

CEHS Online Graduate Education Programs Ranked 5th in the Nation | CEHS

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Thanks in part to its Instructional Technology and Learning Sciences (ITLS) master's degree, the online graduate education programs offered by the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services at Utah State University were ranked in the top five programs in the nation by the 2018 *U.S. News and World Report*.

What sets the ITLS online master's program apart is the opportunity it provides students around the state, the country, and the world to earn a prestigious graduate degree in a rapidly-expanding field.

The program has risen to national prominence primarily because of the strength of its courses. "The ITLS faculty have incredible online classes because that's what their expertise is in," said Matthew Havertz, the department's webmaster. "They teach classes on instructional design, they do research on how people learn best, and they know how to use technology to create a well-structured online class."

That sentiment is echoed by the students in the program. "The professors are experts at making a remote education experience feel personal, involved and thorough," said David Moore, a student in the program. "It may be the best learning experience I've had in my life. An ITLS professor's area of expertise is teaching. Having a professor who is an expert at facilitating learning is refreshingly effective."

Founded in the mid-60's, the instructional design program at Utah State is one of the oldest in the country. Beginning in 1998 the department became the first at USU to offer

a distance-based graduate program. The department has embraced changes in technology in the two decades since, eventually transitioning to an online-only system.

Dr. Mimi Recker, former ITLS department head and one of those responsible for launching the distance program, views the number of students who are already in their careers to be one of the program's strengths.

"It sets up a very different educational paradigm because students are coming to the table with a lot of skills and experience," Dr. Recker said. "As a teacher, it makes for a much more interesting class."

The nature of instructional design, along with the project-oriented classes, allows students to make the material relevant to their professional situation. "The degree is essentially about learning how to break complex information into digestible pieces," Moore said. "If I want to have skills that are valuable beyond the next few years, I need to be able to make complex subjects simple. That's why this degree is so appealing."

The online-based instructional technology and learning sciences program is just one of the many nationally-recognized graduate degrees offered by the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services at USU. The college also offers ITLS graduate degrees for students at the Logan campus.

While many online-only programs suffer from a lack of face-to-face interaction between students, the ITLS program has found ways to work around that deficiency. At the beginning of the school year, students in the program are invited to the university's main campus in Logan for a three-day session that develops a feeling of togetherness.

"It jump-started our cohort's relationships in a way that would have been very difficult to achieve remotely," Moore said. "I never would have thought to have online students meet in person but it ended up being a great way to bond."

The students also use an app called Slack that has allowed them to communicate about everything from registering for classes to exchanging recipes. "Basically, it allows students to have the kinds of hallway conversations they'd be having if they were in Logan," said Dr. Andy Walker, current ITLS department head. He continues, "What I like the best about the Slack team is that our own student David Moore got it started! Our students really take ownership of their degree program."

Online students are given the same opportunities as on-campus students whenever possible. Guest speakers are

periodically brought to Logan for presentations that are often unavailable to distance students. Havertz has begun streaming those events on the ITLS Facebook page and uploading them to YouTube for on-demand viewing by distance students.