

## **AC 2009-63: THE IMPORTANCE OF AN ON-CAMPUS RESIDENCY EXPERIENCE IN DISTANCE-EDUCATION PROGRAMS**

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# **The Importance of an On-Campus Residency Experience In Distance Education Programs**

## **Abstract**

This paper discusses the importance of an on-campus residency experience to the success of a distance education program. The benefits of such an experience are described and reinforced with survey data and anecdotal evidence.

Norwich University's School of Graduate Studies is home to 10 Internet-based graduate programs, including a Master of Civil Engineering program. At the completion of 18 months of distance study (36 credits), all students are required to spend one week on the University's campus in Vermont during the month of June. The week's activities include a mix of academic and social events designed to bond the students to each other, to their faculty, and to the bricks and mortar University. Academic debates on professional issues, social events with fellow students, families, faculty, and administrators, and a live-in experience in the University's dormitories are but a few of the activities of residency week. The week culminates with a traditional commencement exercise.

Our experiences have shown these residency events to be a fundamental component of the overall educational process. After attending the events most students agree that Residency is a highly enjoyable and useful experience that should be continued. Live, in-front-of-an-audience capstone design project presentations during the week, peer reviewed by students and faculty, present an opportunity for final academic and professional education and training as part of the graduate program. Just as important, the week provides them with irreplaceable opportunities to cement relationships with classmates and faculty, as well as being a key vehicle for the University to begin building life-long relationships with its newest alumni.

## **Introduction**

Colleges and universities are continually searching for ways to "bond" students to campus; i.e. to provide them with a sense of place with the goal of creating loyal alumni. Historically faculty and staff were required to focus their relationship building activities on only two categories of students: residential and commuter. Today many institutions are finding it increasingly necessary to add a third category: distance students.

Norwich University's School of Graduate Studies (SGS) is home to 10 Internet-based graduate programs, including a Master of Civil Engineering program. At the completion of 18 months of distance study (36 credits), all students are required to spend one week on the University's campus in Vermont during the month of June. The week's activities include a mix of academic and social events designed to bond the students to each other, to their faculty, and to the bricks and mortar University. Academic debates on professional issues, social events with fellow students, families, faculty, and administrators, and a live-in experience in the University's dormitories are but a few of the activities of residency week. The week culminates with a traditional commencement exercise.

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Another interesting phenomenon is revealed when the institutional bonding behaviors of on-campus and distance students are compared based on age. Institutions face different alumni building challenges when dealing with “traditional” versus “non-traditional” aged students. The primary focuses of traditional students, whether residential or commuter, tend to be their studies, their classmates, and extracurricular activities such as athletics, student clubs, Greek organizations, etc. Non-traditional students tend to focus strictly on their studies, often with no participation in extracurricular activities and little out-of-class interaction with their fellow students. When not in class their time is typically dedicated to family and employment issues. By virtue of their age, distance students fall almost exclusively into this second category of behavior. This, combined with their remote, off-campus location, creates extraordinary challenges in the alumni building/bonding area.

### **The Primary Objectives of Residency**

There are two primary objectives of requiring an on-campus Residency as part of a distance learning curriculum. The first is to present a forum to learn public presentation skills of technical material. The second objective is the cementing of student-to-student and student-to-faculty relationships that began in the online world.

### **True Public Presentation Skills Can Not Be Learned Without Residency**

In many engineering and science master’s programs, a thesis is the culmination of a master’s degree and is a research project a student performs as part of the requirements to obtain a degree. Each student’s thesis is the culmination of their research, creativity, and scholarship. At Norwich University, the MCE program includes a six credit-hour course which is primarily the research and production of a capstone project. Before the student begins this course they propose a topic and submit an abstract of their proposed research. Residency occurs after the completion of this course, and during Residency each student presents and defends their capstone project in a fashion similar to the defense of a thesis. This presentation occurs during Residency before members of the MCE faculty and the other students.

