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### Why Online? GWU Tracks Trends in Higher Education

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# Why Online? GWU Tracks Trends in Higher Education

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Office of University  
Communications

November 24, 2015

## *GWU Continues Standards of Excellence in Online Learning Environments*

Flexibility. Convenience. Access. These are all reasons someone might choose to pursue an online education instead of a more traditional face-to-face delivery. In 2012, the U.S. Department of Education reported more than 5.5 million people seeking a higher education—roughly 25 percent of students—were taking at least one course online. Experts predict those numbers will continue to climb. As eLearners.com reports, “With growth, online degrees will be not just *accepted* but *expected* as a component of tomorrow’s college education.”

As a longtime leader in online delivery, Gardner-Webb University was recently named the No. 1 institution in North Carolina by OnlineColleges.net for best online programs in the state, an honor that recognizes GWU’s significant commitment to delivering quality educational opportunities to students in multiple formats. Gardner-Webb University online programs are becoming increasingly popular among a range of individuals who desire to complete either an undergraduate or professional degree. They need the convenience of online delivery without sacrificing the quality offered by an award-winning, fully-accredited institution.

Dr. Jennifer Buckner serves as an assistant professor of English at GWU, and is an advisor and instructor in the University’s online Master of Arts in English program. She understands the appeal of online options for students.

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Dr. Jennifer Buckner

“We live in a world that grows increasingly flat with each new technology, no longer limited by geography or traditional workday schedules,” Buckner offered. “Online learning provides more flexibility for individuals whose schedules, locations, or personal lives don’t permit them to sit in traditional classrooms.”

Dr. Janet Land is a professor of English at GWU and she also serves as the director for the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL). Through her work with CETL, she has noted a variety of opportunities and challenges as courses evolve from primarily face-to-face delivery into online or web-enhanced, hybrid versions.

“As an instructor, I’m thrilled to meet and work with strong, intelligent, motivated students,” she shared. “Many professors fear the loss of community in online courses. Fortunately, I’ve learned that it is more than possible to maintain those interactions.”

While there are benefits and drawbacks to a variety of learning environments, online modalities offer some appealing differentiators. According to eLearners.com, “The Internet makes it possible to unite students and instructors without long commutes or fixed class schedules. Working professionals can study at night. Stay-at-home parents can study during kids’ naptime. Military members can study from any new post to which they are assigned. None of these people are lazy or prone to cutting corners. On the contrary, they are busy, ambitious learners, who simply need a better college design.” Geographic barriers and environmental friendliness can play important roles in the overall appeal of online delivery.

“Online learning is, perhaps, more structured simply because it has to be in order to provide clarity and navigation for students who don’t have a professor there to answer instant questions,” Buckner shared. “When I started, I was afraid that I wouldn’t really *know* the students in our program. But I feel like I know my advisees personally. I’ve been fortunate to work with them closely, and I consider them as individually recognized as any of our on-campus students.”

To help ensure that Gardner-Webb is delivering the very best in online courses, the University has partnered with Quality Matters (QM), an organization that uses a peer review approach to assure quality in online classes and provides professional development for faculty members who teach Internet-delivered courses. Recently, online courses authored by Gardner-Webb University faculty members Dr. Tracy Arnold, Dr. Sydney Brown and Dr. Jennifer Putnam earned QM national recognition.

“The QM standards incorporate a relational component standard into the courses, so we’ve been very intentional in the way we’ve done that,” Brown explained. “It’s the opposite of limiting in terms of what we can bring to class. We are able to rely on the knowledge and expertise of our students in a lot of ways, and we are able to bring in the knowledge and expertise of people in the field that we would not necessarily get to do in a face-to-face environment.”

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Dr. Sydney Brown

As Gardner-Webb continues to lead the way in online learning among institutions in North Carolina and beyond, administrators and faculty members are remaining committed to providing the very best in quality and value.

“Some have speculated that the pure face-to-face class may soon be a thing of the past as the ubiquity of the Internet means that almost all classes are evolving toward some form of blended learning,” said Dr. Ben Leslie, GWU Provost and Executive Vice President.

“Gardner-Webb was part of the first wave of universities experimenting with online learning in the early 2000s, and we have certainly learned a lot. But most importantly, we’ve learned how critical it is to keep up with what’s going on in a rapidly-changing field, to pay attention to innovation, to focus on the needs of the online student, and to ensure that our online faculty have the resources and support they need to excel.”

*Located in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb University provides exceptional educational opportunities within a Christian environment, preparing students to think critically, to succeed professionally, and to serve faithfully as members of their local and global communities.*