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RIT to extend mission with online institute

By NATE DOUGHERTY - 5/31/2013

Rochester Institute of Technology has developed a program that allows students from diverse backgrounds to take graduate-level courses, talk with other students, hear lectures by professors and even talk about the university's hockey team.

All of it is taking place online.

RIT has created the Innovative Learning Institute, meant to offer a meaningful and wide-ranging learning experience for students as well as to provide help for faculty.

There are three units under the ILI umbrella, including the Center for Multidisciplinary Studies and a teaching and learning studio assisting RIT faculty. The third component, RIT Online, is the outward-facing unit that delivers the curriculum to students.

The initial focus for RIT Online will be on people returning to school after time away. These students, many of whom have been working, can build on the experience they already have with a flexible slate of course offerings.

This flexibility will also make courses more affordable than traditional graduate programs requiring more courses, officials added.

"This gives us the ability to deliver education beyond the 100-mile radius of our campus and do so at a cost that's affordable to more people," said Therese Hannigan, interim director of ILI and RIT Online. "RIT has been great at delivering career-focused education, and now we can do that in an online space."

Though ILI is a major venture for RIT, it is not the university's first foray into online education. RIT had been a leader in online learning going back as far as 20 years, said Neil Hair, interim executive director of the Innovative Learning Institute.

The focus shifted to other programs in the mid-2000s, but the expertise and innovation in online learning remained, he added.

"We have a lot of history that allows us to create something that takes advantage of RIT's key strengths and abilities," Hair said.

RIT plans to differentiate its online learning program with what its creators call a "virtual campus experience." Students have access to the same support services available to their on-campus peers, such as tutoring and lectures from professors.

"People who get a four-year degree have that experience, and when they come to campus for the first time get an orientation that shows them all the things we offer," Hannigan said. "Now we can offer online students things we traditionally offer on campus, like coffee shops in virtual space where faculty members can give talks and a student lounge where they can talk about their course of study."

Wellness will be a major focus of the online support system, Hair noted. Students can talk with health and wellness staff members, get help with nutrition and connect to online courses related to health and exercise, such as Zumba.

"If people are coming back to retool their careers, why not address their wider goals too?" Hair said. "They get that campus experience that's more than just getting a degree."

The RIT Online program opens to students in the fall, with courses selected to meet the needs of graduate students, particularly those from RIT. University officials sent an email to alumni, asking which courses they would like to have taken but did not have time for.

The results matched closely with suggestions from a consultant in putting together the curriculum, Hannigan noted. All are selected to correspond with areas of job growth.

"We did this very strategically, making sure there are jobs in those areas and students are getting the skills and training to fit perfectly in those areas," she said.

Beginning in the fall, courses such as website design will be offered as part of informal clusters of courses. Many of the students have experience in their fields and are looking to enhance their skills rather than seek a degree, so RIT officials crafted a program that allows more flexibility in the courses they take.

The courses can be taken individually but are offered in groups of three or five that can be bundled together to create degrees later.

"If there's someone who maybe doesn't need an entire degree but needs to learn HTML, they can take that course individually, but if they change their mind, there are other ones in management or other complementary areas," Hannigan said.

In the second year, RIT officials plan to extend the program with new offerings, and in the third year they will explore expanding the program to include undergraduate courses as well.

"We want to provide a seamless crossover for students looking to enhance their skills and careers," Hair said. "We also want to partner more effectively with industry so students at the point of graduation have employers looking for them. This will be an entire experience from beginning to end in terms of repositioning yourself and your career."

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