

Graduate Programs and Distance Learning

Some schools offer advanced degrees without making you give up your everyday life.

When it comes to Christian graduate education, with spirituality being a key emphasis, the phrase “higher learning” takes on new meaning.

“The spiritual component enhances the academic quality of an education. It prepares students to swim upstream in a world of compromised values,” says Thomas Malcolm, director of continuing and adult education at Southeastern University in Lakeland, Florida.

If you plan to pursue an advanced degree at a traditional institution or through one of the increasingly popular distance-learning programs, Christian schools offer several choices designed to satisfy the spiritual and academic needs of students.

Whether your goal is to improve your practical job-related skills or prepare for ministry as a vocation, Christian graduate schools around the nation offer high-quality training from a faith-based perspective, often at multiple campuses and usually through some sort of distance-learning program.

At Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma, students choose from graduate-degree programs in business; education; and theology and missions, which includes integrated seminary training to prepare students for holistic Christian ministry with a charismatic-Pentecostal emphasis.

“We believe in academic excellence and spiritual empowerment,” says ORU School of Theology and Missions Dean Thomson K. Mathew.

Asbury Theological Seminary—based in Wilmore, Kentucky, with a satellite campus located in Orlando, Florida—offers graduate degrees at both campuses that include Master of Arts in Christian education, Christian leadership and Christian ministries, and doctorates in ministry, missiology and philosophy.

The majority of the school’s theological students graduate to serve as local-church pastors, though others seek training for missions, teaching, counseling, and youth and music ministries. Asbury has roots in the United Methodist tradition but draws students from several other denominations, including the Assemblies of God and Church of God.

The Virtue of Virtual

A distinctively Christian education is coupled with superior high-tech resources at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, where distance learners enrolled at the school outnumber residential students 13,000 to 9,000. David Barnett, associate vice president for distance education, suggests that distance learning is a growing trend because it is compatible with the busy contemporary lifestyle.

“Distance learning is a tremendous area of growth because it allows working adults to achieve their educational goals in a flexible, affordable way without having to leave their jobs or uproot their families to move to a residential campus,” Barnett says.

“Distance education,” as the term implies, involves training students who are not in the same geographic location as the instructor. Due in part to the increased availability of state-of-the-art communications technology, distance learning is quickly becoming a popular alternative to the traditional learning model.

At some institutions, a Master of Divinity (.) can be pursued entirely online, but at all schools, obtaining an accredited Doctor of Ministry degree (.) requires some on-site, face-to-face instruction.

Students at Regent University in Virginia Beach, Virginia, must take what are called “modular courses.” For these, they are required to attend class on campus for one full week, even though the school’s distance-education program offers plenty of technological bells and whistles, such as live, interactive presentations during which students raise their hands and ask questions virtually.

Regent offers graduate degrees in several areas of study, including business, communication and the arts, divinity, education, government, law, leadership studies, and psychology and counseling. Graduate degrees at the school of divinity include Master of Arts, ., . and Doctor of Philosophy. The school also has a satellite campus in the Washington, D.C., area.

For those who opt to pursue the nontraditional course of training in lieu of being a full-time student on campus, perhaps the greatest advantages are being able to retain their current way of life and remain active in their churches or ministries while applying what they are learning.

Malcolm, of Southeastern, reports the typical student enrolled in the university's continuing and adult-education program is "a 37-year-old Caucasian female with 2.5 children who works full time, volunteers at church and has a family income of about \$40,000"—a demographic profile not unlike that at similar programs.

When Accreditation Matters

Mitch Baker, assistant director of technology and degree completion at Lee University in Cleveland, Tennessee, suggests that prospective students lean toward enrolling with accredited institutions.

"Look for a regionally accredited institution, as they have a reputation to preserve and work very hard to maintain the quality of their educational programs," says Baker, who has been involved in continuing education since 1996 and helped Regent University set up its doctoral program in organizational leadership.

"There are a lot of good nonaccredited courses and programs," he adds, "and they may meet an individual's needs, but if one desires to pursue a master's or Ph.D., the accreditation pays off."

Despite the advantages distance education offers, Baker admits it is not for everyone.

"A student should take a learning inventory to discover how they perform best. Some people need to be in a face-to-face environment to succeed. Others will do better online," he says. "The key is to know your strengths and weaknesses and

capitalize on that knowledge.”

For a more comprehensive online listing of Christian schools and programs, go to (). More information about a school’s accreditation can be obtained online from the Council for Higher Education Accreditation ().

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