

Texas Distance Learning Association Presents *“Outstanding Commitment to Excellence and Innovation in Distance Education for an Institution”* during its 2010 Annual Convention in Houston, Texas recently.



For five years, Oratory Athenaeum has used distance education as part of its regular curriculum making it a transparent part of its school's culture. All social studies courses at the school are taken as online asynchronous classes. This includes AP social studies courses for those students who are interested in a more rigorous program. The school's staff serves as liaisons for their students in partnership with online instructors who the students may never meet in a face-to-face setting. As a result, its students are better prepared for challenges they will face in a world that is relying on distance learning for education, training, and professional development.

Oratory is committed in providing its students with those skills needed to meet the 21st Century. Thus, it is making the commitment to ensure its students understand how to use technology, applications, and distance learning strategies to be successful distance learning students and world citizens. Many of the school's student body are part of its international program mostly coming from Spanish speaking countries outside of the United States. It is demonstrating, through its distance learning program, that learning is no longer tied to brick and mortar boundaries.

Oratory participated in a unique collaborative cultural exchange project with Denmark for two years. The project allowed students in both countries to learn about the world at large using distance learning tools. Each team identified a global issue, demonstrated why it was of international concern, presented their findings, and developed a doable solution to the problem selected. Teams were composed of students from each school. They had to communicate across the globe, overcome language, cultural, and time differences. The five Oratory student leaders made presentations, via desktop video conferencing, to state and national conferences. The project was so successful it was featured in T.H.E. Journal magazine. Presently, the school is involved in its second collaborative project with schools in Poland and Colombia.

In another online collaborative project, students in AP Government collaborated and competed with students from another Texas school in an online debate. Each collaborative team developed opening and closing arguments using multimedia resources and were available to answer judges' questions in open forums. Each team's members worked together through group discussion and file exchange areas.

Most recently, a student from Oratory was selected by iNACOL to be part of its featured student panel during its October, 2009 national conference. He emphasized the importance for taking distance learning courses especially if a student plans on going to college.

Oratory staff has embraced online instruction and have become online instructors for students in other parts of the state of Texas where there is a need for instructors in Languages Other Than English.

Students from Oratory have been accepted to various Ivy League schools, Rice, The University of Texas at Austin, and Notre Dame University. Many of the students have attributed their success and confidence in these critical college interviews to being able to talk about the projects and courses that they have experienced through distance learning.