

Tennessee's Successful On-Line Degree Program

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the Regents On-line Degree Program in Tennessee from implementation to its current status as one of the fastest growing and profitable on-line education programs in the country and rated in the top three in the nation. Since its implementation in 2001, RODP has exceeded projected enrollment caps every year. The fall 2004 headcount was capped at 6,000 and enrollment capped at 10,000. It was estimated that over 60% of the students were only taking RODP courses. Since the inception of RODP, there has been an increased of over 39% returning students (students that have been out of school at least a year or more) and new student headcount.

Introduction

Tennessee Board of Regents' colleges, universities, and technology centers joined together in the fall of 2001 to offer the Regents Online Degree Programs (RODP) whereby students may access their courses online 24 hours a day—seven days a week. All twenty-seven technology centers in Tennessee (TTCs) deliver and award the following technical certificates: Computer Operator Certificate; Information Processing Technician Certificate; Computer Operation Diploma; Detail Drafter Certificate; Drafting and CAD Technician Certificate; CAD Technician Certificate] and all thirteen two-year community colleges deliver and award the noted associate degrees: Associate of

Arts (A.A.) and Science (A.S.); Associate of Applied Science (A.A.S.) in Professional Studies - Information Technology and Early Childhood Education, and all six TBR universities deliver and award the baccalaureate degrees in Interdisciplinary Studies and Professional Studies with concentrations in Information Technology and Organizational Leadership and master degrees in Education (M.Ed.) and Nursing (MSN).

RODP is one of the nation's top virtual university systems with a mission to meet the educational needs of rural and urban Tennesseans in a non-traditional setting. Students are able to attend college at a more convenient time and location while receiving the same course content and instruction online as on campus. These classes are fully interactive with professor led media rich instructions. Online students graduate with the identical diploma as on campus students. They also receive online student services, advising, access to the virtual library and bookstore, and 24 x 7 live online tutoring in English, Math, and Spanish.

RODP was rated as one of the top three virtual programs in nation by The Center for Academic Transformation Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, 2003; recognized by Southern Regional Electronic Campus (SREC) for online student services, show-cased as an exemplary system wide model at the national WebCT International Conference, 2003; selected as the virtual university of choice by the Asian American E-Learning Education Support Community, 2004; selected for international presentation by the Oxford University Round Table, 2004; and chosen as one of the five successful virtual universities at the upcoming SREC Conference, December 2004.

RODP's Growth and Influence

Since its launch in the fall of 2001, the RODP has served as a way for hundreds of Tennesseans to earn associate's degrees and bachelor's degrees without having to travel to one of the TBR's six university or 13 community college campuses. Recently the 27 technology centers, which offer technical certificates and diplomas in computer operations, drafting, and the upcoming Business Technology, also joined the online program. RODP can deliver education anytime and anywhere a student needs it. Students attend from all over the nation and from fourteen different countries—even a student from Antarctica and a missionary from Haiti.

The concept of offering online degrees is not new, but TBR's effort to consolidate its resources, faculty and staff into one effort is a model is one that has received national attention and accolades. Through RODP, students may choose the institution from which they receive their degrees and still receive full student support and services online.

Each TBR institution employs an RODP Campus Coordinator, and most schools have filled their allotted virtual seats since the program's inception because its popularity has spread by word of mouth. Even though the program has over 4,000 students in just two years, "RODP" and "Regents' Online Degree Program" still aren't familiar terms to most Tennesseans and businesses. They do not know that RODP is the unite collaboration of our finest TN Regents' public higher education schools including TTU, ETSU, APSU, MTSU, UO-Memphis, TSU, and all the community colleges and technical schools where you are now able to obtain your full degree online.

The program has grown to address new statewide needs. RODP has added new degrees and programs like the Master of Education (M.Ed.), additional teaching endorsements in Special Education, English as a Second Language (ESL), Math, associate degree for teacher aides, and the upcoming nursing education-MSN. RODP officials decided the time was right to kickoff a campaign to foster name recognition for the program and provide Tennesseans with more information. Melton says she didn't have to look far to find the people best suited to produce campaign materials for an online degree program.

Effective Use of Technology

The development of a multimedia CD-ROM, an interactive one-stop information center for a first-time user or a student familiar with RODP, was a major accomplishment for attracting students. Dozens of digital video clips offer personal stories from RODP graduates, students, faculty and staff. Information is provided about each TBR university, community college or technical school in the program along with each degree or certificate offered.

For students, the CD-ROM offers a virtual campus community, complete with access to online advisors, tutorials, libraries, a bookstore and study groups. The content includes a section on careers and information for industry about training workforces in specific programs.

The content was built on the program's target markets — working professionals, families, information technology buffs, nursing students, teachers and military personnel—which will remain the same so that pertinent information for those audiences is always provided and upgraded so that RODP will be readily recognized across the state of Tennessee.

Conclusion: A New Beginning

When the full campaign is launched in early 2005, a total of about 12,000 CD-ROMs will be available through TBR institutions. Plans are in the making to send copies to all industry human resource managers in the region who may be interested in either informing their employees about RODP or in using BMC's services.

TBR administrators are thrilled with the project, particularly the CD-ROM, and this month awarded honors to Tennessee Tech for its innovative work. By using a member institution to produce the campaign not only do they use its resources wisely in these tough budget times, but the program posted a substantial cost saving. The Business Media Center has designed a product that is not only the first of its kind in terms of incorporating a PR Campaign with a teaching and learning tool for students and faculty but a way to unite all of the Regents' forty-five public higher education institutions into offering the best accredited and affordable online programs for the State of Tennessee—making it possible for Tennesseans to know about our quality online programs.