The students have the opportunity to learn both during their own presentations and also from others in their cohort in this live presentation format in ways that are impossible in a videotaped or “canned production” presentation. One of the best opportunities is to learn first by seeing how other students give their presentations, and then to improve their own skills by doing a presentation. Another of the live presentation opportunities is to read the body language of the audience while presenting and then being able to respond to the favorable or unfavorable audience reaction. In addition, a live presentation is essential to give the student the chance to extemporaneously provide information or react to questions. If the presentation is given in the

on-line arena a student can hide behind the transmission delays and remain anonymous while in a live question-and-answer session the student must face and react to criticism or intense questioning.

Both the students and faculty participate in the question and answer period, i.e. the defense of the capstone project, following each student's presentation. The best critique of a presentation requires reviewers to be in the audience with the presenter to evaluate the use of visual aids by the presenter and obtain the full effect of speaker acoustics including loudness, tone and clarity.

We believe that the Residency presentation experience is essential because most professional presentations will for the foreseeable future continue to be given live at conferences in front of audiences. Remote internet or video taped presentations will not provide real-world experience for students.

### **Student to Student, Student to Faculty and Student to Institution Relationship Building**

We have observed the online student-to-student and student-to-faculty relationships build in each cohort, but these friendships are not fully realized until the students actually meet face-to-face at Residency. There is an excitement that builds in each cohort as the classroom work nears an end and Residency approaches. This knowledge of the impending Residency provides glue for many of the online discussions among students in the course work preceding residency. During the last two courses before Residency there are always several discussion topics posted that are related to "Looking forward to meeting you at Residency" or stating something similar to "Wow, Renee, I can't WAIT to actually meet you in person!" after a post of a very strong idea on the discussion board. The bonding and friendships are based on meeting at the University so the University gains long term benefits from its online alumni.

One obvious way Residency helps the University is financially due to the surge in donations after the students attend Residency. A recent student, when completing the end-of-Residency survey, made the comment "made my first donation of \$1000 today and am proud that it will not be my last".<sup>(1)</sup>

One recent unexpected relationship that came out of meeting at Residency was two students who live in different states began the planning of starting a consulting engineering business together. We hope this phenomenon was not a one time event and will continue to occur periodically over the years.

While meeting and building friendships is a great outcome of Residency, we have also seen another effect of meeting as a cohort. When one student dominates every online discussion area, the other members of the cohort are reluctant to meet but at last year's Residency the students found the "dominator" to be one of their best friends after they met face to face. That dominating personality only came out when online and he could hide behind his monitor.

Our observations of relationship building are being seen by other online programs as well. Michele Kazmer<sup>(2)</sup> recently concluded, when comparing student experiences in online programs with and without a residency, that those students without a residency requirement "... built fewer friendships among their student colleagues."

## **The Secondary Objectives of Residency**

### **Spending Time on Campus Lends Credibility to Program**

Distance learning suffers from mixed perceptions of overall quality and rigor. This is similar to perceptions of “diploma mills,” often with questionable accreditation, that will provide graduate or other degrees at a price, with substantial academic credit being provided for life experience. Students unfamiliar with the distance learning institution, because all of their interactions may be virtual, can hold lingering doubts as to the credibility of the program vis-à-vis these diploma mills.

A residency experience brings students into contact with a traditional institution’s physical plant. Although bricks and mortar do not necessarily a credible program make, a student walking onto a traditional-looking campus typically receives a sense of comfort that the distance learning program is associated with an institution of appropriate academic standing. A distance learning program that has a planned residency knows that the student will anticipate visiting the campus and thus the student will likely infer program credibility during the process of deciding whether to apply and matriculate.

Anecdotally, faculty and staff of Norwich University’s program have overheard statements of satisfaction (and to some degree, relief) during the residency experience. During Residency in 2007, one student was heard to remark something to the effect of, “I was just very happy to pull into town and see that there actually was a set of traditional college campus buildings and that it was not just a picture on a computer.” This sentiment was shared by others, no doubt providing a deeper level of satisfaction that their program would meet the standards expected of residential programs at the University, as well as indicating that there is a concern out there for storefront educational programs.

### **Opportunities for Faculty Team Building**

A large percentage of SGS faculty members are part-time adjuncts. Much like our students, many are scattered across the country, if not the world. Utilizing today’s communication technology our faculty are very successful at collaborating on curricular and general program management issues but coming together once each year at Residency provides many other opportunities.

