

Redefine Yourself by Going Back to School

✖ *Many people are hitting the books to discover a new career. Here's how you can join them.*

If the admonition to accept “change” at work sounds agonizingly cliché to you, you’ve discerned something of a given these days. Change, as most people in today’s workforce know, has become a pseudo core value of every CEO from New York to Beijing who is fighting to keep their company afloat in this global economic downturn.

To keep from sinking beneath the competition, leaders must quickly adapt. As the waters get rough, employees are expected to swim too.

Sink or swim—it is one way of describing what most people must do at a job, or in life generally. And in a rapidly changing world, where corporations across the globe sink sometimes overnight, one option for Christian workers who want to accept and embrace change is returning to school to advance or change their career.

For the Christian adult student, the options are limitless.

Johnnie Moore Jr., vice president for executive projects at Virginia-based Liberty University, told *Charisma* that Liberty enrolled more than 48,000 students this year, which would make it one of the largest evangelical universities in the world. The Christian powerhouse founded by the late Jerry Falwell offers 56 majors, 33 minors and 92 graduate programs with fair tuition rates, flexible payment plans and good student-to-faculty ratios.

Moore says more than two-thirds of Liberty’s global student population is enrolled in online programs. “We realize that

the majority of our online students are balancing their education with a full-time job and the care of their family," he says. "Our programs are designed to be flexible. We are a 'brick and click' institution, so online students can also travel to Lynchburg, Va., and take special intensive classes in a traditional, residential format."

Having also recognized the value of offering a nontraditional education, Southeastern University, a smaller yet fast-growing school in Lakeland, Fla., has recently experienced rapid growth in the number of students enrolled in its online programs.

"There are so many options right now for adult students," says Kevin Jones, director of admissions at Southeastern. "Whether it's a master's degree or a bachelor's, they can do them online, they can do them in the evenings, or they can go during the day on campus. The flexibility is kind of the key. The customer service that universities are providing now is really outstanding for helping people in meeting their needs."

How Can We Help You?

"Customer service," a phrase traditionally applied to banks or restaurants, is now part of the appeal for university campuses across the country. As an industry, education has had to become more customer service-oriented to accommodate people with families, who can't afford to quit their jobs, or who have no desire or ability to relocate.

Following the explosive success of schools such as the University of Phoenix, where distance-learning programs evolved and greatly benefited over the years from the advent of the Internet, most Christian schools caught on and sought to mimic the model.

The results of this trend have been astounding, especially

among Christian schools. This year, the Online Education Database (OEDb) ranked Liberty's online program the sixth best in the nation, more than 20 slots ahead of the ever-popular University of Phoenix. In the same standings, Virginia Beach, Regent University was ranked No. 2—making it the nation's top online Christian university.

Also appearing in the OEDb's top 10 were LeTourneau University (No. 5) and Grand Canyon University (No. 7). Four Christian schools placing in the top 10 of the best online universities for 2009 demonstrates how seriously Christian leaders have considered the potential and value of nontraditional means of education.

Liberty was somewhat of a pioneer in offering nontraditional degrees, having launched Christian distance-learning programs more than 20 years ago. From its inception, Liberty's Christian ethos emphasized the importance of applying ethics not only in coursework but also in all aspects of career growth and life. Moore says that the school's mission is "to develop Christ-centered men and women with the values, knowledge and skills essential to impact tomorrow's world."

Many Christian universities, aside from offering the obvious spiritual incentives of a Christ-centered education, are known for pursuing academic integrity and excellence.

James Townsend, director of admissions at LeTourneau University in Longview, Texas, says on the school's Web site that students are trained up spiritually and through comprehensive academic learning. "We believe success in this world takes both," he says. "The heart of LeTourneau [is] melding ingenuity and faith together so that the person who leaves our institution sees life through both."

