In 1999, I taught my first online course to 20 nurse managers from the hospital across the street. We had nothing like Blackboard, Collaborate, ApprenNet, or Tina the Avatar. In fact, the faculty designed the course to be a hybrid – meeting for half a day for four Saturdays in the term and doing the rest through a rigged email system and a discussion board.

One of the prevailing beliefs at the time was that learning was not as effective in the absence of social interaction, teacher to student and students to students. I recall worrying about how students could possibly learn if I did not have direct contact with them every week, even though they could ask me questions and have discussions online.

I fancied myself the Sage on the Stage – an entertaining teacher, who, with this new online format, was depriving the students of the benefit of my presence. My rude awakening on this issue came during the last in-person class when I realized that I had become the Guide on the Side.

After final papers were distributed and discussed, I asked the students to offer advice on how to improve the course. There were the few usual comments on the worth of the book and the number and nature of assignments.

I probed a little further.

What about getting to know one another? What about access to the teacher? What about the social interaction and live discussion? What followed was a litany of all of the reasons that none of my issues mattered.

Then came the question: “Is it really necessary to meet in person? Many of us believe that we could more than complete the objectives of the course totally online.”
While many companies have a long history of providing at least some sort of continuing education benefits, they haven’t always been keen on paying for online degrees. To be sure, in the early days of e-learning, it often took some hard selling to convince employers of its credibility.

Here’s a true story from the annals of distance education about a woman who was determined to finish the bachelor’s degree she had started many years earlier – but put it on hold indefinitely to work full-time and raise a family:

Back in 1999, Genevra Webb-Conlee realized that to move ahead in her career, she would need at least a four-year degree. So she began looking for a program that would somehow fit her busy lifestyle, which included a significant commute, a 10-hour workday, and occasional travel as the business development manager for an aerospace company in Virginia. After researching her options, she came up with an online degree program that seemed like a good prospect – but her company would not pay for it because it wasn’t accredited. Undeterred, however, she started looking for one that was.

Genevra’s search led her to a regionally accredited university with an academically rigorous online degree program that met her criteria. In gearing up to sell her managers on the idea, she prepared an exhaustive presentation in four, two-inch binders, complete with section tabs. Armed with this information, she headed into a two-hour meeting on the merits of online learning – ultimately emerging with an agreement. She went on to graduate three years later (with a 4.0 GPA), subsequently earned a master’s degree, and has since enjoyed enormous professional success.

Of course, those days are well behind us now, as online education continues moving into the mainstream of higher learning.

In fact, according to the “How Do Employers View Online Degrees?” infographic we produced here at Drexel University Online, employers, as well as recruiting professionals, see online degree and certificate programs as highly credible, career-enhancing options when offered by a regionally accredited institution with a traditional campus and a reputable academic brand. Or put simply, an institution like Drexel University.

For example, 42 percent of all hiring managers surveyed by the Society for Human Resource Management reported looking favorably on an education credential from an “online only” institution. But that number jumped to 92 percent when the same credential came from a brick and mortar university with a virtual campus like ours.

In a recent report published by Excelsior College and Zogby International, 83 percent of the CEOs and small business owners polled said an online degree is every bit as good as its traditional counterpart, when provided by an institution with an established name and reputation. In other words, it’s not how you complete your degree; it’s where you earn it – and Drexel is an exceptional choice.

Having been founded more than a century ago, Drexel boasts a venerable academic history as an urban research university, with one of the oldest and largest cooperative education programs in the country. On top of that, we now hold the #7 spot on U.S. News & World Report’s roster of “up and coming schools,” in light of our longstanding commitment to academic and faculty innovation – a commitment that gave rise to Drexel’s pioneering efforts in adult and online learning.

Our virtual campus was launched in 1996 to offer working professionals a convenient way to earn the same valuable degree as their campus-based peers by studying with the same renowned faculty and using the same accredited curriculum. Consequently, Drexel’s more than 100 career-focused online degree and certificate programs often rise to the top of the rankings.

This year alone, Drexel’s online master’s program in Library and Information Science was ranked among U.S. News & World Report’s top 10 such graduate programs in the country, while our AACSB-accredited MBA Anywhere is now rated 14th best in the world by Financial Times. By the same token, our online BS in Health Services Administration came in at #4 on an industry-recognized list of “Best Online Healthcare Administration Degree Programs.”

