



online learning

CREATING
COMMUNITY IN A
VIRTUAL WORLD

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CREATING COMMUNITY IN A VIRTUAL WORLD

Online learning has gotten a bad rap in education circles. Many regarded it as just another passing fad – the technological equivalent of the Beanie Babies craze of a decade ago.

After all, how could a computer screen replace the face-to-face interaction of professor and students? How could students learn how could students and faculty form the critical, life-changing relationships that are so much a part of the Concordia University experience? Implausible as it may have seemed a decade ago, online learning has a foothold in education that it's unlikely to relinquish. A full 25 percent of Concordia University's enrollment is now in online programs and that number grows every semester. More than just convenience, students appreciate the community they log-in to every time they participate in their online program.

A key ingredient in the success of online education for Concordia University has been its ability to help students develop a trusting, collaborative relationship within the cohort and with professors, creating powerful connections that quickly turn a diverse group into a community of learners. The bonds begin forming when students arrive for a required visit to campus known as residency.

Students enrolled in one of Concordia's online programs may live across the street, across the country or across the ocean, but they converge on the St. Paul campus for a weeklong residency that launches their cohort. Residency allows students to meet faculty and the other members of their cohort, delve into course requirements and their responsibilities as online learners, and alleviate anxiety about technological and academic requirements of the program.

At residency, students begin to understand their cohort is a team, a support system, and a panel of experts they can draw on for advice and encouragement. Cohort members complete the remainder of the program entirely online, but these early connections cement a bond that endures long after the program is complete.

[Beyond the Keyboard]

Kirstin Nolan and Colleen Giebink are members of cohort #B589, a group of 13 people completing their undergraduate degrees in Family Life Education. Their cohort convened for the first time in April 2005 at their on-campus residency.

Kirstin Nolan lives in Spokane, Washington. She is a relief houseparent at Hutton Settlement Children's Home where she works with 16 girls (age 7-18) creating a safe and caring home atmosphere. She has set her sights on becoming a case manager at the children's home – a position that requires a bachelor's degree, and chose an online program because she could earn her degree and still keep her job. Cohort collaboration is something Kirstin is already beginning to appreciate. "It causes you to see another perspective you might never have had...to reflect in a new way within your own job or everyday life," she said. "I am looking forward to the next two years of education with them. I am excited to hear what my fellow classmates have to say. I am excited to learn!"



Kirstin Nolan



Colleen Giebink

Colleen Giebink wants to help families in crisis, "anything from divorce, illness, abuse, losses ... the things that can shake up a family," she said. Her desire to help others inspired her to complete her degree, too. Along with a wealth of experience across a variety of volunteer positions, Colleen's personal experience navigating her own family through the uncertain territory of her husband's battle with cancer also gives her a clear perspective for families facing similar struggles. Colleen was a full-time student last year at a university near her home in Green Lake, Wisconsin, but the 37-year-old wife and mom to a teenage son felt out of place in the traditional campus setting. She wanted a program that better fit her lifestyle; online classes were ideal. "Even though it was difficult to come to the residency, I believe it is the key to a successful program and the beginning of many wonderful friendships," Colleen

said.

[A Little Help From Her Friends]

Cheryl Schuck recently earned her master of arts degree in Criminal Justice Leadership working from her home in Bellflower, California. The owner of Stealth Investigations, a criminal defense investigative firm, she brought a unique point of view to her program, which tends to attract people from the enforcement and prosecutorial side of the criminal justice system.

Cheryl began her program expecting a one-size-fits-all approach. What she found was a flexible, student-oriented program that relies heavily on the collective knowledge and interaction of the students themselves

rather than on simple instruction. As the program progressed, her cohort delved deeper. "Our levels of trust, respect and appreciation for all points of view fully blossomed... into what are now authentic friendships that go beyond electronic pathways," she said. "I never envisioned that the online program would be such a rich and rewarding experience."

