

Letter to Dr. Rasch

by Rebecca Kirton

November 6, 2000

Dr. Lee Rasch
Western Wisconsin Technical College
LaCrosse, WI 54602

Dr. Rasch:

I am writing to you today because I am interested in seeing Western Wisconsin Technical College offer more classes over the Internet. I believe that students and WWTC would benefit from having more of these types of classes. I am a Human Resource Administration major who is taking Written Communications in the online format.

Currently WWTC offers 18 courses online. These classes are in the areas of business, general education, and health and human services. All the available classes are good choices, but I feel that more classes should be offered. I would like to see such classes as Introduction to Business and Organizational Psychology.

First I would like to explain how WWTC would benefit from having more online classes. Having more programs on the Internet would enhance WWTC's reputation. Online degree programs are the way of the future. I found in a series of articles written by Heather Brossard titled **Ten Ways The Web Will Change The World**, that there are 33 states currently offering complete online degree programs and 5 others looking into such programs. More schools are picking up on this trend; I believe WWTC should follow this trend in order to remain a school of choice for students.

WWTC welcomes people from all backgrounds, but the culture in the La Crosse area is not very diverse. Virtual colleges enables students to take classes from anywhere in the world. WWTC students would have more exposure to other cultures by being in a class with others around the world. WWTC currently offers a class in cultural diversity. What could be better than first hand experience with others from different areas of the world? Students could learn the customs and values that are important in other countries. With more of today's business being done globally, having this experience will give WWTC students a competitive edge. WWTC would be sending out more graduates that are capable of working in foreign countries.

Offering online classes would increase student enrollment, making more money for WWTC. More students could take classes without the added cost of a classroom. WWTC could bring in more tuition dollars and save money by not having the expense of an onsite classroom.

WWTC has a terrific reputation for catering to working adults and other non-traditional students. Offering more online classes would show that WWTC is committed to fulfilling its mission of making quality education available to everyone. It would show that WWTC understands the need for flexibility in education for students and that they are willing to accommodate that need.

I have briefly explained the benefits of online courses for WWTC, now I would like to give you the students' perspective. There are many students who can't take traditional onsite classes because of problems of scheduling, location and availability. I would like to share some of these concerns with you and explain how online classes make it possible for students to get the education they want and deserve.

Online classes are perfect for the working adult. Many students cannot attend traditional classes Monday-Friday because of work and family obligations. They need classes that are offered at times convenient for them. The Written Communications class run by Mary O'Sullivan is a perfect example of flexible scheduling. We had to come to La Crosse for a mandatory meeting, but then the rest of the course is done at the times that we choose.

Some may think that this type of work schedule is not structured enough and that students will not work as hard. This is not an issue with the program that Mary O'Sullivan runs. High recommendation from WWTC instructor Jenny Parker influenced me to take Mary's course. Jenny said that Mary was very thorough and had deadlines for her class to help keep students on track. I have found this to be very true. Mary sends several emails detailing proposed work schedules and reminders of deadlines. She also has a terrific course outline that details what work should be done each week. If all instructors could be persuaded to run their online courses this way, I am sure the students would be very successful.

One problem is the availability of classes. It is very frustrating if you can only get a class at the La Crosse Campus. Sometimes space is limited; you can't get in the class you want. One feature that makes this type of course appealing is the ability to take online programs virtually anywhere. For example, Arizona is offering classes from its three state colleges, creating a virtual university. I found information about Arizona's program at <http://www.azdistancelearning.org>. They offer entire degree programs. You can take their classes without ever setting foot in the state of Arizona. I have found it quite wonderful that I have not had to drive the 60 miles to La Crosse to attend class. I have been able to take the class from home and when necessary, from the WWTC district campuses. I love the flexibility of being able to do this. Class space is only limited by how many students the instructor feels capable of handling.

There are some concerns that Internet classes "rob" the student of the full college experience. Some would say that students would miss out on class discussions and peer support. We, in Mary's class, are able to participate in discussions in the virtual classroom. We also have email groups, creating a study buddy system perfect for giving each other support and feedback. This actually works better because you are able to "talk" to each other just about anytime. You don't have the limitation of seeing each other during a one-hour class period, three days a week.

Another concern is that Internet courses are not as good as traditional onsite classes. I found a report called "**The No Significant Difference Phenomenon**" that cites several studies that prove otherwise. Some of the reports state that there was no significant difference in the test scores between onsite students and online students. One report called "**What Are Faculty Saying?**" stated that online students learned equally effectively as on campus students and some faculty said their students did even better. The key is to have an excellent program and students who have self-discipline.

There is a fear that these programs will create a digital divide separating those that have access to the latest technology and those who do not. Heather Brossard mentions in that there are some programs where it seems the leaders are more interested in utilizing the latest technologies that may not be

available for all students. I have found that so far, this is not a problem with the courses at WWTC. There is a helpful page on the WWTC Virtual College Website that explains what students need for equipment for the online courses. One of the recommendations about computers concerns the hard drive space necessary, 8 gigabytes, for the program. I personally use a computer with half the hard drive space and have found it to not be a problem. There are also suggestions about software and directions on where to get it cheap or free. If you cannot afford a computer, you can access the WWTC class from a local district campus or perhaps a public library. WWTC is making the ability to take online courses possible for anyone.

I would like to add on a personal note how I could have benefited from having access to more online programs. I am a mother of two boys and hold a full-time job. I have a limited number of hours that I can use for going to school so it is taking me longer to complete my program. Some of the classes I needed in General Education could have been taken online. That would have given me more flexibility in scheduling classes. I love the Human Resource Administration program and am very proud to say that I am attending WWTC. I just wish that I could be finished with the program sooner. Please consider offering more online classes because it will benefit your students and Western Wisconsin Technical College.

Thank you for your time,

Rebecca Kirton

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