Like Genevra, our students at Drexel University Online are bright and hardworking adults, for whom a good education is the engine of opportunity. Which is why, as one of our online graduates recently said, “it was a great investment, with an excellent return on professional advancement.”
What is the most crucial factor in the success of future leaders? According to a 2010 IBM survey of more than 1,500 CEOs from 60 countries and 33 industries worldwide, the answer, overwhelmingly, is creativity.

Many of the surveyed CEOs were from Fortune 500 companies such as PepsiCo, Ford Motor Company, Disney, Time Warner and K-Mart – all of which employ a “Chief Innovation Officer” or “Chief Creativity Officer” as part of their executive staffs.

Preparing students to think like creative professionals is the goal of Drexel University Online’s Master of Science in Creativity and Innovation program, offered through the School of Education. While many universities are beginning to offer individual courses in creativity, Drexel’s Creativity and Innovation program is one of only a few full creativity degree programs in the country and it is offered completely online. Drexel also offers graduate and undergraduate certificate programs in this subject.

This year, seven students in Drexel’s inaugural online creativity and innovation program graduated from Drexel University. Most of the students – who are as close as New Jersey to as far away as Taiwan – planned to come to campus for the commencement ceremony.

“Everyone is inherently creative, but that creativity can be enhanced. Our program teaches techniques for improving creativity – generating original ideas – but it also takes that next step and teaches students how to implement those ideas.”

FREDRICKA REISMAN, PHD, FOUNDING DIRECTOR OF DREXEL’S CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION PROGRAM

The academic program provides students with a deep foundation and contextual background of the field, balanced with real-world application. Through such courses as “Foundations of Creativity,” “Tools and Techniques for Enhancing Creativity” and “Creativity in the Workplace,” students learn the history of research in creativity, as well as learning to understand themselves better and to be aware of their own creative strengths and weaknesses. An outreach of the program even includes a class on “Mediation,” co-taught by Reisman and Nancy Kraybill, JD, a professor in Drexel’s School of Law, which addresses mediation as a creative problem-solving task.

Throughout the program, students acquire skills to conduct methodical analysis of problematic situations in a variety of settings, and devise and implement the best possible solutions. In order to complete each course, students must create a project that shows comprehension of course content. The students have already implemented their ideas in their workplaces in a broad array of fields.

Jared Volle was able to put his coursework to use in both his jobs: teaching English in Taiwan and working on his online comedy coaching site, www.creativestandup.com.

“After practicing stand-up comedy for eight years, I began studying creativity to get an edge in the industry and quickly found that the psychology of creativity was fascinating,” said Volle. “I see teaching creativity as helping people self-actualize. It’s far more rewarding than simply making people laugh.”

Belinda Florence, a transplant coordinator for the Kidney/Pancreas Transplant Center at Hahnemann University Hospital, was able to implement her class project, the “No Show Committee,” at work. Florence noticed that many patients weren’t showing up for their evaluation appointments to determine candidacy for an organ transplant. She developed a plan to increase patient awareness of and access to the transplant program by isolating the different factors that would cause patients to not show up for their appointments, and then devised creative ways to solve those problems.

After implementing some of the creative solutions – such as changing the reading-level of the text in the patient brochure, printing the informational packet in more engaging colors and creating reminder magnets – the Center saw an increase of 10 to 15 percent in the number of people who kept their appointments.

Patrick Leyden also put his education into practice in his current workplace, Sho-Aids, Inc., a tradeshow services company based in Sharon Hill, Pennsylvania. In his job as creative liaison manager, Leyden works with clients to create unique and impactful trade show exhibit booth environments.

“How throughout the program, I used my own professional situation to reflect on how creativity and innovation can be applied in a modern workplace,” said Leyden. “Individual creative performance, the creativity of small cross-functional teams and the creative potential of an entire organization were all areas that I explored. Whenever possible, I am an advocate for workplace creativity.”

Terri Zobel, who worked as director of programs and services for the Laurence A. Baiada Institute for Entrepreneurship, found ways to implement her new knowledge through program development for students and entrepreneurs.

