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UW-EC online learning
UW-Eau Claire recently completed the first year of its first totally online bachelor's degree program and Kate Lang is the academic director for the popular new program.

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UW-EC's online learning program doing its job

By Eric Lindquist
Leader-Telegram staff

MENOMONIE — Five years after dropping out of UW-Eau Claire, Jim Budde is back in class but not back in town.

Instead, he works full time for the U.S. Postal Service in his hometown of Beaver Dam and squeezes in his studies around his busy life. The arrangement is made possible by UW-Eau Claire's first completely online degree program, which is about to begin its second year. The Bachelor of Professional Studies in Organizational Leadership and Communication program targets students like Budde who have college credits but no degree.

"The online format is what allows me to pursue this degree," said Budde, 26, who is married and has one child and another on the way. "It would be impossible for me to go back to college without the flexibility this program offers."

Budde attended UW-Eau Claire for 3½ years but quit to take a job delivering mail for the Postal Service. But when he began to worry about his job security, Budde decided to hedge his bet by enrolling in UW-Eau Claire's new online program.
While it's not easy juggling his job, family and a full-time college load, Budde is optimistic the two years of stress he endures to earn a bachelor's degree will be beneficial to his career in the long run.

"What I like most about it is I can have the ability to go out and earn a living and support my family, and then at night I can do my schoolwork," said Budde, who sometimes doesn't finish studying until 2 a.m.

Liberal arts mixes with business

The 60-credit degree completion program, a collaboration between UW-Eau Claire and UW-Extension, is designed for adults who have completed an associate degree program or have a sufficient number of college credits. The cost is $375 per credit.

It combines a liberal arts foundation — communication, economics, history, philosophy, political science and sociology — with coursework from the College of Business. It was approved by the UW System in June 2011 and is the first degree of its kind in the system.

The program, which launched with eight students last fall and expanded to 20 in spring, is intended to provide students a generalist degree that will prepare them for a variety of careers.

"I think it's a very serviceable degree, and people will walk away with valuable skills and knowledge," said Kate Lang, UW-Eau Claire's academic director for the Bachelor of Professional Studies and chairwoman of the history department.

Two-year program for full-time students

University officials designed the curriculum by asking faculty in several departments what people in their disciplines need to know to be leaders, she said.

"We wanted to take the best parts of a liberal arts education and combine them with practical skills to help students be successful in the workplace," Lang said.

Students attending full time — that means completing two classes every eight weeks plus summer school — can graduate in two years, although most of those currently enrolled are going half time.

Budde, who was the first student to sign up for the program and hopes to graduate next summer, is taking a full load and acknowledged it is a challenge.

"I don't think a lot of people realize this online program is a lot of work," Budde said. "It actually is real college classes; it's not watered down at all. The professors don't take it easy on you just because you're working full time."

Essays test mastery of the material

To participate, students should have access to a computer with an Internet connection, webcam and headset with a microphone, although it is even possible to access the program from a smartphone, Lang said.
Some professors ask students to watch recorded lectures or PowerPoint presentations, while others primarily require reading and then use essays to test students' mastery of the material. In lieu of class discussion, some courses require students to post online responses to questions and then comment on their virtual classmates' answers.

To accommodate the busy lives of nontraditional students, the courses don't schedule meeting times and typically have about two deadlines per week when assignments must be turned in.

"The students don't ever have to come to campus, but we're always happy to see them if they do," Lang said.

While the Bachelor of Professional Studies is UW-Eau Claire's first venture into a fully online program, the UW System offers at least 26 such bachelor's degree programs, with six at UW-Stout in Menomonie, and a total of about 4,600 online courses.

Surveys spur program creation

Some of the programs have arisen from UW-Extension surveys about the workforce needs of regional employers. Once those needs are identified, UW-Extension works with campuses to see if they have faculty expertise that could be tapped to create an online program to fill the gaps, said George Kroeninger, assistant dean with UW-Extension's Continuing Education Division.

"It's a fairly new and efficient way to address high-need career areas," Kroeninger said, adding that UW-Extension contributes money for course development, marketing and student support services.

The alternative delivery method can be particularly attractive for the tens of thousands of Wisconsin adults who have earned college credits but don't have a degree to show for it, said Phil Huelsbeck, outreach program manager for UW-Eau Claire Continuing Education.

So far, the average age of students in the UW-Eau Claire program is 38, with students ranging from 26 to 54, and all of them are from Wisconsin and Minnesota. The geographic reach likely will expand nationally and possibly even globally as word gets around, he said.

"The response to the online degree program has been overwhelmingly positive," Huelsbeck said. "I think it's inevitable that online programs like this will grow."

Lindquist can be reached at 715-833-9209, 800-236-7077 or eric.lindquist@ecpc.com.