

Albuquerque Journal (NM)

July 28, 2008

First Online-Only Degrees Given at WNMU

By Martin Salazar Journal Staff Writer

Four hours and 283 miles separated Albuquerque resident Jenna Harper from the university offering to take all of her college credits and apply them toward a bachelor's in criminal justice.

Ten years ago, that might have been a problem. Today, not so much.

Harper took advantage of Western New Mexico University's fully online degree program, and two months ago she and another Albuquerque resident, Yvette Sanchez, received their criminal justice bachelor's degrees. They did it without ever stepping foot on Western's Silver City campus, becoming the first students to graduate through the school's online program.

"It was just perfect," said Harper, who is now studying for the law school entrance exam.

Sanchez, a paralegal at a law firm, said she worked a full and part-time job while completing her degree from Western. She said she squeezed in her school work when time allowed, mostly between 9 p.m. and 4 a.m.

"If I can accomplish this with two kids, anyone can," she said.

The women registered online. They bought their books online. They participated in class discussions online and took quizzes and tests over the Internet.

While both completed their first two years at Central New Mexico Community College, Western offers the full four years online.

"It seems to me that this is increasingly where education is going," said New Mexico Higher Education Secretary Reed Dasenbrock. "We are moving into a new era."

Dasenbrock said the exciting thing about online education is that it levels the playing field for all New Mexicans, giving someone living in a remote part of the state far from a university a chance to tap into a degree program offered hundreds of miles away.

Western now offers three fully online degree programs. Besides the bachelor's in criminal justice, the school offers an online bachelor's in rehabilitation services and a master's degree in interdisciplinary studies. All three online programs were granted accreditation in May by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools.

Western charges students taking online classes the same tuition as traditional students plus an extra \$25 fee per credit for the online classes. The extra money goes toward infrastructure support and faculty training.

Donna Rees, Western's dean of extended university, said the school has been able to offer its online bachelor's in criminal justice because of funding secured by Rep. Dianne Hamilton, R-Silver City. The online criminal justice program went from 60 students two years ago to its current 127, Rees said.

She said Western is interested in expanding its online degree offerings but is cautious because it wants to ensure that the online programs retain the quality of the traditional classes.

"We have students from all over New Mexico that are enrolling in our interdisciplinary master's of arts program," Rees said. "There are even places where they could go to (the University of New Mexico) or (New Mexico State University), but for whatever their circumstances are, this is a better program for them."

Rees said her school's online degree programs have attracted students from Des Moines, L ordsbu rg, Sa nt a Rosa, Tukumcari, Caballo, Truth or Consequences, La Mesa, Roswell, Clovis, Deming, Las Cruces, Albuquerque and Los Lunas.

UNM and NMSU also offer online degree programs. New Mexico Tech and Highlands do not. Officials at Eastern New Mexico University didn't respond to e-mails about their online degree offerings.

Sanchez said she couldn't have received her B.A. any other way.

"The instructors were great," she said. "They were willing to work with you."

Harper said the only downside to completing her degree online was not having the face-to-face interaction with professors and classmates.

"When you talk to somebody, it's nice to connect with them," she said.

But she said she has no regrets, noting that she was able to tackle her course work when she wanted, she didn't have to fight for parking and she didn't have to spend money fueling up her vehicle to get to class.

Harper said some professors posted videos of their lectures online while others posted outlines of their lectures with the reading assignments. Professors also required students to take part in online discussions about readings, she said. If she got stuck, she'd e-mail her instructors, and they were responsive, she said.

"You need to be very, very organized, because if you fall behind on anything, it starts to feel overwhelming, or you start to feel like I can't get this done and then it just kind of comes crashing down," Harper said. Ditching class

Students struggling with the commute can take more courses online. A5

Caption:

ROBERTO E. ROSALES/JOURNAL Jenna Harper received her bachelor's degree in criminal justice through Western New Mexico University's online program.

Copyright (c) 2008 Albuquerque Journal

Record Number: JD2008072800108