Sandy Gambill: This is Sandy Gambill and I’m here today with Leslie Hinyard, who’s an Assistant Professor and Associate Director of Academic Affairs for the Center of Outcomes Research. Leslie, thank you so much for agreeing to talk to us about how you engage students in your program. Can you just tell us a little bit about the Center for Outcomes Research for people who aren’t familiar with it?

Leslie Hinyard: Thank you for having me today. The St. Louis University Center for Outcomes Research, which is also known as SLU COR, started as a division in internal medicine actually, within the School of Medicine and we were formed as kind of the way for physicians within the School of Medicine to have some research support. However, very quickly this intertransitioned to having its own research agenda, which is really where we began, so the people within SLU COR are actually usually funded through their own grants and contracts and we do a lot of health outcomes research, which is a phrase that is starting to become common but I don’t think everybody really knows what it is. And it’s really looking at the end points of health services and health treatments, so that could mean anything from a clinical trial where we’re looking for whether or not a drug or a device is effective or works within a very confined population, or it can be how much does it cost to provide this particular intervention to a population or are people who are served within a particular healthcare system better off, or are they having better end points, are they feeling better at the end of the day than people served in another healthcare system. So it’s really a very broad look at healthcare services and outcomes, but the most important part is that we’re looking at the end point, and usually we’re talking about patient related end points, so the things that are important to the patients at the end of the day, which could be how much something costs, it could be quality of life, it doesn’t necessarily have to be whether or not they die at the end of
their treatment. So that’s the kind of research that we do, but our program that we have, we’ve started, this is our second year that we’ve had our program, we’ve had our courses for longer than that but our Masters of Sciences and Health Outcomes Research, that program is finishing up its second year and that program is really designed to provide a strong methodological foundation for people who are interested in doing research within healthcare, specifically health outcomes research, but the research skills apply in a broader context.

SG: I was really interested in talking to you because with our theme ‘engaging all learners’ because I think you have a really unique circumstance with that academic program, all of the courses are online, is that correct?

LH: That is correct, our entire program is online, including our capstone course and our capstone presentations. It’s all completely online.

SG: And who are your students?

LH: So we actually have a really broad base of students. We have everyone from very well established physicians that are currently faculty members here at SLU and we have people, actually we have an accelerated masters program, so we actually have some undergraduates who are starting in our courses. So that’s a really broad base. We also have a dual degree with law and so we have some health law students that are also participating in our MS program, so that broad base of students leads to an interesting aspect of our courses even from our foundations courses through our more advanced coursework.

SG: Wow, I can really see that, I mean with most online graduate programs or certificates, you expect to have working adult professionals, which those students present their own particular challenges as far as engagement because they’re busy people. But with such a
broad base, with having those and having students early in careers, how do you engage such a wide range of learners?

**LH:** It’s been a challenge since the beginning of the program, but the great thing is that everyone is still starting from a baseline level as far as the content material, so some of the physicians have research experience but they don’t necessarily have outcomes research experience so they’re experiences are generally more clinically focused as opposed to more observational research, it’s just the type of stuff that we do here. And so it is good from that perspective that most of the students as far as the methodological foundation are starting from the same place. Obviously the sophistication of their writing skills and their own personal literature skills, those are widely varied, but it helps to have everyone at least at some baseline level having not a lot of experience in the research. We also do a lot of collaborative work in our courses, and I know that seems odd considering they’re all online and they’re all asynchronous which for those of you who don’t know what asynchronous means, it simply means that no one has to logon to the system at a particular time, so you don’t have to be online at 3 o’clock on Wednesday, you can complete your coursework at your own pace during the courseweek. And so we do a lot of group work that allows the students that are not as familiar, the students that are starting from an earlier level to really engage with those people who may have had a little bit more experience. And I try really hard to make sure in my own courses that I’m assigning groups together with people from various different backgrounds in groups together to help facilitate that particular collaboration.

