

Erikson addresses students concerns cited in independent evaluation

In summer 2011, an independent evaluation of Erikson's online master's degree in early childhood education found that Erikson is a model for online education. At the end of the program, students became part of a close-knit community of early childhood professionals with the knowledge and practical skills they need to serve children and families.

While the evaluation was overwhelmingly positive, it identified several areas where the online program could improve. Erikson has already taken steps to respond to the feedback, including the following:

Helping students maintain balance in their lives

According to the evaluation, the biggest challenge for online students is learning how to balance the demands of their work, family, and Erikson's rigorous online degree program. In response to the evaluation and other student feedback, Erikson has implemented the following:

- During the orientation for new online students and early in the first semester, we are providing more resources and tips to help students move toward balance more successfully.
- We developed a Semester-at-a-Glance tool to help students plan for the major assignments in each course and to ensure that instructors don't schedule major assignments for the same week.
- We enable students to work ahead when their schedule demands it. For each course, Erikson opens two study modules at a time, so students can work on assignments for the current week and the next week.

Erikson continually works to implement processes and tools that respect the rhythm of online students—when they access a course, when they post in discussions, and which days and times of the week are busiest. We believe that when we honor students' rhythm in our instructional design and course planning, students feel more successful and better able to manage the demands of their online courses.

Helping students become comfortable with online learning

In the evaluation, students stated that they needed time to become comfortable with the online learning process and enabling technologies. Erikson is building time into the program for students to learn any new technologies, as well as implementing student suggestions, such

as training students how to manage online discussions and developing a tutorial on how to download and save readings and other course materials.

Harnessing the power of technology

Students appreciate our instructors' intentional use of videos and discussion posts to reinforce learning. Instructors prepare video introductions and demonstrations and narrate slideshow presentations used in the class to help students understand the course materials. Additionally, each week, our instructors post a summary of what was discussed in class to clarify ideas and connect key themes from week to week. They also prepare a "Looking Ahead" post to share what students can expect in the following week. These practices have been incorporated into all of Erikson's online classes based on student feedback.

These are just some examples of effective practices that have emerged from student feedback and the innovative teaching of Erikson instructors.

For more information on Erikson's online master's degree in early childhood education, visit <http://bit.ly/nVfisZ>.

For more information on the independent evaluation, Building and Sustaining Professional Learning Communities Online: A Case Study Approach, and to download a copy, visit <http://bit.ly/pGdUp6>.