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The Anytime, Anywhere Master's Degree

As technology erases the limitations of physical space, distance learning offers new ways to earn advanced degrees. By Stephanie Wilbur Ash

While stationed in Iraq, Martin Webb and his Army bunkmates pooled their money and bought a satellite dish for their tiny trailer. The bunkmates used it to play the online war game Halo. Webb, now deputy inspector general for inspections for the 82nd Airborne Division in Fort Bragg, North Carolina, used it to earn his MBA from Florida State University. He did the same work as his classmates back in Tallahassee, just online and from halfway across the world. "All I needed was the Internet, a little bit of time everyday and priorities," he says.

Careers, spouses, children, mortgages—these priorities are what separate adult learners from traditional college students ages 18 to 25. Certain sectors of higher education have always catered to the adult work force by offering classes on evenings and weekends. But for today's busy professionals, getting to a physical classroom at any time just isn't feasible. We work longer hours, travel more often, change jobs and need more advanced training than the workers of 20 or even 10 years ago—all fed by the digital revolution and our changing global economy. As this revolution continues, forward-thinking universities are using new technol-



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ogy to reach those best poised to use the degrees: current workers with years in their field.

Colorado State University's MBA programs have been conferring degrees to remote students since 1972, says director Susan Meyer. "We started with closed circuit TV, moved to cable, then to VHS and DVD, and now we do mixed media and video streaming," she says. This technology gives students an experience similar to classes held on campus.

Defining Distance Learning

Defined by the United States Distance Learning Association as learning that happens with a physical separation of teachers and students, the term encompasses teaching techniques such as web-based discussion boards, video conferencing and e-mailed assignments. Schools employing distance learning techniques can offer quality degrees with the flexibility to learn anytime, anywhere. This appeals to adult professionals seeking to increase their marketability in their current careers, change careers or become competent in new technologies.

The convenience of studying whenever and wherever is the main attraction of distance learning. But with the high cost of commuting and, perhaps, childcare,

it is a more affordable higher education option for many working professionals. Furthermore, as the recession work force contracts, mastering global communication—inherently required in many distance learning programs—could be as great of an asset as the master's degree itself.

Distance learning works so well for full-time professionals that it's exploding in popularity, growing faster than higher education as a whole. Thousands of students study full-time online, earning everything from certificates in computer programming to undergraduate liberal arts degrees to Ph.D.s. Today, nearly 20 percent of all U.S. higher education students take at least one course online. And online programs are only one spoke of the distance learning wheel.

In addition, distance learning programs are uniquely suited to active-duty military personnel experiencing deployments who still want to pursue master's degrees to advance within the military or increase their marketability when they enter civilian life. In fact, some distance learning master's programs offer special tuition rates and other accommodations for active-duty military.

The extent to which a flexible degree program is "distance" varies from program to program. Some flexible master's



programs—including those at Florida State, Penn State and Oklahoma State—are all-online versions of traditional residential programs. Other programs, such as those at Walden University and the University of San Diego, pair occasional residential requirements—such as meeting face-to-face with faculty and students a few times a year—with online learning. Other schools, like Northcentral University, have no brick-and-mortar component; the entire school is online, so students and instructors never meet face-to-face.

But all approaches have one thing in common: They are born from the need to get highly experienced professionals together with the country's best educators, creating the most innovative, professional and tech-savvy work force in the world.

"I don't think brick-and-mortar campuses will go away, but the trend of distance learning has gotten higher and higher, and it's skyrocketing," says Shona Gambrell, program manager of the Center for Executive and Professional Development at Oklahoma State University's Spears School of Business.

Credible and Rigorous

Jennifer Tagler, a 34-year-old from Phoenix, kept getting turned down for the jobs she wanted. "They would tell me, 'You're over-experienced but under-qualified,'" she says. Years in retail management matched her career goal to train personnel, but her bachelor's degree in graphic design did not. So four years after her first college experience, she attempted an MBA the "brick-and-mortar" way: by going to a campus.

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"I only took one class; it was the only one that would fit with my work schedule," she says. "There were parking issues, additional fees [and] a commute. I realized it would take me forever to finish, and I didn't know how I would come up with the money."

Tagler switched to an online school, the University of Phoenix. "Once I started, there was no turning back," she says. "It was way too convenient." She earned her master's degree in marketing with an emphasis in health care management—and a \$10,000 raise for her position as a corporate trainer.

Tagler's story is a typical, yet modern, higher education story. For more than 20 years, the salary increase from gaining an MBA has been between 30 and 60 percent, according to the Graduate Management Admission Council. Unlike 10 or even five years ago, employers view master's degrees achieved through distance learning techniques as credible, and not necessarily less rigorous, or even less prestigious. "It's just a part of the fabric of higher edu-



University of San Diego

cation now," says Rick Shearer, interim director of World Campus Learning Design, the distance learning antenna of Penn State. "People aren't questioning it in the same way they used to."

