

# online

For busy training professionals who don't want to put their higher education on hold, online degrees provide a practical and legitimate solution.

# degrees

BY HOLLY DOLEZALEK

When Nancy Wendorf spoke at her graduation ceremony in December 2000, she had just five minutes to tell about 27 years of waiting. Wendorf, a senior project manager at Scottsdale, Ariz.-based General Dynamics Decision Systems, started her MBA at age 21. But life soon intervened and Wendorf dropped out when a major car accident put her out of commission. Then came marriage, kids and juggling a career at Motorola—leaving very little time for school.

At age 48, she decided to make time for it and enrolled in the MBA/global management program at the University of Phoenix. For the next two years, she worked full time, helped her kids in the evening with their homework, and then stayed up to do her own—sometimes until 3 a.m.

“I tried the ground schools,” says Wendorf. “I’m not saying they’re bad, but for someone who’s trying to fit an accredited education into a busy life, online schools are the way to go.”

More people like Wendorf are turning to online degree programs to continue their education. They enroll at exclusively online universities like Jones International University, based in Englewood, Colo., or they sign up for online programs offered at traditional universities, like George Washington University in Washington, D.C. Many of these students are in their late 30s or 40s and don't want to interrupt their families or careers. All are getting a different kind of degree, taking classes from instructors they rarely see with students who may be next door or in China.

For a student in an online degree program, a typical class day might involve logging on to a Web site to hear a lecture that is delivered as streaming video or posted as text. He or she might join a discussion with other students, the instructor or both in a chat room, or post answers to the instructor's discussion questions. Students might complete assigned readings in textbooks, turn in homework by e-mail, take an Internet-based test, or work in small groups on projects or papers. Since many of them are working full time, they research problems drawn from their jobs for these projects.

"With each project, we collaborated across time zones and coordinated who would finish and turn it in," says Wendorf. "I could be in South Africa on a business trip, but as long as I had an Internet connection, I didn't miss class."

### The Online Eduscape

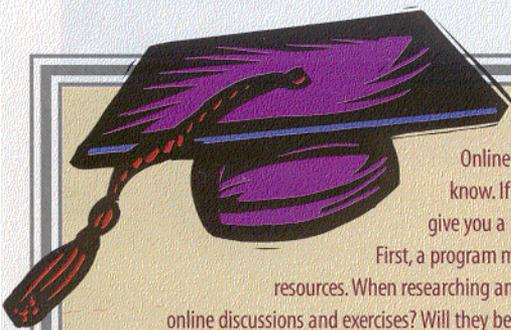
Distance learning has been around a long time, but in the last five years the Internet became its predominant mode of delivery. Today, most universities offer online education of some sort, and many offer entire degree programs online. Jones International University became the first online-only university to be regionally accredited in 1999.

A list of programs and degrees available online would be prohibitive, but to give an example of how these programs have grown in recent years, consider online MBA programs. There were only five online MBA degrees available in 1989, according to Vicky

Phillips, CEO of Geteducated.com, an e-learning consulting firm based in Essex Junction, Vt., but today that number has risen to 95. And the opportunities are available for training professionals, too. Geteducated.com's free report, "Best Distance Learning Graduate Schools: Education & Library Science 2003," lists 65 institutions that offer advanced degrees in education, instructional design and other training-related disciplines.

These online programs don't threaten the traditional universities—at least, not yet. But some analysts think it's only a matter of time before the ivy-covered walls find themselves threatened by the online onslaught. Last September, a study by Boston-based Eduventures.com, a research and advisory firm in the corporate, postsecondary, and pre-K-12 learning markets, estimated that about 350,000 students are enrolled in online degree programs. That may not sound like much, but that's 2 percent of all students enrolled in postsecondary education in the United States—and the same study estimates that the market for fully online degree programs is growing by 40 percent annually.

For all their convenience and flexibility, online degrees are no walk in the park. The courses require a similar amount of reading, research and work as traditional courses—but they also demand motivation and self-discipline. "It requires a lot of time management and sacrifice of other things you'd rather do," says Linda Proctor, a courseware development project manager at Intel Corp., Santa Clara, Calif. Proctor



## What To Ask

Online degrees programs are different from traditional campus-based programs, probably in more ways than you know. If you want your money's worth from an online degree program, researching some of the following issues will give you a better idea of what you're getting into.

