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NU HOPES TO EXPAND ONLINE PROGRAM

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Northwest University is looking to expand its scope by enrolling an increased number of students in the online program. The school is hoping not only to add revenue to the traditional campus but to boost their recognition nationally and globally.

NU isn't the first Christian university to make this shift and certainly not the first among universities across the nation. Christian universities are now turning toward an online program as a means to support the traditional on-campus and undergraduate programs, but NU has hopes for the program far beyond the financial benefits. NU anticipates having a large majority of their student population online within the next few years.

While still holding true to the unique Christian community and small student body on campus that NU nourishes, the online program will increase the academic possibilities, making it a more accessible school that will not only educate but nurture spiritual growth in a much larger way than it has in the past.

As education continues to change rapidly, NU has chosen to embrace this change rather than reject it. According to a recently released ranking of the top online programs in the state from Online Colleges via the NU blog, NU is ranked #7 overall and #1 among private universities in Washington state. "This is one of the ways that we stay up with society and technology while all the time asserting our faithfulness to the word of God and the centrality of Jesus on our campus," said NU president Joseph Castleberry. "We don't have a choice of not staying up to date technologically and not learning from the best practices of both classroom and online education. It'll help us keep changing in a positive direction."

The process of growing the online program has been in the works for several years. In 2010 Castleberry announced the plan to flip NU's business model from 75 percent traditional students and 25 percent online students to 25 percent traditional and 75 percent online. Currently, NU is 55 percent traditional and hopes to achieve their plan in approximately 5 years, culminating at a ratio of roughly 1,000 on-campus students to 4,000 online students. On average, most colleges and universities in the country lose money on residential and traditional students due to the high expenses needed to operate the program. While financial support is an important part of the picture, it is not the crucial reason driving this expansion.

True to NU's Christian mission to "carry the call", the online program serves as a platform to share the gospel. Online students are not required to sign a statement of faith as traditional students are. "Our traditional undergrad students are required to have a faith commitment because we are coming together in one place [to] form a special and specifically Christian community," said NU provost Jim Heugel. "This isn't the nature of the online modality, so a faith requirement is less meaningful."

However, most students in the online program are devoted Christians, many even training in the field of ministry. About 200 online students are a part of church partnership programs and are simply unable to attend traditional courses. The online program allows students to train for ministry in the church without having to be on the campus. These students, Castleberry said, "[allow] us to have a better Kingdom impact."

The dean of College of Adult and Professional Studies, Jim Jessup, said "Northwest has been more than a physical campus for over twenty years...The traditional program of the Kirkland campus has always been at the heart of NU's ministry." All students will benefit, both online and traditional. Jessup said, "It can be said that our online students are helping to fund services that are used by traditional students, and vice-versa." As a part of the Church Partnership Programs, Jessup said, "[NU offers an] academic curriculum so students are able to combine their academic program with their hands-on ministry training." Jessup added, "These students are not attending traditional classes; [they] are located in Idaho, Washington, Oregon, California, and Nevada—a total of 30 partners and over 200 students this fall."

To help increase the enrollment for the online program and the financial status for many upgrades on campus, the marketing department has recently created a new logo and slogan for NU. Marketing Director Steve Bostrom believes the change in logo and tagline will have a positive influence on prospective students' perception of the school both online and on campus. Bostrom said, "One of the reasons why we changed the current logo was because it did not clearly communicate that we are a Christian university. Something so foundational to our identity is now very clear in our new logo." However, Bostrom believes that a new logo and tagline can't "replace a student's recommendation." Bostrom said, "A new logo and tagline are a small part of the equation. Much more important is the experience that current students are having at NU today....I can tell you that NU leadership is committed to making the NU brand experience even better and more opportunity is being provided for student input. Still, our hope is that the *overall* NU experience is one you would recommend to others."

Professor of New Testament and Intercultural Studies Dr. David Thomas sees NU's growth as a positive. Thomas has taught primarily traditional classes, but he taught an online graduate level course over the past summer and remarked on the vast scale online courses bring to the table. Thomas said, "I had students as far east as North Carolina and as far west as Hawaii. I had a student in Maryland, and then I had students in California. It basically expands the scope and it raises the profile of Northwest University." Thomas said it is a win-win situation for traditional students as well "because you want more name recognition on your diploma, right? It's kind of a mutual symbiotic thing because you [a given Northwest University graduate] are in another part of the country and all of a sudden you run into somebody who's done an associate's or an online criminal justice thing or they took some graduate courses—even if they didn't graduate but they transferred—NU is a reality for them, it's not just a small Christian liberal arts, regional school in the Pacific Northwest, it now has national, indeed potentially global reach."

Financially, Castleberry described the movement as "a win-win situation." "The cost of offering [online education] is a lot cheaper, so it's a benefit to the student who takes the online course but it's also very financially advantageous for us," said Castleberry. Aside from financial gain, the new expansion will offer opportunities for those who can't attend the physical campus. Needless to say, the traditional campus can never be replaced and online school is not for everyone, but those it can serve will truly benefit.

The Kirkland campus is planning to become more selective in the students accepted to attend in the future, as NU is currently at its maximum for the residential student body population. Castleberry said his vision for this change is "more elite but less exclusive." Thomas said, "The gold standard is always going to be a traditional campus. That can't be replaced."

In an imperfect world, change is to be expected but one must use the tools they have to create a positive change. As Thomas said, "We've got this tool, the Internet. It's not a panacea, it's not a silver bullet, but it can be used. So let's use it."