Universities such as Penn State have entered the distance learning arena, bringing their full-time tenured faculty and their trusted brand names. The business sector has become extremely technology focused. Employers have seen the benefits of technological mastery in their businesses. Therefore, "There just isn't the question anymore of whether or not [online or flexible] degrees have value," Shearer says.

Institutions are expanding their online operations to keep up with distance learning trends. Some turn to electronic learning experts such as Embanet—a pioneering company in online education—to build programs, develop courses and increase tech support. Since its creation in 1995, Embanet has supported thousands of enrollments for distance education programs at more than 300 organizations worldwide.

The Information Sciences and Technology Building at Penn State. The school offers all-online versions of its traditional residential programs, which are often taught by full-time faculty members.



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—JOHN RUZICKA, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF
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The Graduate Management Admissions Council has seen a steady increase in applications for flexible MBA programs—those that employ distance learning techniques—during the past 10 years. The combination of flexible and part-time MBA applications far outpaces traditional full-time MBAs. Last year, applications for flexible MBA programs alone matched applications for full-time traditional MBAs.

Even in the distant technological past

of five years ago, a survey by Eduventures, which tracks higher education trends, discovered that employers looked down upon online classes. Surveying employers in 2004, Eduventures found that the majority of employers—62 percent—thought online learning was “equal or superior to the value of classroom learning.”

Technology Replaces
Geography

How students learn may be different through distance learning techniques, but it's no less rigorous than a traditional residential master's degree. The massive technological advancements of the past 10 years made this rigor possible. For instance, Florida State University's three online master's degrees, taught by the school's full-time graduate research professors, use a new technological advancement developed by Carnegie Mellon University. It allows Power Point presentations and videos of lectures to be synched and tagged remotely, “so students can search and respond with questions,” says Dr. Bruce Lamont, associate dean of graduate programs.

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The popularity of distance learning grew steadily over the past decade. Last year, applications for flexible MBA programs matched applications for full-time traditional MBAs.



TRACKING THE DISTANCE LEARNING TREND

Because higher education is both a serious intellectual practice and big business, its trends are carefully watched. That's how we know distance learning is not a fad, but part of the way we'll learn from now on. For instance:

- 1 About 48 percent of adult learners have an interest in online programs.
- 2 Currently, 96 percent of colleges and universities serving adult students offer at least one course online, and 60 percent offer whole programs online.
- 3 Flexible MBA programs reported the strongest application volume among graduate management programs compared with traditional and part-time MBAs.
- 4 The typical adult learner is 38.8 years of age, has an average annual household income of approximately \$76,800 and is employed full time. For persons ages 35 to 54 seeking higher education, campus-based study falls out of favor, and online options are preferred.
- 5 Improving performance or pay is the overriding motivation of approximately 30 percent of adult learners. Career-related themes are the primary reason that many consumers—63 percent—pursue continuing and professional education, while personal enrichment is an important secondary and tertiary motivation.
- 6 On average, adult learners are most concerned with quality and the qualifications of faculty. Other important considerations in the adult learner's evaluation of options are cost; the reputation of the college, both overall and in their field of study; and course scheduling.
- 7 The median increase between pre-degree salary and salary six months after graduation was 53 percent for full-time MBA graduates and 29 percent for part-time MBA graduates. —S. W. A.

Sources: The Graduate Management Admission Council, Eduventures

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CHOOSING WISELY

One of the dangers of distance learning—particularly for all-online degrees—is that peer-review and quality control hasn't completely caught up with no-walls instruction. Some schools may look good on screen, but they could be handing out useless degrees.



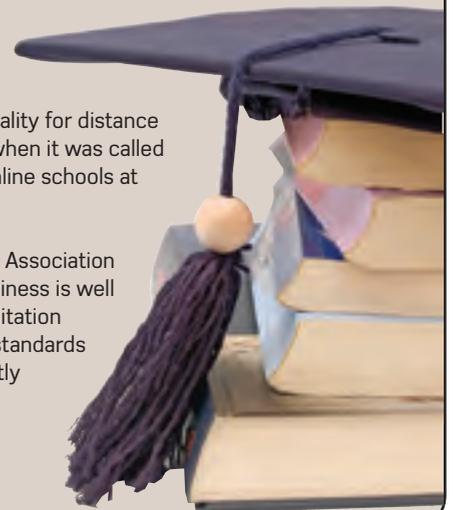
Accreditation itself, however, isn't the end-all indicator of a school's quality or legitimacy. There are several accrediting agencies in the country, and some are more respected than others. Plus, the process is voluntary for universities.

