University of Cincinnati offers an online program in respiratory therapy to help students increase their employability

University of Cincinnati, College of Allied Health Sciences

The Opportunity

Over the past few years, in order to advance the profession, the respiratory therapy industry has been encouraging students to earn a bachelor's degree, instead of an associate's degree, in respiratory therapy.

In the 2014–2015 academic year, there were 374 associate's degree programs in respiratory therapy, but only 61 bachelor's programs. "There were several states where baccalaureate education wasn't available, so this created a niche market for a BS completion program, especially one that was online," remarked Shane Keene, the associate dean of the College of Allied Health Sciences at the University of Cincinnati.

The college decided to create an online bachelor of science in respiratory therapy program (respiratorytherapy.uc.edu) to fill this niche. "It was the right time," Keene explained. "The profession was transitioning. There was a need that current offerings couldn't meet."

Pearson

An Online Solution

The college chose to partner with Pearson Embanet, which provides online program management services, to launch and support the online bachelor of science in respiratory therapy program. Pearson provides marketing, recruitment, and retention services. The first students enrolled in the program in the spring of 2013.

The online program is aimed at midlevel professional respiratory therapists who want to enhance their employability by earning a BS, as well as recent graduates of associate's degree programs who want to continue their education.

To secure a steady stream of students, Pearson helped the college develop articulation agreements with thirty-two community colleges nationwide that offer an associate's degree in respiratory therapy. "It's a win-win situation," noted Keene. "The associate degree educators realize that if they have something formalized in place, it takes some of the pressure off them to get their students placed in baccalaureate-level education."

To enter the capstone phase of the program and graduate, students must become credentialed as registered respiratory therapists. The college and Pearson offer support to help students through the credentialing process, providing a home study guide to prepare for the exam and paying for the two-part exam as well.

"We're doing everything that we can to encourage students' professional growth while they're in the program, in addition to getting their degree," Keene said. "And I know that we're the only respiratory program out there that does that, so it's kind of an innovative way that we're attracting students because we've invested in their education as well."

The structure of the online program was designed to meet the scheduling needs of students, many of whom are enrolled part-time and have careers and family. Students take two seven-week courses consecutively and one fourteen-week course per semester. "They're never in more than two courses at one time. So it's not so taxing to try to manage everything else in their life," noted Keene.

To address student concerns about degree completion times and cost, the college and Pearson developed an accelerated curriculum, which requires students to complete fifty, instead of sixty, credits. That way, students can complete the online program in five semesters (twenty months), instead of in two to four years.

PROFILE

City/State
Cincinnati, Ohio

Institution Type
4-year public research university

Rankings
- Top 200 national universities, *U.S. News & World Report,* Best Colleges, 2016
- Featured in *The Best 201 Colleges for the Real World: Get In. Get Out. Get a Job.*
- Top 20 public research universities nationally, *Lombardi Program on Measuring University Performance Annual Report*

The college's goal is to prepare students to become managers, educators, or researchers or to enter graduate school. So in developing the accelerated curriculum, the college made sure its courses aligned with learning outcomes that would help students progress along their career paths.

To further increase students' employability, the program emphasizes the development of written and oral communication skills. Writing in the APA format and speaking in front of groups "are pretty much two requirements if you're going to become a leader," explained Keene. "What separates our program from a lot of programs is we really incorporate learning the APA style into all the course work."

"The other component that makes our program really different is we have a pretty large focus, especially for an undergraduate program, on research," Keene remarked. The program includes an introductory research course, an advanced research course, and a capstone project, which prepare students for graduate studies. But "it makes them more well-rounded professionals, regardless of what their career trajectory is," added Keene.

The Results

In the course of three years, from the spring of 2013 to the fall of 2015, the number of students in the bachelor of science program has steadily risen from three to 144.

Keene credits Pearson's Online Program Management solution not only with helping the college increase enrollment, but also with helping it retain students. "I'm very proud of our retention," he said. He pointed out that "students, for the most part, are vested. They are working professionals who realize the importance of the degree." But, he added, "we're able to figure out ways to make our program work for students despite life issues that can happen."

For example, the program has found ways to accommodate deployed members of the military. "Instead of students dropping out," Keene explained, "we've been able to give those students incompletes and let them pick back up when they get stateside and finish their course work, so their time for degree completion isn't affected. Working with the military is really key to our program because there are lots of military respiratory therapists."

"Pearson's retention efforts speak volumes for the quality of the services because not only are they getting students, they're helping us keep them."

— Shane Keene, Associate Dean, College of Allied Health Sciences

"Completing my undergraduate education with Cincinnati was the best decision I ever made."

— Brittany Jernigan, Graduate, Online Bachelor of Science in Respiratory Therapy Program

The Pearson program manager regularly checks in with students from the start of the first class until graduation, providing information, guidance, and encouragement. The support Pearson provides, Keene said, "allows us to be proactive before a student becomes just a casualty and drops out. We're able to intervene. We don't have the resources or time or staffing to provide that level of service on our own."

Graduates have expressed satisfaction with the online program, writing letters to thank program staff and to share stories about how the program enhanced their employability. "Students are taking the degree and making it work for them," Keene remarked.

One graduate, Brittany Jernigan, wrote, "Getting my BS in respiratory therapy from the University of Cincinnati was challenging, but the staff made everything outside of learning and course work easy. All of the professors are highly qualified, and I learned so much from each one."

Keene thinks enrollment for the online bachelor of science in respiratory therapy program will ultimately grow to three hundred students. The college is in the process of developing an online master's program in respiratory therapy to meet the market's evolving needs.

In the future, Keene hopes to take the best practices for online learning used in the respiratory therapy program and apply them in other departments in the college.

SUCCESS FACTORS

- **Articulation agreements** with 32 community colleges nationwide, creating steady enrollment

- **Accelerated curriculum,** facilitating degree completion

- **Support for students during credentialing process,** promoting professional growth

- **Proactive retention efforts**

Learn all the ways Pearson is helping institutions build, scale, and sustain successful online degree programs. Visit **pearsoned.com/opm**

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Learning is a journey of discovery, challenge, and wonder. Along the way, we are transformed.

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