Transcription of Podcast 8

Randy [00:00:08] Welcome to the University of Wisconsin HELP podcast. I'm Randy Parvin, a student services coordinator here at UW HELP. Over the last few weeks this podcast has been talking to different folks about the college search process. I've learned a lot and I hope you have, too. Today though we're switching gears a bit. I think this podcast will be interesting for counselors, educational advisers, and parents who want to learn a little more about one under- looked educational option in Wisconsin. It really is a hidden gem. And who doesn't like hidden gems? My guest today is Liz Bush. And she is the program manager for the University of Wisconsin Extension’s Independent Learning. Liz thanks for being part of the UW HELP podcast. I really appreciate you taking time out of your schedule to visit with me. Welcome.

Liz [00:00:58] Thanks Randy. I'm happy to be here today.

Randy [00:01:01] We're going to have fun today. So let's just get right into it. For those who don't know: what is Independent Learning?

Liz [00:01:09] Well Independent Learning has been around for a really long time. It originated over a hundred years ago as a correspondence study program dedicated to expanding educational opportunities to students across the state and beyond. And that mission holds true today. As a collaborative program, it's housed at UW-Extension, and Independent Learning partners with academic departments across the UW System, and some other institutions outside of the UW System, to develop and offer a really diverse array of about 70 different courses. And courses in areas like General Education, Foreign Language, Business, Education and Health Professions. The cool thing about our program is that all of our courses are offered via distance education—the majority of which are fully online—and they all follow a self-paced flexible model that puts students in the driver's seat. They set their own learning path and sort of chart their way through that. Students will determine when they're going to work on their course and at what pace they like to do so.

Randy [00:02:10] Okay. Well let's rewind a little. How did Independent Learning first start? What did it look like a hundred years ago?

Liz [00:02:20] You know back at that time it was true correspondence study. And one of the changes we've seen over the course of time is how our courses are delivered to students. So when we started out—for many, many years, maybe even decades--out courses were delivered to students using postal service. So students would submit a paper registration to our office saying they want to register for one of our correspondence study courses, we'd process that registration, and then we'd mail to them a course guide. And a course guide included everything they needed to take that course with us, including their course materials. So they'd get that in the mail, and they'd start to work on their course. As they worked on their course, they'd do a lesson, complete a written activity, and they'd mail that back to our offices.

Randy [00:03:05] And that's the way Independent Learning started. And I bet, you know back in 1905 or 1910, that had to be a really cutting edge a way to deliver education to the folks.

Liz [00:03:17] It sure was. I mean it was really about expanding the opportunities to students all across Wisconsin and beyond their state borders.

Randy [00:03:24] Yeah, you didn't have to travel to Madison, Oshkosh or Milwaukee to learn about the cutting edge ideas of the day. Which is so cool. Well let's get into a little more about today. I heard you use the word "self-paced." Is that literally what it means? Tell me more about that.

Liz [00:03:43] Yeah that's correct. So I'd mentioned this earlier. Students are really in the driver's seat in an Independent Learning course. They're setting their own deadlines and they're creating their own path towards successful completion. So that can look different to any student. You know some of our students are looking for an Independent Learning course because they struggled with a course in a traditional classroom setting on campus. And they think a little less stressful environment where they're charting their own path and establishing their own deadlines is going to get them in a space that they feel more comfortable to succeed in that course. Other times we get students that want to go on a fast track. They've got a summer break or a winterim break and they want to try and complete a general education course or something during that time. Independent Learning fits for all of those types of students. We do provide students with a course planning tool when they start one of our courses. Because sometimes if I say "You're in charge, you chart your own path." That might be appealing to a lot of students. But other students might think, "I don't know if I have the skills to be able to be motivated to do that, or the discipline to make sure that I'm on track." So we provide students with a course planning tool at the start of every course. We give them sample completion plans. If you want to take this course in three months, here's what that would look like. Here's how many hours you should work on your course.

Randy [00:05:05] How many assignments they have to put in?