**SG:** So you deliberately set up your groups so that people with different life experiences and different ages are in the same group. How do you find those groups interact?
LH: They actually interact really well, but one of the benefits of the asynchronous aspect of an online program is that the students themselves can get together and decide what works for them and how they want to work together. So sometimes that means that they get online and do Google chats and actually sit and work together on a problem. Sometimes that means that we, we use the wikis a lot in our coursework, so the benefit to the wiki is that it saves each version prior, so people can make edits but you can still see the previous version. And so that allows groups to actually work together asynchronously and edit each other’s work and unlike google doc where you lose the version, in the wiki you have the entire record of what everybody’s done and that allows the groups to work together, even if they’re not all online at the same time. That’s basically the logistics of how those things work. As far as the collaboration between people of varying skill sets at the beginning, it actually works really nicely, because the people that may have more life experience or more research experience really help to engage the people that may not have had so much experience and then the people who are coming from law, or are an undergrad, or are completely in this program and may have an undergraduate degree in some health related field but have no graduate training at this point, have a very different perspective on research than people who are practicing physicians. And those different perspectives allow everyone to really contribute and to see problems from different angles and I found that that actually works well to give the physicians, or really I’m saying physicians because that’s the majority of our students, but really students that have more experience in research. It gives them the ability to see their work from the perspective of a more general audience, which helps to at least reduce the amount of jargon in writing and in research presentations.
SG: It sounds like such an amazing online community because with the group of students you have, you couldn’t get them in a room at 3 o’clock on a Wednesday, so you are doing something online that you couldn’t do any other way.

LH: Exactly and that’s actually why we chose to do an online program, because we knew that a lot of the students that would be interested in this program would not be able to accommodate a traditional schedule.

SG: From the experience that you’ve had, I’m wondering if you have any advice for departments that are considering developing online programs where the students might be either widely varied in experience or largely made up of professionals working in the field.

LH: I think there’s a couple of things that are actually really important for online programs in general and online programs that are catering to a varied student body. The first is really the importance of developing a cohesive community, which really involves outside of the classroom having some person within the department or the program state maintaining contact with all of the students, so that’s really just a practical issue but it gives the students a feeling of belonging to the program, which I think can easily be lost since they’re never here.

SG: Does that need to be a faculty member?

LH: I don’t think it needs to be a faculty member, I think it can be anyone that’s associated with the program so long as people feel like there’s an engagement with either the faculty or the administration on a level outside of the classroom. Another thing is really just the importance of structuring your courses in a user-friendly format. So in particular, some people are coming with a lot of internet ‘savviness’, people that are very comfortable, and some people come into online programs relatively uncomfortable with the format but doing it out of necessity. And it’s really important to structure your courses so that they’re easy to
navigate and what we try to do and what I specifically try to do in my courses, I always have an introductory video. I use Tegrity a lot, so I use screen capture to go through the entire course, so there’s actually a video of how to capture every single component of the course that people can view at the very beginning. I also do a Tegrity video of the syllabus, so I can sit down, in a traditional class I’d sit down and have a conversation with my students as to the course expectations and the syllabus so I really do that in a recorded format and then I ask people to please respond with any questions that they have. The other component is really engagement within the course so that the students have to talk to each other. Online learning can feel like an isolated experience if you don’t have to engage with others, so we do a lot of group work. We also do a lot of blog posts or discussion boards and those are generally student facilitated, so I usually break them up into groups and then within the groups they have to kind of summarize the learning for the week and pose their own question to start conversations, and I’ve found that those conversations tend to work a lot better than anything that would come when I pose a question, when it’s the student driven experience, they tend to have much more insightful views. The last thing is really making sure you give an opportunity for the students to introduce themselves to each other at the beginning of the course and this can really serve two purposes. One, to get to learn how to use the technology that they will need to use for the course and the other, so that people really feel like they know who they’re in the virtual classroom with, so if I am assigning wikis, using the wiki structures using the assignments for the course, I’ll have them at the beginning of the course, create a wiki page that introduces themselves. And then they can ask each other questions or we can use the discussion blog, but that serves the dual purpose. So I think really as far as online classes for busy people, it’s setting things up in your courses that makes it accessible
and easy to use. And then really the most important thing is the availability of the instructor, which can be difficult when people expect you to be online 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, but if you set up the expectations of when you’re going to be available, and how often people and how quickly people can expect a response from you, that interaction between instructor and students and then the students interaction with each other really facilitates a lot of learning within each of the courses, even though you’re not sitting face to face.

SG: Great, well thank you so much for sharing these experiences, it’s a really unique program and we were really happy to learn about it.