

Higher Education the High-Tech Way

'Distance learning' brings the classroom to your family room

Whether you wish to improve your job-related skills or prepare for ministry, Christian schools offer distance-learning programs to satisfy the spiritual and academic needs of students.

Asbury Theological Seminary, with campuses in Wilmore, Kentucky, and Orlando, Florida, offers masters degrees in Christian education, Christian leadership and Christian ministries or doctorates in ministry, missiology and philosophy.

Christian education pairs with high-tech resources at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, where distance learners enrolled at the school outnumber residential students 13,000 to 9,000.

"Distance education," as the term implies, enables students to learn even if they are not in the same location as the instructor. Benefiting from its compatibility with busy modern lifestyles and the increased availability of state-of-the-art communications technology, distance learning is quickly becoming a popular alternative to the traditional learning model.

A recent study by Eduventures, a consulting and research firm, found that 50 percent of people who expected to enroll in a higher-education program said they would prefer to receive at least some of their instruction online.

About 80 percent of online students are undergraduates. They are generally older and more likely to be working and have families, presumably taking advantage of the liberty that distance learning offers them to retain their current way of life and remain active in their churches while applying what they are learning.

David Barnett, associate vice president for distance education at Liberty University, says the nontraditional student is the ideal candidate for distance learning.

"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.

Barnett's point is reflected in the broad invitation Regent University offers applicants to its online-degree program: "No matter where you are located in the world, you can obtain a Regent University undergraduate or graduate degree." Prospective students can choose from more than two dozen degrees offered online by the Virginia Beach, Virginia, university. Distance education at Regent includes offers plenty of technological bells and whistles, such as live, interactive presentations during which students raise their hands and ask questions virtually.

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

Despite the advantages distance education offers, it is not for everyone. Mitch Baker, director of independent study programs at Lee University in Cleveland, Tennessee, suggests that a little self-assessment before enrolling could help to prevent making a wrong choice.

“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.”

Baker also 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,” Baker says. “There are a lot of good, nonaccredited courses and programs, and they may meet an individual’s needs, but if one desires to pursue a master’s or Ph.D., the accreditation pays off.”