CSW Distance Education Program Wins Tennessee Alliance for Continuing Higher Education Award

In recognition of its outstanding work in making social work education accessible to those students who are unable to travel to campus to attend classes, the college’s MSSW distance education program received the Tennessee Alliance for Continuing Higher Education’s (TACHE) credit program award in November.

TACHE (http://www.tnache.org/) is an organization of continuing higher education professionals that advocates better lives for Tennesseans through greater access to higher education and workforce development. The purpose of the credit program award is to recognize an individual or institution demonstrating outstanding and/or innovative credit programming.

“We’re honored by TACHE’s recognition of the college’s distance education program’s outstanding credit programming,” says Sherry Cummings, PhD, professor and associate dean of the college at the Nashville campus. “We look forward to the continued growth of our distance education program and the further provision of needed graduate-level social work education to working individuals and those living in rural communities.”

With an enrollment of about 125 students, the college’s MSSW distance education program, located on the Nashville campus, has helped many students.

One student, Reba McBride, is on track to complete her master’s degree in spring 2011, something the wife and mother of two says otherwise might not have been possible. “The program has to be designed to accommodate the unique needs of those like myself who are actively involved in career and family life,” McBride says. “For me, the most valuable aspect of the distance education program is the ability to log in to the system from any location and at any time. Last spring, I ‘attended’ class, researched, and submitted a paper from Myrtle Beach, where I was on vacation with my family.”

Similar to its on-campus counterpart, the MSSW distance education program requires 36 hours for a graduate degree for advanced-standing students in social work but allows students to complete their degree without daily travel to campus. All course content is delivered online, along with limited face-to-face Saturday meetings that complete the blended approach to the delivery of the program.

Kate McClernon-Chafﬁn, distance education coordinator for the college, expresses her appreciation for the award, stating, “I am very proud of this recognition as the TACHE award really speaks to the mission of social work and the UTCSW. I hope that we can continue to provide an excellent education to students across the state in order to improve communities.”

In an interview with Dean Sowers (see article at left), UTK Chancellor Jimmy Cheek noted the importance of distance education at the university: “I think distance education is very important for us as a campus and as a system... that’s exactly what we need to be doing...providing access to students that can’t necessarily come on campus.”

—Kirche Rogers

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JC: Yes, I do know that.

KS: We were very pleased. We have a distance education MSW program, and we are going through the process of approval for an online DSW program, which is an advanced clinical doctorate. Could you talk about how you see the role of online education and distance education for potential students at UT?

JC: I think distance education is very important for us as a campus and as a system. I discussed this with the president this morning and told him about the award you (the College of Social Work) got for distance education at the master’s level and told him we wanted to launch a professional doctorate that will serve the students, not only in Tennessee, but around the country. That’s exactly what we need to be doing. . . providing access to students that can’t necessarily come on campus.

KS: It has been wonderful to be able to reach out and provide education to persons who can’t quit their jobs and leave their families and come to campus. It’s very fulfilling. We’re facing a budget cut in the future, now that the stimulus money will be going away, and you’ve done a wonderful job of leading this campus through a proactive planning process, and I think we are all prepared to go through this. But I wonder if you could talk about what the budget cuts of the last few years have done to UT?

JC: They have reduced our budget on this campus by $57 million. That’s 30 percent of the resources that this state one time gave us. That’s a huge amount of money. We’ve made up about $11 million of that in tuition increases. And so we are going to have mechanisms in place that include state support and tuition support that help us meet the critical needs we have for faculty, staff, and graduate students.

KS: Lastly, as you look into the future, what do you see as our greatest challenges?

JC: Maintaining our commitment to high quality education for our students and a commitment by our faculty and our staff to continue to work extremely hard. We have asked more and more of everyone, and it’s been very difficult economic times. At the same time, we need to celebrate our victories. There have been some things that we’ve done extremely well, and we need to tell everybody about those.

KS: I want to thank you for taking time to share yourself with our alums, students, and friends of the college. We are fortunate to have such a wonderful leader who’s taking us into a bright future.

—Betsy DeGeorge is Assistant Director of Publications and Media Technology at SWORPS

To view Chancellor Cheek’s web page detailing his push-to-the-top-25 plan, go to www.utk.edu/volvision-top25