

The True Value of Scholarships for Online Students

Thomas Jensen and Karen Adams

Kari Nuskiewicz, a single mother of four, was struggling to find the time to pursue a graduate program that held deep meaning to her as a victim of domestic violence. "I dedicated myself to obtaining knowledge that would keep my daughters and myself safe. But more importantly, gaining the resources to prevent women and children from going through the experience or guide them if they had," she said.

Already successful in earning a bachelor's degree in child psychology, Nuskiewicz,

of Schofield, Wisconsin, graduated in May from the University of Wisconsin-Platteville (UW-Platteville Online) with a master's degree in criminal justice with an emphasis in victim and offender services. She also received a Child Advocacy Studies Certificate through UW-Platteville Online.

Nuskiewicz and the 1,000 graduates before her are the reason that throughout its 35-year history, the UW-Platteville Distance Learning Center has stayed true to its belief that working adults should be



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able to advance their education without putting their lives on hold.

"Many of our students are mothers and fathers who spend as much time in a car or airplane as they do at home," said Dawn Drake, executive director of Alternative Delivery Systems at UW-Platteville. "They're entitled to pursue a degree that they and their employers can be confident in and is of the highest quality" (Personal communication, June 15, 2012).

One way UW-Platteville helps students achieve their goals is by offering a variety of scholarships for students, including Nuskiewicz who earned the Dawn Drake Excellence in Distance Education Scholarship. The annual scholarship, first awarded in 2005, was established by Drake in recognition of the important role that distance education has played in her life, both personally and professionally. The award of \$500 also recognizes the many sacrifices that distance learners make to successfully juggle education, career, and family.

"I put a lot of effort into my studies, with the hope of obtaining the scholarship, making my daughters proud, and easing the financial burden of school," Nuskiewicz said.

Currently working with The Women's Community, Inc., in Wausau, Wisconsin, a shelter and resource center for female victims of domestic violence and their children, Nuskiewicz hopes to develop educational programs and materials for mandated reporters and school students.

In many states, including Wisconsin, mandated reporters are professionals who, in the ordinary course of their work and because they have regular contact with children, disabled persons, senior citizens, or other identified vulnerable populations, are required to report (or cause a report to be made) whenever financial, physical or other types of abuse have been observed or is suspected, or when there is evidence of neglect, knowledge of an incident, or an imminent risk of serious harm.

Nuskiewicz is just one example of the increasing need to help students financially. Nationally, more than 6.1 million students were taking at least one online course during the fall 2010 term, an increase of 560,000 students over the previous year, according to the Sloan Consortium. Nuskiewicz noted,

There are many grants available to single mothers who return to school for bachelor's degrees, however not for those who have accomplished that, yet find it necessary to move forward to pursue a desirable degree that will support their family. (Personal communication, June 18, 2012)

Normally, when the Distance Learning Center reaches out to students regarding the "Dawn Drake" scholarship, the Distance Learning Center Scholarship Committee, on average, receives a little more than a handful of applications or serious inquiries. This year, the committee pored over nearly 30 applications, with more than 500 students expressing interest in the scholarship.

In January, UW-Platteville and the Distance Learning Center reached a top 20 spot in GetEducated.com's "Best Buys" for an online master's degree in criminal justice. It was the second time in less than five months that the university's online programs had earned a Best Buy designation. GetEducated.com, an online consumer watchdog and advocate for prospective distance education students, rates and compares online schools and degrees based on cost and quality, student satisfaction and credibility. UW-Platteville Online provides a master's degree in criminal justice for under \$20,000.

"We're constantly looking for ways to be more efficient and more effective," Drake said. "And most importantly, providing a high quality education through forward-thinking instruction, student-driven course design, and attentive and intuitive student services" (Personal communication, June 15, 2012).

UW-Platteville's distance learning program began in 1978, offering a single bachelor's degree—in business administration—and its first graduating class numbered five in 1981. The university launched its first 100% online program in 1999 with a master's degree in project management and its first online graduating class consisted of 13 people in 2001.

Today, UW-Platteville Online serves 2,500 students worldwide through its eight degree programs at both the graduate and undergraduate levels, including its newest master's degrees in organizational change leadership, integrated supply chain management, and distance education leadership. UW-Platteville Online's other programs include master's degrees in criminal justice, engineering, project management, along with bachelor's degree programs in criminal justice and business administration.

Student support is the essence of UW-Platteville's Distance Education programs. Outreach Specialist Amy Griswold, who just received her online master's degree in organizational leadership and is former chair of the scholarship committee, knows firsthand how important encouragement is for an online learner. "Sometimes that support doesn't come in the form of a cheerleader or a motivational life coach, but from the people we are with every day, who are proud of us and want to see us succeed."

Often, scholarships are not so much about money as much as affirmation for students, particularly for those who study online. "People think I'm crazy, but I'm creating a future for myself and my family. Nobody can take my education from me. It is something that becomes part of me," said Amber George, a student in UW-Platteville Online's bachelor's degree program in criminal justice and an applicant for the Dawn Drake Scholarship.