Liz [00:05:07] You got it. And they can adjust that course plan to meet their needs. If they want to take 12 months, which is our current program module to complete a course, [or if] they want to do it in six months they can sort of adjust accordingly using that. The other benefit of Independent Learning is that not only do our students work with faculty in developing that plan, [but] we also have a team of success coaches and our student services side that that will coach students along the way. Check in: "How are you doing against your plan? Are there any other resources that you need?" Give them some time management skills. Things like that.

Randy [00:05:39] Let me ask you a question here. One thought I had when you talked about online courses: is it just a student reading a bunch of text? How do they interact with the faculty member? Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

Liz [00:05:57] Sure. In an online course, which is the majority of our courses today, when a student registers in one of those, they'll receive login credentials to our learning management system. It's a place online where they'll access the actual work in the course. When they log into their course, they'll navigate through the course introductory materials. That usually includes a welcome video from the faculty member. It will include the syllabus and a lot more guidance on which course materials you need, some tips on how to progress through the course, study tips, things like that. Then they'll access that course planning tool that I mentioned and they'll complete their course map where they want to be. You know if I want to finish this course in six weeks or 12 weeks, they'll complete that. And they'll see those sample plans that we've already prepared for them. So that they could follow one of those. Then they're ready to access the course content itself. Our courses are largely organized into modules. So they'll progress through learning modules where they might access the course material in a variety of ways. They might do some reading, they might watch some video presentations, they might complete some written exercises or some assessments. But it's all designed for students to learn on their own. And our faculty play a unique role in that they are positioning themselves in the course not only as a content area expert, but also as sort of a facilitator supporting the student as they progress through the course.

Randy [00:07:23] That's interesting. You mentioned something in the previous question I want to follow up on: the students success coaches. This sounds like a really cool thing. I took, in the early 80s, a correspondence course. And I did well! I think I got an A. It was Intro to Archaeology. But there wasn't anything like that. How does that work? If I'm a student struggling in one of these courses, do they reach out to me or do I have to reach out to them?

Liz [00:07:53] That's a great question. Students will interact, as I mentioned, with their faculty member as they're progressing through the course. And their faculty is always that point of contact if they've got content area specific questions about course content. But the beautiful thing about our model is that success coach and our student services team. Our students are going to hear from the student success coaches who will check in on them periodically throughout their time in the course. They will do e-mail outreach, they'll follow up with some phone calls, and they're really positioning themselves just to see "How are things going?" Because the true nature of Independent Learning is you're an independent student following through a course. There might be 40 other students in the course, but you're not interacting with them like you would in a traditional online course or an in person class.

Randy [00:08:41] Because of the self-pace.

Liz [00:08:43] You got it. So let's say for example, Randy, you and I are both in the same class. You might have started it two months ago. I might have just registered today. You might be on a slower pace, I might be on a fast pace. We fast forward a month from now: I might be on module four, you might still be on module one. Because you're working at a slower pace. But I won't know you're in my course necessarily. And I'm kind of working on my own schedule. There are some of our faculty that do take advantage of features within our learning management system like discussion boards. And they will engage students in posting and responding to current events that are topical to the course content, for example. So I might see your posts. Maybe you finished the course, but I'm still sort of being able to reap the benefits of what you've provided as a class discussion point.

Randy [00:09:34] That's interesting. What type of students take these courses for Independent Learning? Is it just like me back in the early 80s, who took it to fill out my 123 credits that I needed to graduate? Is it those type of students?

Liz [00:09:54] Right now we serve about 1,300 students a year. And they range in sort of why they come to Independent Learning. They might be coming because they want to get an early start in college. They might be coming because they want to support the degree completion like you did. Or just to gain professional development. The majority of our students are current college students. A lot of them come from the UW campuses, but we also serve a lot of students from campuses across the country, and even internationally. They'll take our courses to stay on track or to get back on track towards graduation. That's why we offer a lot of general education courses in Math and Sciences, Humanities, English courses [and] Foreign Languages. The reason that we often get college students as well is that our courses transfer across the UW System. So if a UW-Platteville student takes one of our courses they know it'll transfer back to their campus. Likewise, with any of the College campuses. And a lot of other colleges and universities across the country accept our courses as well.