How can you find a quality school? Here's what a smart consumer should know about accreditation:

- The most legitimate accreditation agencies are those recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and/or Council for Higher Education Accreditation. They maintain a list of these organizations at chea.org.
- There are certain indicators that can help you determine if a school and its credentials are legitimate. One is whether the school can accept federal and state financial aid. Another is whether credits earned at that school will transfer to other schools.
- Public universities granting degrees through distance learning programs generally have legitimate credentials. They are accredited through one of the six regional accrediting bodies in the United States depending on their location—and these are considered sound.
- The Distance Education and Training Council has been defining quality for distance learning programs since 1926, back when it was called "correspondence." View a list of all-online schools at detc.org.
- Specific to business programs, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business is well known and well respected. An accreditation from the AACSB means the highest standards for business education are consistently reached.

Find a list of schools at aacsb.edu.

—S. W. A.



➔ Continued from page 124

ONLINE RESOURCES

Your Go-To Guide

With so many options, selecting the right distance learning program can be a challenge. From tips to trends, these websites can help you get up-to-speed.

THE UNITED STATES DISTANCE LEARNING ASSOCIATION

The national organization for distance learning is focused on leadership, advocacy and information about trends in distance learning in all its forms—including K-12 and other training purposes. usdla.org

GET EDUCATED

This website ranks and compares online schools and degrees, providing extensive consumer-related information to help you shop wisely. geteducated.com

EXECUTIVE MBA COUNCIL

Flexible MBA programs for higher-level working executives are often called “Executive MBAs.” This organization provides information on trends and a directory of programs. emba.org

THE GRADUATE MANAGEMENT ADMISSION COUNCIL

The leading advocate and resource for quality graduate schools of business worldwide, GMAC is studying the trends of distance learning among MBAs and how to best reach working adults. gmac.com

JOINT KNOWLEDGE ONLINE

This groundbreaking interactive portal for distance learning and training is a service of the United States Joint Forces Command. This is the entry point for armed forces personnel to continue to advance their training through deployments. jko.jfcom.mil

—S. W. A.

The goal is “to increase the interaction between students and faculty and simulate an on-campus classroom setting,” says Lamont. It’s a goal shared by most universities offering distance learning master’s degrees. The exclusively online Northcentral University achieves this through a small ratio of students to instructors—in which instructors serve as close mentors to students. At Colorado State University, lectures are video-streamed live and produced on the fly in classroom-studios in order to “capture

student questions, discussions, explanations, presentations [and] speakers,” says Susan Meyer, director of the MBA program. “We want the spontaneity of the classroom because it helps the learning [process].”

Technology brings together students from all over the world, a point that may actually add value to the master’s degree achieved through distance learning. Working with others in virtual spaces, and across physical spaces, is something today’s work force demands. John Ruzicka, assistant director of



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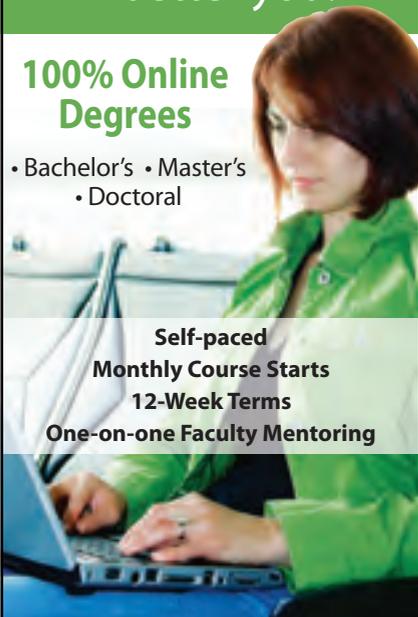
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marketing for the University of San Diego's Master of Science and Global Leadership, was astounded at a group presentation he saw in a campus classroom recently. "The woman running the presentation was in San Diego. One of her teammates was live via [the Internet] from D.C., projected onto a screen. Her other teammate was live from Hawaii, wearing a lei and projected on the same screen. Together the three of them conducted a presentation in real time, to students who were physically in the classroom and elsewhere. All this adds the real world experience of working across time zones. Our students are very excited about the use of technology, because it provides practical applications they can take right back to their workplace."

The real value of distance learning, according to students and program directors, is in the way programs can flex around a busy professional's life. When you can complete your studies anytime and anywhere, you can keep your day job, stay near your family and even move around the world. This is a way for working professionals to merge their careers with their professional or personal need for advanced education. For military personnel—one of the largest segments of the population earning master's degrees through distance learning—it means not having to give up higher education pursuits through deployments and helps ensure marketability in civilian life.

Simply put: Distance learning means working adult professionals can keep those all-important priorities straight and still achieve their dreams.

Just ask Sue Ann Osterhout. Five years ago she was a family therapist and addiction counselor raising seven children in Hutchinson, Kansas. She'd always dreamed of becoming a doctor, and only through the flexible Ph.D. program at Walden University did she see how she could possibly achieve it. "I had found a way to get my Ph.D., cover the bases for my family and not move," she says. She graduated in 2005 with a Ph.D. in psychology and is now Dr. Sue Ann Osterhout.

Stephanie Wilbur Ash is a Minneapolis-based writer with years of experience in higher education as a liberal arts instructor and financial aid advocate.