

Distance education director to retire after 24 years

BY LORI ROBISON
Staff Reporter

For over two decades, Monty McMahon has been a man with a mission: to provide a quality education to students unable to attend traditional schools and colleges.

And as the retirement date of June 26 nears, the director for UNL's Distance Education Program speaks with pride and enthusiasm about the program, its students, and its successful progress toward the technological future of the coming century.

"I love Lincoln and the university and the job," he said. "If you're content and happy in a job that is fulfilling, why leave?"

Established by UNL in 1909, McMahon said, DEP now provides educational instruction for over 15,000 high school and 2,500 college-level students in more than 136 countries.

In addition to the 90 college-level courses offered through the program, DEP offers high school students with a complete four-year curriculum and a resident staff of high school teachers. It is also, McMahon said, the only fully accredited high school diploma program in the country.

The director called the changes in the program in the last two decades "exciting and monumental." There has been a growing acceptance of Distance Education by the public and academic community as a viable alternative to the traditional classroom setting.

With a 12-month open enrollment system, individually based instruction and Internet access, the program's flexibility has meant that students who work odd hours, have physical limitations or live in geographically isolated areas have been

able to enjoy a quality education, McMahon said.

"Now, the university is coming to you," he said, "Now (DEP) can teach you wherever you are."

In addition, more professors are wanting to make their courses available in this program, he said.

Citing major changes in technology as a major reason for the growing interest and demand for distance education courses, McMahon added that through desktop publishing, the materials produced by the department are as professional in appearance as any other educational publication.

And with the continued growth of technology, McMahon said, the quality of the education received has advanced considerably.

"It's more fun," he said. "There's better access, more access to distance education and the universities are responding."

But the director's contributions to DEP will not cease when he retires. Through McMahon's efforts, a five-year, \$19.5 million grant will help ensure the program continues to offer its students the best education possible. The funds, donated by several federal agencies, will eventually bring the entire high school curriculum onto the information highway. In fact, four classes—informal geometry, expository writing, Global Perspectives: Bosnia, and chemistry—are already being offered to high school students on the Internet.

McMahon also said plans are being discussed for eventually bringing the college-education segment of the program onto the Internet as well.

"This is the most cost-effective method of education I know of," McMahon said.

However, independent study is not all flash and glamour. The director warned against students believing



DANIEL LUEDERT/DN

MONTY McMAHON, the director of UNL's Distance Education Program, will retire on June 26.

that it was easier than attending classes, emphasizing self-motivation, self-discipline and goal-orientation as necessities for success.

"We will provide the books and make the instruction available to you," he said, "but the books will not open by themselves."

However, because of the skills developed while succeeding at independent study, McMahon said the high school students who complete the program—which include three National Merit Scholarship Award winners—are more prepared for col-

lege life and the world of work. Students often write back, he said, saying they made the dean's list of their college, but were bored with a curriculum they moved through with relative ease.

And although the director has helped to guide DEP toward better programs and a higher quality of education for 24 years, McMahon attributed much of the programs success to "an outstanding staff." By providing the tools and freedom for staff members to do their jobs, he said, they also have the room to achieve.

McMahon's decision to retire was based on "family choices," and he plans to spend time with his family, travel and devote more time to his hobby -- building doll houses.

He said his lengthy stay at DEP came from the satisfaction he has received from serving as director of the program.

"Over the years, I've signed hundreds and hundreds of diplomas for people all over the world," he said. "Providing a quality education to people wherever they are is extremely rewarding."

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