A growing community of graduates has never sat in a bricks and mortar classroom on any campus. A number of these EKU Online students, many from states other than Kentucky, enroll in Eastern’s nationally esteemed online bachelor’s and master’s degree programs with the College of Justice & Safety (CJS), which precisely mirror those followed by on-campus students. Actually, insists EKU Online student ReBecca Frakes, “studying online can be two or three times the workload of a campus class,” but she finds curriculum quality, faculty attention and student interaction well worth the investment. Besides, as a working mother whose husband also balances school and work, an EKU Online program is simply the only practical way she can further her education.

EKU Online courses offer adult learners, working professionals, military students, stay-at-home parents and those in remote locations the flexibility to “attend” fully accredited courses ranging from general education required courses to eight complete online bachelor’s and master’s degree programs in justice & safety. Meanwhile, the College of Arts & Sciences now offers online programs in psychology and paralegal studies; the College of Education has a program in library science.

Dr. Scotty Dunlap of CJS cites the multiple interactive technologies harnessed for EKU Online courses: e-journals, virtual offices, Blackboard™ software, email, online discussion boards, web seminars, video lectures and “community portals” where students post information about themselves, forging personal and professional bonds. Students connect by computer and smart phones, manage complex group projects and apply classwork to workplace issues; many study at night while their children sleep.

Students like Julie Rogers, a safety professional in Arizona, considered only online programs from an accredited, bricks and mortar institution, “not one of those for-profit places.” Eastern’s national reputation in justice and safety clinched her choice. Mike Norman of Illinois had a solid position at a utility company but wanted a higher level of career challenge. Family responsibilities forced him to think carefully before investing in a personal dream. “It was a teachable moment for my kids,” he says, as they watched him exhaustively research Eastern’s programs and faculty before enrolling, master new learning technologies and, at 47, lug books to a Florida vacation. Last December, Norman travelled to Eastern’s graduation ceremony to personally thank faculty members and celebrate his new master’s, a dream fulfilled.

Before beginning his master’s in safety, security and emergency management (SSEM), Vince Romero, an Air Force technical sergeant, says: “I really thought I knew safety. I learned aspects of the field I’d never contemplated.” With a graduate certificate in occupational safety, he’ll return for another in ergonomics and emergency management. Romero tells colleagues, “If you want to learn safety, go to Eastern, but expect to be challenged.”

ReBecca Frakes reports that when “I just couldn’t get my head around advanced statistics,” Dr. James Wells, director of Eastern’s Center for Criminal Justice Education and Research, sent supplemental material, quickly answered her emails, engaged and encouraged Frakes “until I got to really love statistics.” A first generation student nearing graduation, she sees her daughters, age eight, five and two, already planning their college careers.
Tim Matthews, executive director of Eastern’s e-campus, points to a circle of EKU Online benefits: Eastern’s reputation attracts a high quality, dedicated, diverse student body which in turn enhances the program. Students from Eastern’s service area, other states and overseas bring experience in oil and power industries, merchandizing and military operations. Online discussions may include a corporate vice president of safety, a large city’s emergency manager or corrections professional from California. A student of juvenile justice shares the impact of having her first child at age 15. She’s dedicating her career to helping young people at a crossroads in their lives. These interactions, says Matthews, create “constructivist learning” in which new knowledge is created through community learning.

With support from professors like Wells and a caring online community of student-peers, Matthews cites an 85 percent retention rate for students who have completed three courses, substantially above national averages. Student and alumni networks create high quality internship options, while CJS graduates are finding that Eastern’s reputation for both “bricks and mortar” and Online programs opens doors for employment and promotion. Steven Ramirez, ’10, wrote an open letter to his faculty: “I recently got a job at Georgetown University in emergency management. This would not have been possible without the knowledge gained through your classes.” Criminal justice professional Tanya Crick, ’08, of Hopkinsville has been promoted twice thanks to her new degree and still keeps in grateful contact with her professors.

As Eastern strives to extend learning opportunity to wider populations, Dr. Dunlap praises EKU Online’s inherent democratization of the education process. Women entering traditionally male-dominated fields, minority or mature students, those with health or handicap issues learn as peers with EKU Online. Timid students who may withdraw in a typical classroom often blossom in spirited, moderated online discussion formats.

These results are the fruit of careful program development. In 2005, says Matthews, CJS began analyzing outstanding national models for Online programs that could be infused with the essential Eastern blend of academic integrity, real career focus and student support. Eastern faculty, staff, and instructional design professionals re-visioned course material for dynamic online delivery using a suite of learning tools and modalities. Dr. Allen Ault, dean of CJS, places student service at the core of each program: “If you can’t come to us,” he tells prospective students, “we’ll bring high quality educational opportunities to you.”
Unlike some programs which entrust their courses to contractors, instructors of record are Eastern faculty members, always accessible (as Ms. Frakes’s experience demonstrates) and supported by trained facilitators. Faculty give students their office and cell phone numbers. “EKU Online means a 24/7 teaching commitment,” says Matthews. Supplemental pay acknowledges this commitment, but faculty point to the excitement of a vibrant online learning community and the inspiration of adult learners as the sustaining rewards of this unique teaching environment.

“While we remain strongly rooted to our fundamental identity as a residential campus,” insists Provost Janna Vice, EKU Online programs have benefited all students and the university as a whole:

- Expanding regional stewardship: Students in the service area who are unable to participate in on-campus programs can further their education.
- Growing diversity: A wide range of students and adult learners enrich EKU Online classes, adding their wealth of personal and cultural experience.
- Expanded internship and employment opportunities: Working professionals from across the nation strengthen the alumni network.
- Attracting quality students: EKU Online attracts high-achieving students from throughout the nation and the world.
- Improving academic instruction: Faculty apply EKII Online learning technologies and instructional design models to their on-campus classes.

- Improving student services: Student success initiatives designed for EKU Online students extend to all students, helping increase retention and graduation rates university-wide.
- Enhancing Eastern’s visibility and reputation: EKU Online programs promote regional, national and international reputation.
- Increased enrollment: EKU Online programs attract students who would otherwise not attend.
- Increased revenue: Larger student populations support the academic and university infrastructure.

As Eastern carefully develops new EKU Online programs, the reward for major investments in program design, for faculty on call 24/7, and students pulling long nights over the kitchen table will be letters like this from recent EKU Online graduate Bill Parrott: “I learned more at EKU than I thought possible, thanks to the excellent Blackboard discussions, class objectives and contents and because each of you were the difference between my just getting a degree and really learning something useful. I use that knowledge every day in my safety job. Thanks for two great years, but more importantly, thanks for sharing your vast knowledge with me. I am certainly a better man for learning under your tutelage.”

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT EKU ONLINE, call (859) 622-7441 or visit www.eku.edu/online-degrees