Drake agrees.

If this ever becomes completely about the money, then I don't want anything to do with it. I'm not going to sacrifice the quality of the programs because that's not fair to anybody. The vigor associated with high quality online programs at UW-Platteville keeps students motivated and appreciative of their experiences. (Personal communication, June 15, 2012)

Starting as director of the Distance Learning Center in 1998, Drake developed training curriculum for faculty to put courses online, served as liaison with University of Wisconsin Learning Innovations to develop a process to better serve online students, developed an infrastructure to support learners at a distance, and assisted with development of 25 online courses.

Named executive director of alternative delivery systems in 1999, Drake oversees all aspects of continuing and distance education at UW-Platteville, shares ideas and collaborates with advisory boards, and has increased participation in classes by 1,200 percent.

Current and/or prospective students can visit www.GoUWP.com, call 800 362-5460, or e-mail disted@uwplatt.edu to learn more about UW-Platteville Online and its scholarship opportunities.

Below are overviews of the various scholarship opportunities through UW-Platteville and its Distance Learning Center.

DAWN DRAKE EXCELLENCE IN DISTANCE EDUCATION (\$500)

Who should apply: UW-Platteville degree-seeking distance education students.

Background: Created to recognize the important role that distance education has played in the life of Dawn Drake, executive director of Alternative Delivery Systems at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, both personally and professionally. It also recognizes the many sacrifices that distance learners make to successfully juggle

education, career, and family. Deadline is February 15 each year.

ANA ALVAREZ-HOLMBERG MEMORIAL SCHOLARSHIP (\$2,000)

Who should apply: Members of Project Management Institute of Minnesota and American Society for Training and Development, the ASTD-Twin Cities Chapter (or sponsored by a member).

Background: The scholarship's namesake left her mark through her kindness, commitment, support of others, honesty, and energy before she died in 2005 at the age of 46. Through her commitment to several organizations, her family, her friends, her faith community and to the community at large, she became a model of service and volunteerism.

GET EDUCATED EXCELLENCE IN ONLINE EDUCATION SCHOLARSHIP (\$1,000)

Who should apply: U.S. citizens enrolled in an online program with minimum GPA of 3.0

Background: This online degree financial aid program is funded and maintained by the distance learning experts at GetEducated.com as a part of its mission to help cut the cost of online college. Awards are based on both merit and financial aid need. Previous recipients include UW-Platteville Online students.

SOCIETY FOR HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT STUDENT SCHOLARSHIPS (\$500 TO \$5,000)

Who should apply: SHRM student members with a valid SHRM ID number as of October 15.

Background: Undergraduate applicants must have a cumulative grade point average of at least 3.0 on a 4.0 point scale and must have completed at least one human resource management course. Graduate

student applicants must be enrolled in a master's degree program and clearly pursuing an emphasis area in human resources and human resource-related program (such as business, psychology, or labor relations) and have completed at least six hours of graduate course work with at least a 3.5 grade point average.

PHI KAPPA PHI LOVE OF LEARNING SCHOLARSHIPS (\$500)

Who should apply: Phi Kappa Phi members pursuing graduate studies.

Background: Love of Learning Awards help fund post-baccalaureate studies and/or career development for active Phi Kappa Phi members to include (but not be limited to): graduate or professional studies, doctoral dissertations, continuing education, career development, travel related to teaching/studies, et cetera. A total of 140 awards, at \$500 each, will be distributed.

THE PROJECT MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION SCHOLARSHIP (\$1,000 UP TO FULL TUITION)

Who should apply: varies by scholarship.

Background: PMI Educational Foundation's Scholarships and Awards Program supports development of the best and brightest future project management professionals and other professionals worldwide through learning opportunities

THE MARY CONE BARRIE SCHOLARSHIP (\$2,500)

Who should apply: students enrolled in a course or program through the continuing education division of any American or Canadian accredited college or university

Background: Destiny Solutions launched The Mary Cone Barrie Scholarship Award in 2008. Mary Cone Barrie

(1945-2009) was the organization's first customer and was an inspiration.

ONLINE SCHOLARSHIP AND FINANCIAL AID RESOURCES

University of Wisconsin Platteville Financial Aid Office (www.uwplatt.edu/finaid/) provides budget and loan counseling.

Higher Education Location Program (www.tinyurl.com/84tqc3c) provides links to information about financial aid, scholarships, and other opportunities for adults to

finance their education, especially within the Wisconsin system.

Federal Student Aid (www.fafsa.gov), an office of the U.S. Department of Education, ensures that all eligible individuals can benefit from federally funded financial assistance for education beyond high school.

REFERENCE

Allen, I. E., & Seaman, J. (2011). *Going the distance: Online education in the United States 2011*. Wellesley MA: Babson Survey Research Group.

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