Time is always reserved during Residency Week for “Department Meeting” type activities. These face-to-face meetings are designed as quality control and improvement opportunities where faculty share ideas, discuss qualitative program issues related to mission of the program, pedagogical issues that thread throughout the program, etc. In addition, the awareness that such activities are taking place may provide a sense of “comfort” to students who obtained their undergraduate degrees in traditional programs and are accustomed to seeing regular collaboration among faculty.

Spending time on campus also gives Course Developers and SGS Information Technology staff opportunities to explore, discuss, and experiment with the latest distance learning technology.

For example, at our most recent event the Course Developer for our “Physiochemical and Biological Processes in Water and Wastewater Treatment” course accompanied an SGS Instructional Designer to a local wastewater treatment plant. While on site they recorded raw video (accompanied by narration from the Developer) of key equipment and processes of the plant. This raw video was subsequently edited and incorporated into a Flash-based animation of the treatment process that included pop-up descriptions of the various components. This tool is now included in the course where students can view the entire feature at their leisure as often as needed.

Finally, in much the same manner that Residency bonds the soon-to-be alumnus to the institution, the geographically scattered faculty members who may only set foot on campus once each year can bond as well. Most of our adjunct faculty are graduates of other institutions and, prior to joining NU, may only have bonds to their alma mater.

### **Importance of not “Over-using” Residency**

Although this paper emphasizes the usefulness of a residency experience for students, it is important to recognize that distance-learning students intentionally chose a nonresidential experience. Accordingly, programs that require multiple campus visits may lose part of their market because of inconvenience to the students. Schedule and travel conflicts have been identified as one thing preventing students from engaging in a graduate program<sup>(3)</sup>, and thus requiring multiple residential experiences can be off-putting to a potential student. Norwich University considered a “pre-Residency” (student visit to campus at start of the program) in addition to its current end-of-program Residency but decided against implementing one for this reason.

One of Norwich University’s distance-learning faculty, in recent investigations of a distance-learning doctoral program to pursue, decided that multiple residency trips during the course of a program (sometimes more than one per year), without substantial proof of their necessity, made certain programs unpalatable. In addition, a 2007 survey of Norwich University Residency students<sup>(1)</sup> indicated that at least a handful would have preferred a shorter residency or none at all. From this it can be inferred that a more time-consuming residency experience may have either resulted in the loss of these students or a lower level of satisfaction. Thus, a balance must be struck between the legitimate and necessary residency experience and an over-use of the experience that may result in lower student enrollment.

### **Building Generous Alumni**

Emotional bonding with an institution is a likely factor in generating alumni support, and such bonding inevitably improves with some physical interaction with a campus. Colleges and universities with high commuter student populations often struggle to obtain alumni financial support compared to more traditional, residential institutions. Distance learning is simply the next step of removal of the student from the campus experience that results in alumni donations. Immersion in a physical environment creates a sense of place for students that will linger in their minds. Assuming that the physical experience is an enjoyable one, this will likely increase donor potential among the distance-learning population.

A residency experience also provides a face-to-face opportunity for institutional advancement staff to meet with graduating students. Typically, such personal contact is much sought after by alumni offices. Staff members are able to provide an efficient, consistent message to student cohorts at the same time that the students are experiencing the camaraderie of the residential experience. In addition, it is often a happy time for students, as they enjoy their face-to-face graduation celebration<sup>(3)</sup>, which is an ideal time to discuss the students' long-term relationship to the institution. In addition, through meeting and discussions with specific students, staff may be able to determine additional information peculiar to some students (e.g., ability to donate) that would not be obtainable through typical alumni database information. It also allows the student to speak directly about distance-learning specific items that might benefit from his or her ongoing contributions.

Finally, the residency experience, if conducted on the home campus of the institution, allows students to see first-hand the many images that will likely show up again in future alumni mailings. This is a linkage that would be otherwise lost, or at a minimum would have less of an impact if the student had only viewed such images (e.g., a specific campus building or other landmark) via the computer screen.

It is worth noting here that the Norwich Residency occurs on the institution's campus. Other university programs sometimes have a Residency, but not on a campus. For the Norwich MCE program, the use of an arbitrary meeting location (e.g., a large city) would suggest that the home institution does not serve an important purpose. In addition, going to a "college town" is an unusual experience that many practicing professionals might not otherwise enjoy as part of their professional travels. The campus environment also allows the student to avoid the distractions of major cities. These characteristics all tend to build alumni ties that can later turn into alumni support.