One of the best examples of the synergy of the cohort is the "brownies and bunny suit" story. It seems a certain hard-nosed city police officer in Cheryl's cohort was late for a chat session one night. "How can I make it up to you?" he asked when the cohort chided him. "Bring brownies to next week's chat!" Since treats are tough to share online, everyone had a good laugh and all was forgiven. The next time someone didn't meet expectations, it was their turn to "bring the brownies" with the added caveat to wear a bunny suit. So, "brownies and a bunny suit," became cohort code for urging members to give 100 percent to their studies. It was this same hard-nosed, big-city cop who made arrangements to surprise Cheryl on her birthday in February with a big basket of birthday brownies delivered by – you guessed it – a life-sized bunny!

Cheryl tackled her graduate studies with determination. Learning experts at other institutions had counseled that with her learning disability (dyslexia), she could not hope to attain an advanced degree. But with resolve and, sometimes, sheer tenacity, she proved the experts wrong.

"She is an absolute stellar student," said Dr. Scott Harr, chair of the CGCS Criminal Justice Department. "Her cohort is well-known for its level of participation and involvement, routinely making more than 200 bulletin board postings a week between the 12 of them. They've bonded unlike any cohort we've ever had, and those friendships are more important than ever as Cheryl has found herself facing the biggest challenge of her life."

In January 2005, in the final course of her program, this quirky, compassionate, inquisitive woman who has inspired her instructors



Courtesy Cheryl Schuck

and classmates with her energy and enthusiasm received devastating news. She had level four lung and brain cancer. Her diagnosis was grim – six months to live if treatments didn't slow the cancer; one to two years if they did.

So close to achieving her life's dream, Cheryl approached her illness with the same fierce determination that fueled her success in graduate school. Her cohort and the rest of the Concordia community rushed to her side in both the virtual and face-to-face world, with cards, flowers, letters and emails of encouragement. Campus ministry arranged pastoral assistance and prayer support, other cohorts kept in regular contact, a student in another cohort even donated plane tickets to fly two of Cheryl's classmates to California when she was particularly weak.

"The cohort rallied around her, embraced her in friendship and support, and helped her to maintain the level of work she desired to," Harr said. "Whether providing a kind ear, a word of support, a call in the midst of turmoil, proofing of her papers or mentoring and tutoring when she just didn't think she could do it, she was never alone."

[True Love of Learning]

Heidi and Jonathan Breitbarth met as classmates in a master of arts in Christian Outreach (MACO) cohort. They were husband and wife by the end of their program.

Students in the MACO program participate in two-week, intensive, on-campus residencies during three consecutive summers, taking online classes during the two intervening academic years. That first summer residency was too hectic to ignite any romantic sparks between Heidi and Jonathan – notwithstanding that Heidi would return home to Colorado Springs after residency and Jonathan would remain in St. Paul serving as Concordia's director of Computer Services and Cross-Country coach.

As the year unfolded, they learned more about their fellow cohort members through their bulletin board postings, weekly group chat sessions in real time and emails. "Even during this time," Heidi said, "I believe that God was allowing me to view a part of Jonathan's heart – perhaps without the interference of any emotional ties."

The pair soon considered themselves good friends. During their second summer residency, friendship began to transform into something deeper. With another year apart looming ahead, Heidi and Jonathan agreed to give long-distance dating a try. Countless emails, phone calls and cross-country trips ensued. "In a few short months, we knew that we were running in the same direction with Christ leading us, but it was time to start running this race together," Heidi said. They were officially engaged on New Year's Eve 2003.

In the months leading up to their wedding, Jonathan relied on the flexibility of his online program. "I honestly don't think I could have been working full-time, preparing for a wedding, and taking classes all at the same time if learning were not done online," he said. "There were a number of times I would come in to work at 6 a.m. to finish an assignment or discussion board posting. On the other hand, my wife is a night person. She would be finishing her assignments or discussion board postings just after midnight."

ONLINE LEARNING @ A GLANCE

How It Works

An enrolled student is assigned to a cohort, or learning group. The cohort's first meeting takes place at the group's residency week on the Concordia campus. The remainder of their online program is delivered through the Internet. Students log in to a course room using WebCT. In their course room, students download their professor's weekly course lecture and link to other related web resources, such as the virtual library or the Online Writing Center. The cohort participates in class discussion about the lecture and reading assignments throughout the week using electronic bulletin board postings, logging in according to their individual schedules to read classmates' comments and make additional postings. Written assignments get submitted and comments returned from their professors by email. The cohort meets once a week in real time for live chat and often talk outside of the course room by email or phone.

