

Chapter 18

Building an Interactive Fully– Online Degree Program

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ABSTRACT

Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College (SMWC) expects to launch an interactive fully-online undergraduate degree program in 2010. This program will fill a market need not currently met at SMWC. The program is designed for an online community of learners with a format and focus that appeals to net generation (millennial), neo-millennial, and computer savvy non-traditional students, including military personnel. The General Studies in the new program will focus on seven themes of Leadership for Environmental and Social Justice and will build upon a subset of the existing General Studies. This new program will complement the Woods External Degree (WED), an existing distance education program, established in 1973, that was built on the “correspondence model.” In the new program, students will not be required to come to campus, but will become a vibrant part of the SMWC community by being empowered to explore, discover, and interact through innovative technologies.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College (SMWC), the oldest Catholic liberal arts college for women in the United States is located on a 67-acre campus five miles northwest of Terre Haute, Indiana. Sponsored by the Sisters of Providence, the College was founded in 1840 by Saint Mother Theodore Guerin, who was canonized by the Roman Catholic

Church on October 15, 2006. The College provides three distinct academic opportunities: 1) traditional campus-based undergraduate degree programs for women, 2) distance education undergraduate degree and teacher licensure programs (Woods External Degree) for women and men, and 3) distance education graduate degree and certificate programs for women and men.

The College serves a diverse community of learners in undergraduate and graduate programs. As of Fall 2008, 271 students were enrolled on campus

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Table 1. Current SMWC distance program formats

| Woods External Degree (WED) | Master of Leadership Development (MLD) & Master of Education (M.Ed.) | Other graduate programs (Art Therapy, Earth Literacy, Music Therapy, and Pastoral Theology) |
|---|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexible schedule • Individual • Undergraduate (4yr, maximum 12 yr) • 20 weeks class time • One-day residency recommended at the beginning of each required course • Desire2Learn (course management system) course format recommended • Many courses use email, some still use mail • Individual assignments, very little if any team assignments • Accept ACE Guidelines • Assessment of prior learning (APL) for college credit | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fixed schedule • Cohort • Graduate (1yr) • 8 weeks class time • Hybrid: Weekend residency every two months, online activities between residency • Desire2Learn course format required using required template • Webinar (seminar held over the Web) activity required • Many group assignments and projects | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fixed schedule • Intensive format • Graduate (2 or 3 yr) • Five-day residencies at the beginning of each semester • Desire2Learn course format recommended • Individual assignments |

and 1097 men and women (89% of whom were over the age of 26) were enrolled in the Woods External Degree (WED) program. Students can earn degrees in 39 major areas. The College is best known for its undergraduate programs in Equine Studies, Education, Business, and Pre-professional Studies. The WED program has a 35-year history of serving non-traditional adult students, and was one of the first independent-study degree programs in the nation. Today, students can earn degrees in 27 major areas through the WED program. Four of the graduate programs, Art Therapy, Earth Literacy, Music Therapy, and Pastoral Theology, enroll 116 students. The Master of Leadership Development (MLD) program enrolled its third cohort of 23 students in February 2009, and 9 additional students in a special cohort. The Master of Education (M.Ed.) program enrolled its first two cohorts totaling 20 students in 2008, with expectations of exceeding 25 students in 2009.

In addition to regional accreditation by the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, specific programs are accredited or approved by the National Association of Schools of Music, the American Music Therapy Association, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, and the Institute for the Certification of

Computer Professionals. U. S. News and Woods Online Report ranks Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College among the top 25 comprehensive colleges in the Midwest in 2009.

Setting the Stage

The College started a correspondence distance program in 1973 and delivered its first online course in 1996. SMWC currently provides different distance formats (see Table 1) available to both women and men. There are more than 2,500 distance students that have graduated or completed their programs at the College through these programs.

The MLD and M.Ed. programs were designed to be completed in one year using a hybrid-course format, with on-site-face-to-face cohort group seminars at the beginning and end of each course, an interactive webinar experience in the middle of the course, and web-based assignments/ discussions throughout the course. The term, *webinar*, is a combination of the terms “seminar” and “web”. In effect, a webinar describes holding a synchronous seminar over the Web. It is often used to deliver a workshop, lecture, group discussion, question/ answer, and presentations.

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