### **Residencies can "Close the Deal" for Distance-Learning Students Wanting to Send their Children to Norwich University's Undergraduate Program**

Parents can have a large impact on the undergraduate school choice of their children. Most colleges and universities stress the importance of a campus visit, often because it is a major selling point for the institution. For distance-learning students with children heading to a traditional residential college, the opportunity to get the parent(s) on campus is invaluable. There can be a significant amount of time available for campus exploration (compared to the typical one-hour campus tour provided by most admissions offices) and there are opportunities for detailed discussions about the undergraduate program with the staff and faculty who are available during Residency.

Moreover, because Residency generally provides time to students for an immersion in the local community (including visits to local restaurants and stores), these Residency participants who are also parents can develop a greater sense of comfort regarding the area and answer their child's questions directly, such as "What is there to do for fun in Northfield, Vermont?" In essence, every distance-learner who attends a campus Residency becomes an ambassador for both the distance program and the overall University itself, including the traditional residential undergraduate programs.

The payoff from this may be especially great for potential undergraduate students from far-away states who otherwise might not trek to Vermont to consider Norwich University. During the 2007 Residency, one parent, an avid skier, made a point to note that he planned to talk about Norwich University as a college choice for his child. Because of Residency, this graduate student (from a state in the deep South) was able to see the appropriateness of the Norwich University undergraduate experience as well as better understand the linkages between ski vacations and the chance to visit his child while at college.

### **Use of Campus Facilities during Summer Season**

Most college campus facilities are severely underutilized during the summer months. Institutions are continually searching for opportunities to put both buildings and staff to profitable use at periods outside of the traditional academic year. Norwich University's School of Graduate Studies' annual Residency events provide just such a use for two weeks (two one-week sessions) each June.

The "bricks and mortar" side of the University benefits from this activity in primarily two ways. Not only are residence halls, dining facilities, etc., generating revenue, but University support staff (e.g., food service, custodial, maintenance, etc.), which are often laid-off at the end of the academic year, can be retained. In addition to the obvious benefits to the individual and the community in which they reside, this practice can also build staff loyalty.

An interesting aside to these summer activities are the additional benefits experienced by the local community. It has been found that the region's businesses experience increases in revenue from students' families who often accompany the student for the entire week and book rooms in local hotels and B&Bs, patronize restaurants, and so forth. In addition, at the conclusion of the day's academic events, our students tend to congregate/socialize at local establishments – much like bricks and mortar undergraduate students. These activities create such a spike in demand that area businesses request that they be notified well in advance of our scheduled events so that they may increase inventory accordingly.

And finally, the pleasant atmosphere of a college campus in summer can play a key role in developing "legacy" students; i.e., children of SGS alumni who enroll in the University as undergraduates. The summer months are often the most beautiful and pristine on college campuses; it is an ideal time to "close the deal" with the whole family.

### **Conclusion**

As distance-learning programs gain a greater share in the higher education market, they must strive to maintain the important, essential aspects of traditional residential programs while not duplicating that entire experience. This is a philosophy typically embraced by institutions that try to provide for commuter students the few key aspects of their experience compared to full-time residential students. Residency – the act of being on a physical campus with a cohort of fellow students for both prescribed purposes as well as personal investigation of the area – is one essential aspect of the experience. As described above, there can be direct, primary benefits to student learning, and there can be many secondary benefits to both the student and the



institution. Distance-learning programs would be well advised to consider an appropriate Residency to enjoy its benefits.

- (1) Norwich University School of Graduate Studies Residency Student Satisfaction Survey – 2007.
- (2) How Do Student Experiences Differ In Online LIS Programs With and Without a Residency, Michelle M. Kazmer, *The Library Quarterly*, Volume 77, Number 4, October 2007
- (3) The University of Wisconsin-Madison's Master of Engineering in Professional Practice (MEPP) Program: The Road to Quality Online Graduate Engineering Education, Wayne P. Pferdehirt, Thomas W. Smith, and Karen R. Al-Ashkar, *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, Volume 9, Issue 2, June 2005.