Randy [00:10:59] And if a student has questions about how that course transfers, what should they do?

Liz [00:11:04] That's a great question. The best thing to do—we always advise any student that takes courses with us—is to work (if they're a college student especially) with their home campus adviser, and see if Independent Learning is the right fit for them. And then identify the course or courses that might fit the need that they're looking for. So if they're looking for an upper division humanities course for example, it's great for them to sit down with their adviser, take a look at our course catalog, identify potential matches and then the advisor can help the student identify how that course will transfer back to their home campus. The UW System’s Transfer Information System Tool Wizard is a great place where you can look at how an Independent Learning course will transfer to, say UW-Superior or UW-Milwaukee or Oshkosh. And you can see matching. What's this course in Independent Learning look like if I transferred into my home campus as a UW student?

Randy [00:11:58] You know, whether your home institution or Independent Learning or another institution about how that transfers and how it ultimately wants to move you closer to graduation. That's what we're looking for. And that responsibility really is on the student.

Liz [00:12:13] It sure is. In addition to college students we also have students who are professionals, or out of school, that take our courses. They might be doing it for personal enrichment, career advancement or to maybe meet prerequisites for entry to a certificate or degree program. You know a great example is that each summer we have a lot of teachers who will take our courses to help meet licensure requirements in their state. They might be from Wisconsin, they might be from New York State, Pennsylvania. But they'll seek our courses because the summer months are a great time for them to sort of play catch-up or get advancement on the licensure. Lastly, the growing number of students that we're seeing are more and more high school students. They start to seek out Independent Learning to get an early start on college.

Randy [00:12:56] How early do I have to register to begin a course?

Liz [00:12:59] It's a great question. Another feature of Independent Learning is that we're not a program that is semester-based or quarter-based, so you can essentially register in an Independent Learning course any day of the year. And when you register that's when your course starts for you. So it's very individualized. Our courses are not held by seat caps either. Because there is such a fluidity to our student enrollment, we don't have to limit the number of students in a particular course. You're guaranteed a spot in an Independent Learning course as long as you've met the prerequisites and the majority of our courses are all freshman/ sophomore-level courses in college. So there are very minimal prerequisite requirements.

Randy [00:13:42] So I could go back to my cubicle and register today, and tonight after dinner, start working on a course with Independent Learning.

Liz [00:13:50] You sure can. You can register right away.

Randy [00:13:53]Think about that.That's exciting because you think of it… my daughter is a high school senior you know she got to apply, and it’s a couple of weeks to hear if you are accepted, and then register. It takes a while to get into a course sometimes in the traditional lockstep. This is really cool.

Liz [00:14:10] Yeah. This program's all about accessibility. Without an application, you really just have to make sure that you're ready for the rigors of college level course—that you've got the skill set to be successful it in a self-paced, very independent environment, and that you've met the prerequisites.

Randy [00:14:27]Kind of goes back to the roots of the University Wisconsin System: taking education to the people where they’re at, that kind of idea. Well, all right, out of all the courses, are there one or two that you thought about taking?

Liz [00:14:40] Oh sure. A few come to mind. One of our most popular courses is an Introduction to Parliamentary Procedure. Right now it's our only CEU course, and the course description always has spoken to me. I’ll read an excerpt from it. It reads “This introductory course is designed for leaders who want to conduct quality meetings that result in decisions, not more meetings.” Who wouldn't want that to be true? So that course has always been on my mind.

Randy [00:15:09] Who takes that course?

Liz [00:15:10] You know interestingly, we get a lot of individuals who become elected officials…

Randy [00:15:16] So like a mayor or a city council person?

Liz [00:15:19] Yeah, because it teaches proper meetings, how to run a proper meeting, Robert's Rules of Order, all of that.

Randy [00:15:27] I’m having flashbacks of high school student council at this point.

Liz [00:15:30] There you go! Yeah it's a great use case.

