

Is Distance Learning for You?

A Degree May Be Closer Than You Think

If you've ever thought of returning to school but couldn't afford to put your life on hold to attend a traditional institution, then perhaps distance learning—participating in college classes from a remote location—is for you. Students utilize audiotapes, videotapes, telephone conferences, cable or satellite television, fax, e-mail, and the Web to receive instruction and interact with professors and other students.

“Online learning” is the common term used to describe distance education delivered across the Internet. Online courses employ such means of communication as Web pages, discussion boards, e-mails, streaming audio, video conferencing, interactive multimedia and even newer formats such as blogs and podcasts.

Assignments are transmitted over broadband connections, and students interact with others through the use of e-mail, electronic bulletin boards and real-time chat. Students needing additional assistance are able to contact their instructor by e-mail or telephone.

Links to online resources allow students to share learning experiences, access valuable research and obtain information from acknowledged experts in the global community. With the growing availability of state-of-the-art technology, distance education is quickly becoming a popular alternative to the traditional learning model.

Yet for all the power of technology, David Massey, director of distance education for the school of divinity at Regent University in Virginia Beach, Virginia, stresses that it is

only one piece of the distance-learning puzzle. "We use the latest technology in our courses, but we avoid using technology for technology's sake," he says. "Instead, we are very intentional about how we leverage the technology to enhance student learning."

Though Regent University offers all the technological bells and whistles, including live, interactive presentations during which students can virtually raise their hands and ask a question of the professor, the school still requires students to complete modular courses, which are held on campus for one full week.

At some distance-learning institutions, a bachelor's degree through Master of Divinity (.) degree can be pursued entirely online, but any accredited Doctor of Ministry (.) program requires some face-to-face instruction, typically delivered in seminars at an approved site or on campus.

David Barnett is the associate vice president for distance education at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, where distance learners (13,000) outnumber residential students (9,000). He claims that distance learning is a growing trend at Liberty and elsewhere.

"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.

In particular, today's online programs afford students the capability of completing their research and other coursework

when it best fits their schedule, while working from the convenience of their home or anywhere else they can access the Internet.

According to the research firm Eduventures, the proportion of college students taking all their classes online is projected to rise during the next 10 years from 7 percent today to as much as 25 percent. And recently adopted legislation has opened the doors wider to distance-education students, as colleges will no longer be required to deliver at least half their courses on a campus instead of online to qualify for federal student aid.

Despite its advantages, there are challenges in distance learning. Liberty's Barnett states that it requires students to be largely self-motivated when it comes to their studies. "A significant amount of work is expected for each course, and students have to be able to juggle the demands of home, church and work, in addition to their course work," he says.

Nevertheless, distance education can be an excellent alternative for busy career professionals, frequent business travelers, military personnel, nonresidents, stay-at-home parents and others who want to further their education without leaving home.

For those who do opt to pursue the nontraditional course of training, perhaps their greatest advantage is being able to remain active in their current ministry contexts and apply what they are learning in a practical manner.

Thomas Malcolm, director of continuing and adult education at Southeastern University in Lakeland, Florida, identifies the

typical student enrolled in distance classes at his institution as “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 other distance-education programs.

Words to the Wise

Mitch Baker has been involved in distance education since 1996 and helped Regent University set up its Ph.D. program in organizational leadership. Now the assistant director of technology and degree completion at Lee University in Cleveland, Tennessee, Baker has some suggestions for prospective distance-education students.

“First, 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 non-accredited 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.”

Second, he says students need to realize that “these are college-level courses requiring college-level study habits, all within a specified time limit.” Finally, he encourages potential students “to sign up for one course and see how it fits into their lifestyle.”

Debbie Watkins, spokeswoman for the School of Theology and Missions at Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma, heralds the virtues of accreditation: “Spirit-empowered training such as ours is enhanced by accreditation with the Association of Theological Schools, giving students a world-

class education for the whole person.”

Another value of accreditation is cited by Gordon McAlister, dean of distance education at Crown College in the Twin Cities area of Minnesota, a school affiliated with the Christian and Missionary Alliance denomination: “The ability of students to transfer qualified credits from other accredited institutions is a valuable feature of such programs.”

Baker stresses that distance education’s flexibility and easy access appeal to busy students: “The beauty of it is that a student can work on their course work anytime and anywhere. ... And the content and materials are readily available so they can submit their assignments remotely.”

However, he admits that distance education 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 than in the face-to-face environment. The key is to know your strengths and weaknesses and capitalize on that knowledge.”

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