One of her class projects addressed trends in the current educational system, particularly the emphasis on cultural conformity and standardized test results. Other projects around this same topic included a program to teach students the value of and tools for building multi-disciplinary teams, an article targeted for a popular parenting publication to raise awareness of these issues and a book chapter that was published last fall as part of the Knowledge Innovation & Enterprise (KIE) Conference Book Series.

“People who take these courses are always surprised at their own creativity,” said Reisman. “They never thought they were creative and then they realize that they have a lot of creative characteristics. As the world becomes more complex, future leaders are going to need to be creative.”

For more information on Drexel’s online Creativity and Innovation master’s program, please visit www.drexel.com/creativity.
Picano believes the best aspect of online learning is the ability to sign on at any time of the day to work on projects, listen to lectures and talk on discussion boards. In her online program, she was “always able to get in touch with professors in less than 24 hours and they were willing to talk through Skype, Google chat and on the phone to help you understand concepts.”

While pursuing her online program, Picano participated in an internship and worked with the Internet Public Library (ipl2), a public service organization and learning/teaching environment, as a reference administrator. She processed questions that would come through reference/research categories, answered patrons’ questions, provided student feedback and conducted reference interviews. Due to her success, she acquired a new project where she was one of ipl2’s social media administrators. In addition, Picano is also a new American Library Association (ALA) round table committee member, where she has conducted a few chats on topics in Library and Information Systems.

“I could tell by talking to admissions that the reputation of Drexel transferred to the online environment. No question was too big or small for them to answer, and they were always happy to help.”

“Receiving a Master’s in Library and Information Science was my next step. I felt that a graduate degree would help me gain more experience so that I could obtain a job.”

Tasked with picking a school to pursue her graduate degree, Picano started conducting research and making pro/con lists to help narrow her choices. In addition to research, Picano attended virtual open houses and information sessions to get answers to specific questions. She asked as many questions as possible knowing “a good school will always answer you back no matter how many times you ask the same questions.”

Ultimately, Picano chose Drexel University Online as her school of choice. Its top-ranked degree program, reputation and staff, as well as advice from her family and friends, helped to shape her decision.

“I always felt as I was a part of Drexel from the time I applied until the day I started my classes,” said Picano. “I could tell by talking to admissions that the reputation of Drexel transferred to the online environment. No question was too big or small for them to answer, and they were always happy to help.”

“My opportunities would not be possible if I did not have the hands on learning experience from my classes at Drexel,” said Picano. “I am currently working with an intern from another school on a project, where I am the only one with metadata, thesaurus and grant writing experience, aside from the professor. It’s nice to say that my classes at Drexel gave me these learning experiences that allow me to apply what I have learned.”

Through group projects and classroom discussion boards, Picano has made close friends within her program.

“I have met so many people in my program at Drexel and have stayed in touch with a lot of them. We Skype with one another every month to say hello and catch up. I noticed a big sense of community with students and professors in the Drexel online environment.”

As if school and work weren’t enough, Picano still finds time to pursue her other passions, including skiing, traveling and reading. In her spare time, she is learning to play golf and has taken a few lessons.

To be featured as our next student or alumni in our “#ABetterU Spotlight” series, please email Sabrina Ram at sr62@drexel.edu.

DREXEL GARNERS HIGH RANKINGS IN U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT’S BEST ONLINE PROGRAMS FOR VETERANS

More than 500,000 veterans and their families have utilized Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits since the law’s enactment in 2008. And that number is growing. To help veterans choose a quality online program, U.S. News & World Report has released its second annual rankings of the Best Online Programs for Veterans. We’re proud to announce Drexel University Online ranked in the top 10 online graduate engineering programs and top 15 online bachelor’s programs for veterans!
This year marked the 127th Commencement ceremonies at Drexel University. On a series of special days, the University community gathered with our graduates and their family and friends to celebrate academic achievement and the enhanced opportunities afforded by a world-class education.

Approximately 874 online students graduated this year, many of which attended Commencement in Philadelphia. We asked our 2014 graduates to submit their favorite Drexel University Online memories! For a complete collection, please visit www.drexel.com/2014grads.