First, a program must offer more than good course content and skilled instructors—it also must connect students to those resources. When researching an online program, ask about its tech support. Will they help you set up the software you need to participate in online discussions and exercises? Will they be available quickly to help you troubleshoot when you're having problems?

Similarly, if you're not familiar with the technologies used, you probably won't know the etiquette for operating in them. How do you get an instructor's attention during a discussion in a chat room? How do you know when to respond to a post—and when not to? Make sure that the school offers training or information about these kinds of concerns.

Of course, any reputable school will be accredited—but be careful even when they are. Many schools say that they're accredited, but their accrediting agencies aren't recognized by the Department of Education. To be sure, call the department of higher education in the state where the school is located, or check the Department of Education's list of nationally recognized accrediting agencies, at [www.ed.gov/offices/OPE/accreditation/natl agencies.html](http://www.ed.gov/offices/OPE/accreditation/natl agencies.html).

Know also that accreditation doesn't guarantee that a school can give you the education you want. Vicky Phillips, CEO of Geteducated.com, suggests that two factors make a big difference: class size and faculty standards. Find out whether the school you're considering limits its class size. Some don't limit class size, and others operate with classes as large as 50. "The limit should never be more than 20, and 15 is optimal," Phillips says.

Ask about whether the school's faculty receives training in how to conduct classes online. Of particular importance is response time. Faculty should be required to respond to student questions and concerns within a set limit, and preferably within 48 hours or less.

Just in case, Phillips says, have an exit strategy in place if you discover that the program just isn't what you want. "Make sure you know when, by law, they have to give you back your tuition if you request a refund," Phillips says.

—H.D.

is pursuing a master's of education in e-learning, corporate training and knowledge management at Jones International University.

Pamela Pease believes that students will be more likely to succeed in an online environment if they understand the kind of time commitment and work that will be involved. "It's a misperception that online universities are easier," says Pease, president of Jones International University. "It might be more convenient and flexible, but it's not easier. We're pretty straightforward about how many hours per week our courses require, but there are always those who have to experience that for themselves."

Statistically, students are less likely to complete a distance learning degree than a traditional degree, says Geteducated.com's Phillips. "We're not a nation of independent learners," she says, although she concedes that younger students might have different learning styles. "Middle-aged learners are used to an atmosphere where shame and guilt motivate them to get their work done, and when they don't have that coercive element, a lot of people don't know how to structure their time or motivate themselves in learning."

Phillips says it's important to evaluate a number of factors when considering an online degree program—the first being your own success with independent learning in the past. She recommends taking one class before enrolling in a degree program.

"People should try it out first, and they shouldn't overcommit," she says. "Once you're lost you can waste a whole semester."

### Good Or Bad?

Online degrees are certainly convenient and flexible. But are they as good as traditionally delivered degrees? There's no easy answer.

In the world of academia, online degree programs have fought—and continue to fight—for respect. The industry has always been plagued by fly-by-night operations that charge customers a set amount for a degree based on life experience but require no class work or testing. These questionable enterprises gave legitimate online degree programs a PR problem that they've never managed to shake.

Still, many academics also question the validity of the more established and legitimate programs. They claim that no education is valid without face-to-face classroom time. The debate meant that, for many years, regional accreditation was out of reach for online programs. (See "Accreditation," below.)

But Thomas Russell thinks the debate is, well, academic. Russell, the director emeritus of North Carolina State University's instructional telecommunications department, has collected more than 300 papers, articles and studies that suggest that distance education generates similar learning outcomes to

## Accreditation

Accreditation is the magic word when a school's reputation and validity are in question. But how do schools earn accreditation?

There are six regional associations of schools and colleges, each named after the region they serve—Middle States, New England, North Central, Northwest, Southern and Western. The process followed by the Higher Learning Commission, which is associated with the North Central association, is a typical accreditation process.

The school or college does a self-study to determine its compliance with the commission's criteria, and a team of educators from the commission visits the school. Based on the self-study, site visit and meetings with representatives of the school, Commission members decide whether to accredit the school.

The criteria the school must meet cover the following areas:

**Mission:** The school must be a degree-granting institution with a mission statement that declares it is an institution of higher education.

