

WICHE ICE ...

from a Program Director's Perspective

Beth Sirles has been the director of the School of Social Work at the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) since 1995. She has led the development of a master of social work program, a small program in a very large state where distance education provides critical access to many students.

Approximately 100 students are enrolled in the social work master's program, which is staffed by 11 faculty members. Some students are in the full-time program and attend classes on the UAA campus. Others, enrolled in the part-time program, take their courses at a distance, allowing them to remain in their communities, where their services are vital to the residents. Since many communities lack a social services infrastructure, UAA's advanced generalist concentration prepares students to operate autonomously and address a wide range of issues, such as alcoholism, sexual assault, domestic violence, and suicide.



All of the core requirements are taught by UAA faculty, but Sirles wanted to offer her students a broader selection of elective courses than her program could support. To do so, she turned to the WICHE Internet Course Exchange (WICHE ICE) and schools of social work at other institutions in the West. "I have been very supportive of ICE from the moment I first heard about it," she says. "It offers tremendous potential for collaborative programs. Now our students have the opportunity to take courses from faculty at other institutions in specialties we don't offer here. Our students know that these courses have been selected, reviewed, and approved by our faculty, and that they will count toward their program. The students really appreciate the extra interest we have taken in their education.

"ICE makes so much sense from a cost perspective, too. Just one example: My campus takes turns offering a low enrollment course with the University of Wyoming's School of Social Work. Students may take this course from either institution. Now, because there is enough critical mass with the combined enrollment, the course is available every year rather than in alternate years, a much more convenient schedule for students.

"Both our faculty and students have truly benefited from ICE collaborations. Our faculty share teaching materials and strategies with their colleagues at partner institutions. They have learned together about best practices in the use of technologies. Their course discussions are richer, as students share their perspectives, colored by their home state policies and culture. Faculty members have the opportunity to develop specialty courses that would not be viable for a single campus but are possible with combined enrollments. In turn, students from several schools have the opportunity for a unique learning experience. Together, we are supporting an online social work education pipeline across the region that enriches all of our programs. It gives Alaskan faculty members an opportunity to stay in Alaska as they work toward their Ph.D. online in another state.

"Despite the economic difficulties, it is a great time to be in higher education. The Internet has radically changed our ability to reach students. Boundaries are disappearing and institutions are no longer islands. We have tremendous opportunity to do things differently...to reduce duplication and combine efforts by reaching out to colleagues in our disciplines at other institutions. By sharing resources and expertise we can create better-quality learning experiences that are more economical for our institutions and our students. We are just at the tip of the iceberg!"