

Capella University is going the distance in online adult education

BY ARLENE SATCHELL

One institution interested in being a front-runner in online learning is Capella University, and at its helm sits Michael Offerman. He's a modern day crusader for adult learning who joined Capella Education Company in 2001. He's now the president and leader of a team committed to "extending access to high quality bachelor's, master's, doctoral and certificate programs for adults who seek to maximize their personal and professional potential."

A Midwest native, Offerman grew up in rural Iowa until his early adulthood. In 1970 he received a bachelor's degree in history and education from the University of Iowa and subsequently joined the workforce. A stint as a trainer in the Social Security Administration gave Offerman his first taste of teaching, which he thoroughly enjoyed. He returned to college to pursue a master's degree in education administration at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, and graduated in 1979 at age 30.

Offerman later attained a doctorate in education from Northern Illinois University. From 1994 to 2001, he was dean of the division of continuing education at University of Wisconsin-Extension. In 1997, a Center for Learning Innovations was proposed, and Offerman was flagged as its first executive director.



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Breaking new ground in Wisconsin

The Center's mandate involved training and support in educational technology, courseware development and production as well as providing online services to the students, faculty and staff of 15 University of Wisconsin (UW) institutions.

"I had to learn how to help adult students bring their experiences alive in the classroom; to learn from one another and to find out what prevented others from going back to school," says Offerman. He forged partnerships with other e-learning entities as he established several online UW degree offerings.

"Mike Offerman has been a tremendous leader in the online education field both in Wisconsin and nationally, and this appointment is recognition of that leadership role," remarked UW System president Katharine Lyall in May 2001 while announcing Offerman's move to Capella University.

"I completed most of my higher education as an adult learner. And I was already steeped in adult learning in Wisconsin when Capella came calling," says Offerman.

Eyes on the ball

As a result of an initial public offering of common stock, Capella Education Company is now a publicly traded corporation. Jerry Halverson, now a senior Capella faculty member in its School of Education, has been there since 1998 when the organization had only 500 students. Previously as vice president of academic quality, Halverson worked with Offerman to streamline the university's offerings. "I really respected him. He didn't micro-manage you," recalls Halverson.

"The 'for-profits' are really strange ducks. Business and education are not natural bedfellows. It takes really skilled people to make a winning combination. An alert, knowledgeable, experienced visionary can make it happen. He must realize that every-

day provides another dialogue in which you have to keep your eye on the ball, which in our case is continually improving the learning experience for students," Halverson adds.

As competition heats up, institutions like Capella must demonstrate that they can deliver education that is as good as or better than their brick-and-mortar counterparts. "We need people who can discuss things passionately and openly, because here we place a stronger emphasis on innovation than on preservation," Halverson says.

Capella found the right qualities in Offerman.

Capella's e-learner profile

In September 2006, 16,400 learners were enrolled at Capella University. Eighty-four percent were enrolled in graduate level business, information technology, education, human services and psychology endeavors. The other 16 percent are undergrads.

Females make up 63 percent of the student population, and 65 percent of students are of white, non-Hispanic origin. Eighty-nine percent are enrolled part time. Capella's e-campus extends across 50 states and 63 foreign nations. Some 84 percent of Capella students hail from urban centers, and 16 percent reside in rural areas.

Capella offers 13 degree programs, 76 specializations, 16 certificate programs and 766 courses. "Our average student's age is 40," says Irene Silber, director of public relations at Capella. She adds that e-learning technology is not a barrier for 40-year-olds. And "Learning who these learners are/were was very compelling to me," says Offerman.

e-Challenges

"I want to see education at all levels available to as many people as possible at all levels of society," he says. Offerman attributes this love for education to his grandmother, a school-teacher who instilled a high value of learning in him as a child.

Meanwhile, online institutions are

grappling with issues similar to the traditional schools when it comes to student finance. Seventy-six percent of Capella's students receive some financial aid. "We're proud that we can offer some programs to assist students. We educate them about ways to finance their education and what it means to borrow money," says Offerman.

As online enrollment numbers grow, web marketing companies like eLearners.com are using new business models to assist the recruiting efforts of clients that include Capella. eLearners.com displays an online directory of 150 online institutions and furnishes leads to those schools according to their specifications.

"We allow shoppers to compare institutions according to cost and delivery formats. They differ quite a lot among online schools," says Terrence Thomas, vice president of business development at eLearners.com, who expects his company's site to soon exceed one million unique monthly visitors.

For nearly five years Capella has been a client of eLearners.com, receiving as many as 20,000 monthly unique shopper visits, of whom 1,000 to 2,000 request additional information.

e-Future

After 14 years as a privately held for-profit corporation, Capella went public in November 2006. Its initial public offering of 4,000,000 common shares sold at \$20 per share. Since then NASDAQ trading price for CPLA has ranged between \$23 to \$29 per share.

Offerman and his executives watch course interest in the online marketplace. They expect it to help them maintain a strong list of course and degree offerings.

Offerman sums it up. "It's been rewarding to see the growth we've had. Our learners and faculty take pride in being associated with Capella University. I'm in a happy place right now." ■

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