Nationwide, most Christian schools also aim to equip their graduates with a high earning potential. "Obviously, the three biggest benefits [of a college education] are marketability in

the job force, opportunities for promotion and advancement, and the financial incentive of increased salary,” says Kathy Player, president of Grand Canyon University in Phoenix, which reported that online students make up 90 percent of the school’s 28,000 enrollment.

Many prominent online Christian schools offer degrees and graduate programs similar to those of their secular counterparts. In most cases, Christian school leaders do not seek to undercut the successes of other schools. “We don’t really compete with other Christian schools,” Jones says. “There are enough students out there to fill our classrooms. I speak regularly with admission directors at other schools, and we exchange ideas and plan how we can build enrollment for everybody.”

Also, students seeking a degree not offered in one place are often referred to a reputable, Christ-centered school in another. As an example, Jones says he might point a student seeking a nursing degree to Evangel College, an Assemblies of God-based school in Springfield, Mo., or an engineering student to LeTourneau in Texas.

Fear and Other Hurdles

With so many career choices out there, the main struggle adult students face when they consider returning to school is self-inflicted, schools say.

“Generally, in dealing with adult students—especially if they’re career-changers—the first thing we do is pray to get rid of the fear,” he says. “It seems like most people are so afraid. They know that they have to do something, but they’re afraid. It’s good for them to first realize that they’re not alone.”

Jones says the approach at Southeastern is to ease the transition by making school services convenient “one-stop shopping” experiences and by offering spiritual support.

"It's difficult, especially for our adult students, when you don't know where to start," he says. "The most important thing is getting a relationship established with your admissions counselor, who can work with them right through enrollment, getting their financial aid set, getting all of their paperwork filled out, and even praying with them."

Marty Crossland, dean of the online campus at Oral Roberts University (ORU), where 100 of the school's 3,000 students are nontraditional distance learners, says some adults worry about their competency level after being out of school for so long. "Returning adult students often have anxieties about whether they can 'cut it' or not," he says. "ORU recognizes this, and offers extra assistance."

He says ORU provides "student success counselors," study skills workshops and ongoing online tutoring in many subject areas, often at little or no extra cost to the student.

Jones says that, in general, students can deal with financial hurdles by:

- applying for state and federal aid at Free Application for Federal Student Aid (see)
- investigating the availability of state grants; for example, the Florida Resident Access Grant awards qualifying students at private, nonprofit colleges and universities nearly \$3,000 per year
- searching for more than \$3 billion in scholarship money at FastWeb (see).

"A few years ago, we even had a 45-year-old male student get a scholarship from the Daughters of the American Revolution," Jones said, chuckling.

Another potential hurdle is choosing a major that conforms to a student's personality and vocational strengths. Students

considering a particular career track are encouraged to do their own research. Career services, which most schools provide, help students imagine possible vocations.

Most schools have replaced the old model of “career counseling” with “career information,” a new standard that encourages students empowered by modern-day technologies to be proactive and to embrace the process of self-discovery—a core aspect of any good education.

And now that the current recession is causing American companies to both shed employees and industries and train and hire new workers in new fields, transferable skills from previous work experiences are important to consider during the selection of any new career.

When unsure, students can make use of personality tests, diligent research and the advice of professionals in the field to help them choose a career. But Jones says most adults return to school on a mission.

“For the most part, we deal with people who come here with their minds already made up, and they’ve already done all the research,” he says.

“They’ve already gone through this whole searching process and come here with their compass already set, and we just help get them where they’re going as quickly and conveniently as we can.”

He added that it seems like among adult students, their new career choice is often a desire God put on their hearts, sometimes as far back as high school. They never went after their dream, so that desire is still there, he notes.

Ultimately, whether the motivation is to advance in their current field or to make a complete career change, Christians looking to shift gears by returning to school are advised to listen closely to their hearts.

"I would say get in touch with what God has called you to do and then follow that path," Jones says. "It doesn't even have to be ministry."

It could mean becoming a teacher or going into business, he says. "It's just that there's a desire that's been placed on their heart. It's still there because it's God-given."

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