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NEWS

For immediate release

Ouachita Online faculty and staff seek to enhance online learning options

By Anna Hurst

September 21, 2015

For more information, contact OBU's news bureau at newsbureau@obu.edu or (870) 245-5208

ARKADELPHIA, Ark.—In an effort to expand Ouachita Baptist University's borders to include non-residential online students, the university launched Ouachita Online courses in January 2015. The program has seen growth since its establishment, and the university's online staff dedicated their summer to ensuring the program continues to grow.

Ouachita Online offers both a Bachelor of Arts degree in business administration and an Associate of Arts and Bachelor of Arts degree in Christian studies. Courses are offered in eight-week terms with two terms each semester and one summer term.

According to Ashlee Giles, director of online and concurrent enrollment programs, the goal of the program is "to be able to offer a Ouachita education to students who otherwise wouldn't have been able to enroll as a residential student."

Ouachita Online Fall Term 1 for 2015 began in August with 18 students enrolled. Numbers are expected to continue to increase for Fall Term 2 which will begin Oct. 19. Dr. Rob Hewell, coordinator of online course development, said he anticipates having "more courses ready to offer to an already increasing online student community and more faculty trained and growing as online course designers and instructors."

To become well versed in up-to-date online teaching techniques, Giles, Hewell and Marla Rigsby, instructional design and technology specialist for Ouachita Online, enrolled in an online course, sponsored by the Distance Education Professional Development program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

"The idea is that we can better equip our online students with the tools necessary to succeed if we better understand what it is like to be an online student," Giles said. "Within the course, we are learning more about who our online students are, the role of the online instructor, planning course content and learning activities and how to manage the course."

Upon completion of the course, the three will each receive their "Fundamentals of Online Teaching Certificate."

"As with any specialized program like Ouachita Online, having faculty and staff who have achieved a level of professional development through a recognized training program strengthens the work of those persons," Hewell said. "We hope to leverage the knowledge and experience gained through the Certificate Program to develop people who, as designers and instructors, create and teach courses that honor OBU's tradition and reputation for excellent academic programs."

In addition to the certification course, the group traveled to Madison, Wis., in August to attend the "Distance Teaching & Learning Conference." The conference, also sponsored by the University of Wisconsin-Madison, celebrated its 31st year of bringing together distance education professionals to learn about the latest trends, techniques and research in the field.

“The conference immersed us in the distance teaching and learning conversation with professionals and learners alike,” Hewell explained. “We were both challenged and encouraged. Challenged because we began to catch a vision of where we need be headed with Ouachita Online for a productive and successful future. We were encouraged because even in this first year of offering courses through Ouachita Online, we’re doing quite a few things right. We’re on the right path and gaining momentum.”

Giles added that the group was “so grateful for the opportunity to be able to attend the conference” due to the insight gained concerning the needs, challenges and expectations of online students today, along with helpful tools and technology that professors can apply to create a more interactive, energetic and fruitful classroom experience.-

“What the research shows is the ‘read and quiz, read and quiz, read and quiz’ method is not effective in online learning and it doesn’t help with retention,” Giles said. Noting that online students “want more,” she added. “Ouachita Online strives to offer our online community the ‘more’ they are seeking – with professors who care, support services at their fingertips and courses that will engage and motivate them to complete their degrees.”

For more information or to enroll in Ouachita Online, visit www.obu.edu/online or contact Ashlee Giles at gilesa@obu.edu or 870-245-5200.