Liz [00:15:32]Another course that I'm interested in is one that we just recently opened. It's an online Civil War-era course. I was a science major so I didn't take a ton of history courses in college, but this course really speaks to me because it presents the material using both secondary and primary sources. Secondary are like textbooks written about Civil War times; primary are original works. So in this course, you read original works by Frederick Douglass, Thomas Jefferson… just really cool things. And all of those materials are provided within the course. So there's no textbook cost associated with that class which is another selling point. The course, too, it prompts students to view and reflect on different films and television series that are on TV today and sort of relate to the course material, too. I like that connection, sort of building a connection from Civil War times to today, and how does that play out. I think that's really cool. Our faculty use media to narrate presentations and discuss key artifacts from the time period too, and I think what's really great about that course is that each module offers study and reading tips to help guide students. So sort of like, “Hey when you're reading this excerpt, pay particular attention to X, Y, and Z.” I think that helps students navigate a course.

Randy [00:16:47] I would love to take that course. That sounds so interesting. Are there new courses that come out all the time for Independent Learning? How does that work?

Liz [00:15:54] Yeah always. I mean we always want to make sure that the courses that we're offering are meeting the needs of students, and that changes!

Liz [00:17:01]So each year we're assessing our courses. We're looking at: are these popular courses? Are they not? Do they just need to be revised and brought back, or do we need develop brand new ones? I'll give you some examples. So this past year we opened up a new course of medical coding and that covers the basics of medical coding but also prepare students for the American Academy of Professional Coders CPC exam. It's a mouthful, but it's one of the most recognized medical coding certifications in the healthcare industry. We're excited about that course. And it's open to high school students. We also opened a new human biology course series that includes a three-credit online lecture and a one-credit online lab course. And that's intriguing because it's an online lab. It uses a lot of kitchen and home materials and you watched videos of our current faculty member go through the different lab exercises and you follow at home. Right now we're working on a new online chemistry series that will include both a lecture and a lab component. This really cool music course called Legendary Performers. We're going to offer that as a flexible credit-hour course, you could take it as two credit hours or three credit hours. But it's a survey course and it looks at the pioneer performers who influenced popular musical taste from the 1920s to 1950. It covers such greats as Louis Armstrong, Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, and others. Other courses that we’re opening up this year: Independent Reading and Native American History. We've got a new poli sci course: An Introduction to American Politics and Government.

Liz [00:18:31]So we're always building and creating new courses to make sure that we're meeting the needs of our students.

Liz [00:18:36]I want to sign up for one of these courses today. You've sold me. What do I need to do?

Liz [00:18:41]The best thing to do is to go to our IL website. That address is il.wisconsin.edu. So again, it's il.wisconsin.edu. There you'll find our full course catalog, you can chat with one our success coaches, learn more about our program policies, and register.

Randy [00:19:05]Well, thanks for that information about Independent Learning. Is there anything else you'd like to share about Independent Learning or the tradition of Independent Learning?

Liz [00:19:15]I think the last thing I'll say is that we've always got a seat ready for you.

Randy [00:19:20]I love that phrase! We always got a seat for you. Love it. Thank you! Well, do you have time for a couple more questions?

Liz [00:19:27]Sure!

Randy [00:19:28]All right! Well, this is kind of a standing tradition here at the UW HELP podcast. If you had Jeremy and I—who records the sound—over for bratwurst tonight (or brats as we say in Wisconsin), how would you cook them for us?

Liz [00:19:27]I'd grill ‘em.

Randy [00:19:42]Yeah? OK, and would they be black, brown when you were done, or what do you think? What would way you would prefer?

Liz [00:19:52]A little black.

Randy [00:19:54]A little black. All right Jeremy, write that down, one for black, we got a tally mark here. And how do you prefer your brat? Ketchup, Mustard?

Liz [00:20:03]Mustard.

Randy [00:20:04] Mustard. That’s two lately for mustard.

[00:20:06]Well all right, Liz. Thanks so much for visiting with me and folks out there listening about Independent Learning. I think we covered a lot of ground. Thank you very much.

Liz [00:20:16]Thanks for having me.

Randy [00:20:18]Yeah. That will do it for another installment of the UW HELP podcast. Be sure to e-mail me about future topics or thoughts. You can do that at randy.parvin@uwex.edu. That was randy.parvin@uwex.edu. Until next time, this is UW HELP, your guide to the college process.