“My favorite memory of being a Drexel University Online student was working with other nurse practitioners and physician assistants on a medical mission to Haiti during spring break.”  
Barbara Anne Cain  
HURLBURT FIELD AIR FORCE BASE (FLORIDA)  
MSN in Nursing, Psychiatric Mental Health Practitioner

“My favorite memory is being asked where I go to school and responding with “Drexel” - seeing the amazement on their faces as I describe being a part of such a prestigious organization, all online. Growing personally and professionally as online education becomes more the norm, will always be something I hold near and dear to me.”  
Richard James Bailey Jr.  
DENVER, CO  
MS in Human Resources Development

“My favorite memory of the Drexel University Online program was meeting lifelong friends through constant communication and collaboration.”  
Brittany Singh  
KINGSTON, JAMAICA W.I.  
MS in Global and International Education

“My best moment was finishing all three of my courses knowing that I’ve made such a big accomplishment in my life and met my goal - especially since I’ve worked full time all throughout. All of my hard work paid off and it’s no longer a dream but a reality to have a Bachelor of Science.”  
Christopher N. Martinez  
PHILADELPHIA, PA  
BS in Health Services Administration

“I am most thankful for the flexibility of Drexel’s online coursework, because it allowed me to pursue my other passions, including trail running and hiking. Completing the MS in Higher Education program immediately opened the door for my next big professional adventure as a Regional Director of Development at Washington and Lee University.”  
Robert Douglas Koch  
LEXINGTON, VA  
MS in Higher Education

“My favorite thing about being an online student at Drexel University is being able to talk to other nurses around the country. We are facing many of the same successes and issues in our individual practices. The varied backgrounds and locations of students made for richer discussions and an appreciation for nursing practice across the country.”  
Lacey D. Bergerhofer  
KANSAS CITY, MO  
MSN in Innovation and Intra-Entrepreneurship in Advanced Nursing Practice

“My favorite memory of Drexel was talking to Dr. Souder over the phone about one of his classes. I thought it was cool that he would use his personal time to talk with me late at night about class expectations because my time zone was behind his.”  
Temitope Peters  
SAN DIEGO, CA  
MS in Communication

“My favorite Drexel University Online memories include working in group projects with students who were on other continents.”  
Nadeane Cooper  
SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA  
MS in Teaching, Learning and Curriculum
Online students and teachers can form strong social bonds with one another and often do. However, forming social bonds is not a pre-requisite for learning the concepts and content in most courses.

Students, who are natural introverts and sometimes feel intimidated by classroom competition, prefer the anonymity of the online format and blossom in discussion boards or synchronous media, such as Collaborate. Learning online creates a respectful environment for the student who needs to think before speaking out in class.

Archived discussion boards and synchronous sessions can be revisited and reconsidered throughout the course. Classroom discussion is like air, it dissipates the moment it is spoken.

It is easy to zone out in an in-person class or even nap in the back of the room. Online learning promotes student engagement and highlights student disengagement early on, as long as the teacher is monitoring participation.

As one student said, “Remember the telephone? I have called the teacher several times during her posted office hours to get advice, perspective or clarification.” That was 1999, now there are office hours by Collaborate.

“At just not productive for me to spend four hours straight in class on a Saturday morning. I have learned to pace myself, to spend as much time as I need to master particular units in the course. Sometimes, half an hour is all I can take before drifting off, and at other times I get so absorbed in my online assignments that I lose track of time.” This student’s insights address the pace and style of learning that is highly individual and easily accommodated in an online format.

I was convinced. I brought this feedback to the faculty who redesigned the course to have one, in-person orientation session and the remainder of the course in an online format. The next time I taught the new version of the course in 2000, the students were just as engaged, the discussions were insightful and robust, and many of the written assignments were of publishable quality.

Lesson learned – being there, in person, is not a pre-requisite to effective learning. It was just a myth.
The In Focus Newsletter is edited and distributed by Drexel University Online.

Please submit newsletter inquiries to Sabrina Ram at sr62@drexel.edu.

CONNECT WITH DREXEL ONLINE:

/drexeluniversityonline
@drexelonline
search: drexel university online
/youtube/drexelonline
@drexelonline

@DrexelOnline • #ABetterU