, filmed commercials, produces flyers and buttons, engaged in voter outreach, and wooed interest groups for their support. The culminating event was a Mock Presidential Debate, moderated by top students from other classes. The debate was modeled on the 2016 Presidential debates, but the questions were original and created by Instructor Orlando with input from students in the other disciplines. Neither campaign had access to the debate questions before-hand, but in addition to agreements on format, their rival campaigns were able to mutually decide what issues would be focused on during the 90-minute debate. This led to a situation where students spent a great deal of time preparing for the event, because the prize was right around the corner. At the conclusion of the debate, audience members and those watching at home on a live YouTube stream were allowed to vote for the Mock U.S. President.\textsuperscript{39}

The 2015 ARLE Simulation became the all-encompassing focus for the students in the “Presidency” class. While some of their “colleagues” in the other classes treated it as just another assignment, the goal for the “Presidency” students was to be all-in. In order to facilitate this, the course assessments changed, but not the desired learning outcomes: readings were assigned and lectures presented on Presidential campaign strategy, but the total number of tests and quizzes was decreased. Instead, students were directed to focus their energies on carrying-out the simulation by applying what they had learned. They were graded not only on the effort and success of their performance as judged by the Instructor, but also on the evaluation of their final work by their teammates (with many team meetings taking place away from the classroom).

Finally, students provided their personal assessment of the experience as a whole at the end of the semester. The results of such experiential Gaming were overwhelmingly positive. The event was attended by over 200 students, faculty and staff, with University President William Lennox Jr. providing opening remarks. Local media covered the events of the campaign, and students in the “Presidency” class were featured in radio interviews throughout the Tampa Bay area. Hundreds of people watched the final event on-line live on YouTube and cast their ballots. Students involved in the experience extolled the virtues of this type of experiential learning in their class exit survey, with many declaring it to be the best course that they could apply towards their future careers. In fact, one graduating Senior was able to portray their performance in the ARLE simulation into a job position with the Florida Democratic Party (despite portraying the Republican Vice-President candidate) during the actual 2016 U.S. Presidential Elections of Donald Trump (R) vs. Hillary Clinton (D). A final assessment also showed that students had learned and interiorized a great deal about U.S. Presidential elections both in general and in practice.

Finally, Dr. Marco Rimanelli is also experimenting on adapting Gaming to international affairs by compressing the ARLE model into a one-week Gaming simulation on current international political crises, focused on: “Crimea & East Ukraine Secessionism: Russia vs. Ukraine/E.U./NATO/U.S./U.N., 2014-2017”. This will become a graded Cap-Stone experiential assessment for first-time students in both his courses of POL-295 “International Relations” and POL-110HA “Democracy” by applying the simulation he created in 2014 at John Cabot University in Rome, Italy as part of his 2013-2014 U.S. Fulbright-Schuman Chairship Award.

**Conclusion**

Despite all these impressive changes and growth, Saint Leo University in 2010-2018 faces major external challenges to its well-being, in a pattern affecting mostly small U.S. Liberal Arts colleges. Firstly, tuition remains still the key source of university revenues from 1997 to 2015 (34% out of Campus students; 48% out of Military students and 17% out of Civilian students affiliated to Distance-Learning Centers). As Saint Leo University benefited from consistent growth (buildings, residences and student population), its tuition increases remained contained compared to the faster tuition hikes in regional and State Public Universities and Community Colleges that further benefited Saint Leo by attracting to it as a financially-competitive Private rural university larger inflows of better qualified new students and transfers from the Florida State higher education system. This trend will only continue as tuition hikes and State financial supports for local Public Universities and Community Colleges less competitive administratively and accelerate their respective decline in enrollments.

Secondly, national U.S. high school graduations have shrunk following a generalized on-going decline in student population since the end of the 1990s-2010s “Baby Boomerlet Years”, while now this is also reflective in an over 3% fall in national students’ enrollment in 2013-2017. At the same time, in Florida many 2-years Community Colleges have completed their authorized expansion to 4-years programs, thus retaining a larger amount of their students who historically moved to State and Private (like Saint Leo) universities to finish their B.A./B.S. degrees. Consequently, since 2015 also Saint Leo University has suffered from these parallel national and state declines in enrollments and financial challenges, as well as internal key technological hurdles (the difficult 2016-2017 transition from on-line COL/DL education based on Pearson’s Learning Studio to the new fully Saint Leo-owned, university-wide and campus-inclusive D2L on-line platform).\textsuperscript{40}

Following the mid-2015 retirement of President Arthur F. Kirk Jr., his long-term strategic thinking on how best to sustain Saint Leo in the years to come has led to the elevating as 9th Saint Leo President Dr. William J. Lennox Jr. (retired Lt. General U.S. Army and ex-Superintendent/President of the U.S. West Point Military Academy of New York) to continue the university’s growth and mission in such difficult times. Saint Leo’s COL/DL on-line education and Blended courses remain a key component, despite the levelling in their enrollment numbers.\textsuperscript{41}


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