Nothing ventured, nothing gained

No one needed to educate Sue Merrell on the value of higher education. As coordinator of curriculum and assessment for Sinclair Community College in Ohio, Merrell knew that she needed more than a master's degree to achieve her goals within an academic setting.

However, she was hesitant to place her educational aspirations ahead of her children’s.

“I knew I eventually wanted to get a doctorate, but the candid truth is that I have three kids in college, which would have meant that we’d be writing tuition checks for four of the five members of my family at the same time,” she said. “That can be a hard sell to your spouse – no matter how committed he or she may be to education.”

In the midst of that dilemma, Merrell heard about a scholarship offered by Capella University through the League for Innovation, an international community college resource network. As a sustaining partner with that organization, Capella offered this annual scholarship — valued at up to $50,000 over three years — to a learner from a League-member college. Since Merrell was already considering Capella, she pulled together the application in early 2002 and mailed it off.

“When I first heard about the scholarship, I thought, ‘Well, nothing ventured, nothing gained,’” she recalled. “While I got great support and recommendations from the institutional leaders at Sinclair, I filed the application honestly never thinking I’d hear back about it. When I heard that I’d won, I couldn’t believe it.”

A model of innovation

Before moving to her current role as an academic administrator, Merrell was recognized for her creative approach to teaching and learning. As faculty chair of Sinclair’s business information systems department, she was twice honored with the institution’s Innovator of the Year award.

In 1998, for example, she was honored for developing and delivering faculty workshops on course redesign and learning improvement efforts. Three years later, Merrell and her colleagues in business information systems were recognized for their work to redesign and launch learning-centered modules and courses, using both traditional and distance delivery modes.

Today, Merrell’s former department instructs hundreds of students each quarter in traditional day and evening courses, Web courses, satellite and weekend courses.

Support and responsiveness second to none

Even with her impressive track record as an academic innovator, Merrell said her experience as a Capella learner has been extraordinary. From the almost
instantaneous feedback she received on her first online application to the personal attention paid to her individual learning plan, she believes Capella exceeds the typical support standards found in higher education.

For example, Merrell pointed to Capella’s online enrollment counselors, who helped her maximize transfer credits and build her initial learning plan. She also praised the mentor system in the School of Education, where she found that faculty member Keith Johansen’s specialty in instructional systems was a natural fit for her professional interests in curriculum, assessment and technology.

The responsiveness didn’t end with formal counseling and mentoring relationships. During a recent quarter, Merrell said fast thinking by faculty member Elizabeth Bruch prevented her from taking an unnecessary course. “I signed up for two particular comprehensives because I thought I had to take them both,” Merrell recalled. “But before the course even started, Liz saw a posting I had made a few days before classes began, sent me a note and said, ‘Sue, you’ve really met the requirements for this course.’ Then, she gave me follow-up information on who to contact next. That kind of attention and care is really unheard of in most academic circles.”

Preparing for the next career step
In an ironic twist, Merrell has spaced her degrees in almost-equal increments. Beginning with the bachelor’s degree she completed at Ohio’s Miami University in 1974, 15 years passed before she finished her master’s degree at the University of Dayton. On her current schedule, 16 years will separate that degree from her Capella doctorate, which Merrell hopes to parlay into new opportunities in academic administration or consulting.

At times, Merrell has talked about her Capella experiences with friends or colleagues who have completed more traditional doctoral programs. Those conversations have frequently served to quell thoughts that the online approach is an easier alternative.

“Because I’ve been in a faculty role where I’ve taught distance learning, this was absolutely the right choice for me and my career intentions,” she said. “Some people who have taken more traditional doctoral programs have had a hard time believing in the caliber of Capella’s approach, but my guess is that they have never experienced the rigors of an online program. You need to be very disciplined and able to manage your time very effectively.”