**Authorization:** Legal documents must confirm the school's status as public, not-for-profit or for-profit. The school must have legal authorization to grant its degrees and operate as an institution of higher education.

**Governance:** The school's governing board must have an executive officer and public members who are autonomous from the administration and ownership.

**Faculty:** Instructors or professors must have degrees from accredited institutions that are "appropriate to the level of instruction offered." The faculty must be significantly involved in developing and evaluating the school's programs, and a sufficient number of them have to be full-time employees.

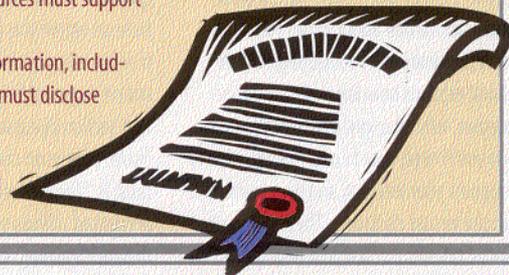
**Educational programs:** A school must confer degrees in programs that are operational, compatible with the school's mission—based on recognized fields of study—and appropriately named in terms of length and content. The programs must also include a general education requirement.

**Finances:** At least every two years, a school must have an external audit by a CPA. Its financial resources must support educational programs, and the school's financial documents must demonstrate fiscal viability.

**Public information:** The school's catalog or other official documents must include all pertinent information, including accurate descriptions of educational programs, degree requirements and school policies. The school must disclose its accreditation status and information about its financial condition upon request.

Source: "Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions: An Overview." *The Higher Learning Commission*, 2001.

—H.D.



those from bricks-and-mortar institutions and has turned them into a bibliography called *The No Significant Difference Phenomenon* (International Distance Education Certification Center, 1999).

Russell maintains the bibliography on a Web site (“The No Significant Difference Phenomenon”) where he solicits other studies with similar results. He

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—THOMAS RUSSELL, DIRECTOR EMERITUS, INSTRUCTIONAL TELECOMMUNICATIONS, NORTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY, RALEIGH, N.C.

also maintains a mirror site called “The Significant Difference Phenomenon,” which houses citations for research that indicates that there *is* a significant difference between learner outcomes in online and traditional degree programs. Still, he says, “Basic research continues to say that taking courses online is every bit as good, based on the examinations that are taken.”

Russell points out that in the debate over whether online education is as good as traditional education, an important issue often gets lost—the impact of differences in learners on learning outcomes. “It depends on the conditions and who is the learner,” he says. “There are some people who will perform better taking a computer-based course than in the classroom, while others would fail and probably would have failed all along if they hadn’t been in the disciplined setting of a classroom.”

If the ivory towers still disparage Internet education, corporations are less inclined to sneer. In October 2000, New York-based career content and services provider Vault.com surveyed 239 HR professionals for their opinions of online degrees. The study yielded results that seemed troublesome for proponents of online education—only 40.8 percent of the

respondents considered online graduate degrees as credible as traditional graduate degrees, and 50 percent said that online degrees aren’t as credible but are still acceptable. Another 9.6 percent said that they’re neither credible nor acceptable.

But Geteducated.com’s Phillips says those numbers don’t tell the story. She argues that studies of opinions about online degrees must ask more specific questions than the Vault.com study to get a true read on respondents’ opinions. “The issue is not whether a degree is earned at a distance, but whether or not they’re familiar with the name of the institution granting the degree; the name takes precedence over method,” says Phillips.

For example, she explains, respondents in studies of opinions about online degrees will rate a degree from Stanford the same whether it’s earned online or on-campus, because they recognize the name of the institution granting the degree. “That explains the Vault study—they did not drill down,” she says. “That study was dealing with people who are more familiar with campus-based programs and believe that most institutions offering online degrees aren’t real colleges. When they find out that real colleges and institutions are offering degrees online, they’re more willing to accept the idea.”

Corporations are too, and they express their acceptance by paying for them. According to Brian Mueller, CEO of the University of Phoenix Online (UOP), 60 percent of the students enrolled at the UOP get tuition reimbursement from their employers. General Dynamics’ Wendorf notes that Motorola (General Dynamics acquired her division from Motorola in 2000) paid for her whole course of study at UOP. “Motorola would never have paid for it if it hadn’t been accredited,” Wendorf says.

