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Professional development goes online

BY TERRY O'BANION

Online learning is now as common as the lecture and the laboratory as a way of delivering education to students. Every institution of higher education in the country as well as most secondary educational institutions now feature opportunities for students to take a course or two, if not an entire degree, through online learning.

Community colleges have been at the forefront of this seminal change in delivering, innovating, and exploring new ways to extend their access missions to more and more students. However, expanding access to education is not just a priority of community colleges.

In the past few years, a number of universities have expanded their online learning opportunities to include graduate degrees for community college teachers and administrators. Walden University, cited in *U.S. News and World Report* in 2001 as one of the nation's best online graduate schools, has created a unique Community College Leadership Program (CCL) that combines the most successful elements of learning-centered practices and online formats.

Walden University has made a substantial commitment to educating the next generation of community college leaders, and community colleges are responding with enthusiasm. Less than two years old, the CCL program now enrolls more than 100 doctoral students from over 35 community colleges.

This online program is rapidly becoming the premier program of its kind. "I reviewed a number of national programs when I decided to go for the doctorate and Walden's Community College Leadership program was head and shoulders above the others," said Susan Lindahl, vice president of college relations and strategic initiatives at Johnson County Community College (KS).

The basic features of online learning are illustrated in the Walden model and provide the framework for the program's success: Adult students do not have to leave their current jobs to participate in this program. In fact, the program is specifically designed to encourage students to use their jobs and their colleges as laboratories for much of their work.

Students in the CCL program work online with a faculty mentor who guides them through the program, and they interact personally with more than a dozen faculty members as they complete the program. Samson Olaode, a program director and assistant professor at Monroe Community College (NY) was impressed with the number of community college leaders who joined the program as faculty mentors. "Most university leadership programs have only one professor with experience in the community college," Olaode said. CCL students have numerous opportunities to work together in collaborative communities online, beginning with their orientation to the program. In addition, some work in teams to assist each other in online research and in other courses and programs.

Students create "learning agreements" that are critiqued online by faculty mentors before they begin working through the Knowledge Area Modules (KAMs) that form the core of the program. There are five KAMs designed to engage the student with the mentor in explorations of a subject's breadth, depth, and application.

In the breadth component, the student critically examines the basic theories of a specific field. In the depth component, the student explores more closely an aspect of that field focusing on current research. In the application component, the student creates a project to apply what has been learned in the breadth and depth components. Walden also provides many online support services as students navigate through the CCL program. Enrollment advisors help guide prospective students through the decision-making and application processes. The school also provides online concierges who help familiarize new students with the online learning environment, guide new students through a user-friendly software orientation, provide technical and administrative assistance in courses, and help ensure that students stay on track throughout each course.

Walden also has “librarians” who are available year-round to help students identify, evaluate and obtain books, journal articles, and other resources through online databases. Students also have free access to tutoring services in math, statistics, and English-as-a-second-language.

This framework for the CCL program is an innovative model of online education. As the future community college leaders of the nation work through the online process of the program, they are not only better equipped to lead, they are also more knowledgeable of and experienced in the values of online learning and are more likely to champion the approach for their students.

O'Banion is director of the Community College Leadership Program at Walden University, a degree-granting institution that offers courses only online.