

News From Terre Haute, Indiana

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SMWC celebrates distance education milestone

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ST. MARY-OF-THE-WOODS — Tuesday Strong dropped out of high school at age 15.

Today, she is director of academic projects at Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology and has received three master's degrees.

But she credits her success to a distance-education program offered at Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College, now called Woods Online. The Woods program “would be life-changing for me. It inspired me to believe in myself and empowered me to continue my education,” Strong said.

The college celebrated the program's 40th anniversary Thursday, and Strong was one of the speakers.

In 2003, Strong received a bachelor's degree in human resource management through the distance education program, then known as WED.

She worked full-time, but received much support from the college's faculty and staff.

“I am proof positive that Woods Online changes lives,” Strong said. “I learned that no matter your circumstances, no matter where you've been, no matter who you are — it doesn't define where you are going.”

The distance-education program has had thousands of graduates through the years, said Dottie King, SMWC president. More than 800 students are currently enrolled in the program from 33 states and all across the globe, including England, Greece, Hong Kong and Jamaica.

Introduced in 1973, the WED program was one of the first independent study programs in the nation, King said. Then-president Sister Jeanne Knoerle started it as a way to educate women who needed a nontraditional way to earn a degree.

In 2005, the college expanded access to its undergraduate distance program by enrolling men as well as women.

The program's success comes from a blend of cutting-edge technology and meaningful faculty interaction, King said. “We're high-tech and high-touch.”

According to Knoerle, when the program was started, only one other college in the country

offered a full college education through an external degree.

“With somewhat quaking hearts, we established the WED program,” Knoerle said. “No one knew whether it was going to work or how it would be received.”

Forty years, and thousands of graduates later, it has been a success, college officials and students agree.

Knoerle said she’s also happy to see “the ways in which the various SMWC presidents have changed and improved and expanded the program to meet the always-changing times”

Other speakers were Gwen Hagemeyer, Woods Online director, and Terre Haute Mayor Duke Bennett, who read a proclamation.

Hagemeyer gave special recognition to Sister Martha Steidl, who has taught classes in the distance education program for 40 years; she will step down from her part-time teaching duties in July. She had retired as a full-time faculty member several years ago, but continued to teach classes for the distance education program.

“She’s been a little bulldog when it comes to learning technology skills,” Hagemeyer said. “She had her first experience with webinars this year.”

Steidl has worked through many transitions — from project-based independent study, to structured courses that accepted assignments by mail and then email and now to a totally online program.

Asked about the changes in technology, Steidl said, “That’s life. It’s going faster and faster, isn’t it?”

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