

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Going Online for Your M.B.A. May Mean Showing Up for Class

SOURCE:<http://online.wsj.com/article/0,,SB109398966309906191,00.html>

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL ONLINE

September 22, 2004

By **SOPHIE HAYWARD**

The first six days of Garvin Young's online business school program were spent in an unusual place: a lecture hall in Upstate New York. He and other new iM.B.A. students at Syracuse University's Whitman School of Management spent the week, as part of the school's residence program, living in a de-facto dorm (a Wyndham hotel), sharing chili at Dinosaur Bar-b-que, shaking hands with professors and discovering who was the math whiz in the group.

"You find out things you really wouldn't know about people if it was completely online," the 27-year-old equities trader from Brooklyn, New York says. "In fact, I really look forward to seeing these guys." Not to worry. Mr. Young plans to spend a month with his classmates in Florence, Italy in October to study international business law at one of Whitman's international campuses.

Online and distance-learning M.B.A.s are one of the fastest growing segments in education -- gaining respect, clout and a niche of professional students thirsty for a degree that doesn't demand relocation. Over the past five years, hundreds of programs have sprung up, spurred by improved technology and an increased demand for business degrees. They range from mail-away diplomas to for-profit institutions such as the University of Phoenix to degrees like those at Whitman, which is accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business -- the top M.B.A. accreditor in the nation. (Many schools, like the University of Phoenix, are acknowledged by regional educational accreditors, which validate schools and colleges but don't assess individual programs.)

The number of students enrolling in online graduate schools grew by more than 25% in 2003, and half of those schools offer business degrees, says Sean Gallagher, a senior analyst with Eduventures, an educational research firm. Vicky Phillips, chief executive for GetEducated.com, a site that provide online guides and help for Internet-degree seekers, says her company has seen the online M.B.A. program explode. "When we started tracking distance-learning M.B.A. programs in 1989 there were five. In 2003, we were tracking 100; in 2004 we archived 125."

But the programs gaining the most traction are those that don't leave their students in cyberspace forever. More universities are launching programs that mix online learning with periodic face-to-face contact. The benefits work both ways: In some places, it allows more flexibility for traditional part-time programs, in other cases, students who live around the globe are able to meet in person once or twice a year. "What we're seeing more and more is a blend," says Ms. Phillips.

In addition to greater networking opportunities and more in-the-flesh interaction, hybrid programs typically include a residency requirement (usually lasting no more than a couple of weeks) that gives students a taste of school spirit they might miss sitting in front of a computer screen at

home. Last winter, students from Syracuse's online program were in heavy attendance at two basketball games. "I see the iM.B.A. students as having as much school spirit as the normal students," says Paula O'Callaghan, the director of Whitman's iM.B.A.

At the University of Missouri at St. Louis, which is also accredited by the ARCS, students in the school's Professional M.B.A. program meet one weekend a month for intensive classroom lectures and presentations. Class discussion, however, is conducted online, using software produced by Blackboard Inc. "The face time is cut in half," says Thomas Eyssell, director of the school's graduate business programs and a professor of finance, "But the key is to keep the students engaged at all times."

Like most distance-learning students, many of Missouri's professional M.B.A. students are at least 30 years old and are rooted in their communities. They have spouses, children and jobs, and have at least the three years of professional experience required by the program. Missouri Professional M.B.A. attracts a more local student body than Syracuse and other programs -- the majority of students live within a 200 mile radius of the school's St. Louis campus, but the program still incorporates the flexibility that has made distance learning so popular.

One thing most online learners agree on: distance courses aren't for slackers. "At first I figured, since I was only seeing these people once a month, this is a joke," says Scot Wallace, a Missouri student. "But once into the courses, I realized [the professors] could and would get to you any time they wanted and they really take advantage of that."

"You have to be a real self-starter to do it this way," Whitman's Mr. Young says. Every evening after he commutes home from his full-time job, he heads to the library to read, study and e-mail his classmates. He estimates he spends 10-20 hours a week on his degree.

According to Phillips, the student cost for this kind of hybrid approach to online business degrees ranges from school to school, though it is usually comparable to, or even more than, the cost of an on-campus M.B.A. Duke University's Cross-Continent M.B.A., which includes nine weeks of on-campus residency, runs \$86,900, versus about \$70,900 for regular daytime tuition. Whitman's iM.B.A. tuition is about \$45,000, not including books, travel and hotel stays (Whitman's charges the same tuition for its day program). Missouri charges \$28,560 for Professional M.B.A. students, compared with \$15,600 for its evening program.

But are the students learning the same stuff? According to one report, yes. Researchers at Kent State and Colorado State University found in a 2002 study of 83 M.B.A. students that distance learners came away with equal, if not better, skills than their on-campus counterparts.

One of the other perks of the hybrid model: name recognition. Online programs that include some campus time tend to be tied to the brick-and-mortar courses at the same university -- and that brand name can mean a lot when students try to take their degrees on the road.

"I was genuinely concerned with reputation when I first started researching," Mr. Young says, "But I was relieved when I did some homework and found online programs at Syracuse, Duke, the University of Florida and Indiana University," -- all well-known schools that offer online programs with campus residency. Universities like Syracuse don't discriminate on their diplomas. An online M.B.A. candidate gets the same diploma as his campus-bound brothers.

The hosting-school's reputation isn't always the best test of a distance-learning program, however, as John Pemberton, a 35-year-old independent software consultant in New York, discovered. He began the University of London's International M.B.A.'s program (part of Royal Holloway) in 2002, which does not have a residency program. But Mr. Pemberton says he found the school's software to be "clunky," professors and tutors to be "unresponsive" and the study materials ill-suited to the courses' exams. Though he was drawn to the school for its "wonderful

reputation," he says he now regrets signing for a program without an emphasis on support from professors and tutors.

Gavin Jones, spokesman for the school's External Programme, says students get what they pay for. The course fees for the distance program are 8,000 pounds (\$14,340), compared with 12,600 pounds (\$22,600) for the regular, on-campus program. "We recognize that [the course is] tough not only because we have high standards, and because there is no support. We are very up front about that," Mr. Jones says.

Write to Sophie Hayward at sophie.hayward@wsj.com