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Going the Distance

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School of Education and Health Sciences

GOING THE DISTANCE

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Going the Distance

At a time when enrollment in online distance education is increasing more rapidly than overall enrollment in higher education, University of Dayton programming is standing out among the rest.

According to a new ranking by the U.S. News and World Report released in January, the online graduate education program in the School of Education and Health Sciences has been recognized among the best in the nation. The program was ranked in a five-way tie for No. 25 out of 238 schools.

“Our ranking, which places UD higher than many prominent schools of education, is validation of the quality of our faculty and all we have invested in continuous improvement of our online program,” said Kevin Kelly, dean of the School of Education and Health Sciences. Kelly added that online learning is a vital medium of graduate education in the 21st century.

The ranking is based on a composite score from five categories: student engagement, student services and technology, admissions selectivity, faculty credentials and training, and peer reputation.



The University of Dayton has risen significantly in the ranking in recent years, entering the ranking at No. 123 in January 2013 and raising to No. 55 in January 2014, and higher still to No. 23 in January 2015.

More than 5.8 million students are taking at least one online/distance course—a 3.9 percent year-to-year growth, according to the 2015 Survey of Online Learning by the Babson Survey Research Group.

This marks the 13th consecutive year of growth, study co-author I. Elaine Allen, co-director of the Babson Survey Research Group, stated in a press release.

Todd Hitchcock, senior vice president, Online Learning Services, Pearson, added, “While enrollments in higher education institutions decreased overall, enrollments in online programs continued to increase.”

The School of Education and Health Sciences has risen to meet this demand for quality online education by restructuring their own online graduate program.

Jayne Brahler, executive associate to the dean for Distance Education, has led this initiative. She has prior experience in distance education from developing programming at Washington State University from 1990 to 1999. To create more efficient and effective online programming at UD, she focused largely on streamlining and updating each course based on the most recent best practices.

First, Brahler guided the process of reorganizing information for more than 100 online courses based on criteria set forth by the Quality Matters organization (QM). QM has a peer review process designed to certify the quality of online education and is the leading provider of tools and processes used to evaluate quality in course design.

One of these tools is the rubric template, complete with eight general standards for designing an online course: course overview and introduction, learning objectives (competencies), assessment and measurement, instructional materials, course activities and learner interaction, course technology, learner support, and accessibility and usability. The rubric was applied to every course to address these standards and provide a more structured, streamlined learning experience.

“Unique to the rubric is the concept of alignment,” Quality Matters states on their website. “This occurs when critical course components work together to ensure students achieve desired learning outcomes.”

By using QM, Brahler can ensure students are taking courses that are aligned with best practices, which has served the program well with higher rankings from U.S. News.

“We never know exactly what they’ll evaluate us on until we receive the survey, so we can’t specifically tailor our program to meet improvement criteria for U.S. News,” she said. “Instead, my strategy is to take an evidence-based approach, look at best practices in traditional and distance education, and design our program to meet the highest quality standards.”

One unique aspect of Brahler’s approach is to maintain the intellectual property of the University and faculty by not employing third-party vendors to construct the online courses for them. This positions the University well to create new courses at any time with minimal cost.

“Hiring vendors takes higher education out of the hands of higher educators,” she said. “We do everything ourselves from scratch, and our success comes from all of the resources we have here.”

In addition to implementing the rubric, Brahler added support services students can access during evening or weekend hours. She has also commended the vital resources the School of Education and Health Sciences already offers: small class sizes, highly credentialed and hardworking faculty, and a system of consistent, reliable communication between faculty and students.

“We’ll continue to do our best, read as much as we can to keep up to date on the trends, find out what students will be expecting, and strive to deliver it,” she said.

Erin Callahan '15



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