Glossary of Terms*

Online Learning: Computer-based instruction delivered using web-based tools.

Cohort: A learning group of approximately 15 people who start their program together and remain together for the duration of their program.

WebCT: A widely used course management platform that is entirely web-based. Students log in to access course information and assignments, submit assignments, participate in online discussions and link to other online resources.

Course Room: A password-protected website used exclusively by a particular cohort and its professors to exchange information.

Live chat: Students meet for a weekly discussion, logging in to the course room at a pre-determined

time for discussion in real time.

* Some definitions in Glossary of Terms excerpted from "Distance Education in High Schools: Benefits, Challenges, and Suggestions," by Davison M. Mupinga, *The Clearing House*. Washington: Jan/Feb 2005. Vol. 78, Iss. 3; pg. 105.



As someone who works in the technology arena on a daily basis, Jonathan is enthusiastic about the future on online learning. “I think we are just beginning to see what amazing things can be done with online learning,” he said. “I pray that God would use me and my position to help the online program grow at Concordia University over the coming years.”

[Carrying Out the Concordia Mission]

The growing mix of online programs and related initiatives at Concordia University is more than technological bells and whistles. It represents a fundamental shift in the accessibility of education that, fittingly, brings the university closer to Martin Luther’s admonition to educate all who desire it.

Like Concordia’s laptop computer initiative, which leveled the field between the so-called haves and have-nots, online learning brings the same leveling effect to another echelon of students who previously could not get access to higher education because of geography, time, resources, family and work commitments, or other life circumstances.

Consider the deaf student in a master’s cohort who can interact with her cohort in real time without her interpreter, experiencing for the first time in her educational career what it feels like to be just another student. Students who overcame their uncertainty about getting a degree after 10, 20 or more years had elapsed. Students whose changing work shifts made traditional programs out of the question. Students whose travel schedules, or maternity leaves, or work transfers put their college plans on hold indefinitely. These students, and many others like them, now have access to the life-changing effects of a Concordia University education.

The success of online learning supports one of the basic tenets of a Concordia education — that learning is a process rather than a place, and that meaningful learning is founded more on relationships than on repetition of facts.

Online learning moves the focus of education from the needs of the institution to the desires of the student. “It’s becoming an anywhere, anytime endeavor, transferring even greater control of learning to the student,” said Dr. Carl Schoenbeck, vice president for Academic Affairs. “Online learning will help fulfill the promise of truly student-centered learning.”

Whether students live on campus for four years as young adults, attend class once a week on campus as busy adults or log in to a virtual campus any time of the day or night, they are part of the Concordia University community of life-long learners. The means by which students access their education is of minor consequence compared to the life-changing outcome. What matters the most is that students have the opportunity to seize their dreams and live out their true vocations

A MISSION WITHOUT BOUNDARIES

In the mid-1990s, Concordia University launched online learning as a new way for students to complete their degree. “Faculty members were skeptical about delivering courses totally online,” said Rev. Dr. Robert DeWerff, who served as dean of the College of Graduate and Continuing Studies when they spearheaded the new program. “There were few examples to follow in developing online programs. Even the Internet was not a strong tool in the early stages of the program.” It was virtually uncharted territory, but it was an experiment worth trying.

Based on the success of its face-to-face degree completion programs – the first of their kind in Minnesota – the university adopted a similar model for online learning. Programs are accelerated, allowing students to complete their bachelor’s degree or earn their master’s degree in 14-22 months; and they are cohort-based, creating a collaborative and trusting environment that allows students to learn, not just from their instructors, but from the wealth of experience of their individual cohort members.

“In the College of Graduate and Continuing Studies, we believe that our adult students have so much to share that they become defacto co-faculty and contribute to the very rich learning environment they are a part of,” said Dr. Scott Harr, chair of the CGCS Criminal Justice Department.

Year by year, cohort by cohort, online learning has gained in popularity and scope. With nearly 600 students enrolled in the non-traditional BA and MA online programs, online learners now represent a quarter of the university’s total enrollment – solid evidence that online learning is more than just a passing fad!

LEARN MORE

Concordia University offers a variety of online and face-to-face programs in Management, Criminal Justice, Human Services, Christian Outreach and Child & Family Studies.

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