Corporate recruiters would be the first to hear if online degrees were a liability in the workplace, but David Brinkerhoff has encountered much less resistance to online degrees than he expected. Brinkerhoff,

## Some Handy References

For more information about your online education prospects, take a look at these resources:

*Distance Learning Online for Dummies* (IDG Books Worldwide, 2000). Nancy Stevenson’s handy guide has information about issues you might face in pursuing an online degree. This book explains how to pay for an online degree, what it might cost, what technology you’ll need, how to organize your life to support your learning and how to interact in the virtual classroom. The book teaches what questions to ask and how to get

them answered. It’s the one to read if you’re not sure what to expect from an online degree program.

*Bears’ Guide to Earning Degrees by Distance Learning, 15<sup>th</sup> Ed.* (Ten Speed Press, 2003). This up-to-date guide spends less time on the basics and more time on where you can get which degrees. If you’ve already decided to pursue an online degree, this is the book for you. The first section discusses the same kinds of issues Stevenson raises, but the bulk of the book is “The Schools,” a section that covers accredited schools with degrees entirely by distance learning, schools with short resi-

dency programs, and other schools, including medical, law and naturopathic schools. A subsection called “Degree Mills” names offending institutions and discusses the history and operation of degree mills—and about lost diploma replacement services that print fake diplomas from legitimate universities.

**Howstuffworks.com** ([www.computer.howstuffworks.com/online-degree.html](http://www.computer.howstuffworks.com/online-degree.html)) offers “How Online Degrees Work” for those inclined to research on the Internet. The information isn’t as in-depth as the books, but it includes good advice and links to online universities, degree

programs, accreditation sites and related HowStuffWorks articles.

**Geteducated.com** has a directory of featured Internet universities, with separate sections for graduate and professional programs and for undergraduate programs. The site also has two guides you can download for free, if you provide some information about yourself: “Best Distance Learning Graduate Schools, Business and Management,” and “Best Distance Learning Graduate Schools, Technology.” There’s also a free newsletter (the *Virtual University Gazette*, at [www.geteducated.com/vugaz.htm](http://www.geteducated.com/vugaz.htm)). —H.D.

the president of Abbott Smith, a Millbrook, N.Y.-based recruiting firm, says that corporations are more concerned with whether a degree is legitimate than with whether it's earned online.

"I've never had anyone say that they would prefer a candidate with a bricks-and-mortar degree," he says. "If it's accredited by a major accrediting organization, who's to care whether they got their degree in their pajamas at 4 a.m. or in a classroom at 4 p.m.?"

Stacey Harris agrees that corporations are more concerned with whether a degree is accredited than how it's earned. Harris, the curriculum program manager at Cleveland-based Management Recruiters International (MRI), designs training programs for MRI's recruiters. "We don't train them to watch for online versus 'regular' degrees," Harris says. "It's the same process for both—they have to call the college and find out whether the degree itself is accredited."

Harris points out that it's getting harder to tell whether a degree is online or on-campus. Most schools that offer both make no distinction on transcripts between on-campus and online degrees, and increasingly there is overlap between the two methods. For example, the UOP offers online and on-campus degrees, but it also has a program called FlexNet, a combination of both campus and online instruction. Many other online programs also require some face-to-face interaction. Meanwhile, many courses at traditional universities are incorporating Internet-based interaction like online chats and lectures posted online.

Still, Harris warns that many employers believe online programs are good at teaching research skills, collaboration and theory—but not so good at providing hands-on experience in the training field. "Employers have no issue with an online degree if it's obtained while working in the industry," she says. "It's a better choice for people who want to move up in the field than for those who want to break into the field."

In fact, online degree programs offer training professionals some advantages over traditional university programs. Geteducated.com's Phillips suggests that because corporations increasingly rely on online education for their own employees, training professionals might be doing themselves a favor by choosing the online route for their higher education. "The best way to learn how to use these technologies is not by reading a book or listening to a lecture about them," Phillips explains. "You get a much better understanding of how these technologies can and cannot be used—and how to implement them—if your degree in the training field is earned online."

In fact, especially for training professionals who work for companies that have campuses or multiple locations, an online degree program won't be that different from the work world. Intel's Proctor says that one of her courses required a group project, which they completed via e-mail among a group in different time zones. "It's not that different from what you find in real life," she explains, "especially when you're working for a global company." ■

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