Online Universities Teach Knowledge Beyond the Books

Offering managers graduate courses in business through Internet technology provides flexibility in scheduling and collaborative learning.

BY VICKY PHILLIPS

When Barry Cotton, district director of human resources for ManorCare Health Services, decided to earn his master's degree in business, he encountered only one problem—access. Cotton, who works out of Oklahoma City, Okla., was on the road four days a week and couldn't get to a campus; he needed a campus that could come to him.

Like an increasing number of executives, he found one in the online MBA curriculum at Colorado State University (CSU). The degree program, delivered via computer conferencing and videotape, is one of a growing number of campus-free, high-quality desktop degree programs that cater to the business community.

Although Cotton, who has almost finished his degree, travels less these days, he continues to study online with CSU because the on-campus evening degree programs available within commuting distance of Cotton's office aren't convenient. "Even though I travel less, getting out of the office by 6:45 any particular night, and to a physical classroom, is not always easy—or possible," he says.

Carron Albert, who attends Thomas Edison State College's online master's program in management, frequently does her homework after her two children are taken care of in the evening. She then e-mails her papers to her faculty mentors and study team members. "With my work and life schedule," says Albert, "there is little time left in my day for going to school." Like Cotton, Albert, who is associate vice president of administration and finance at Thomas Edison State

College in Trenton, N.J., could commute to a graduate school that offers classes in the evening or weekends, but she has opted to telecommute to a virtual campus.

FUTURE LEARNING DEMANDS FLEXIBILITY

Many in human resources and training agree with management consultant Peter Drucker's assessment that virtual learning is coming on fast. "It's not surprising that business executives are attending desktop universities," says Jo Ann Oravec, author of *Virtual Individuals, Virtual Groups: Human Dimensions of Groupware and Computer Networking* (Cambridge University Press). "Online learning will soon be a major force in certain kinds of education," she predicts. "Graduate education, especially at the MBA level, is one of these."

Oravec, an assistant professor of business and economics at the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater, sees a tremendous need for more flexible learning options in today's knowledge economy. "For people with demanding and erratic work schedules—and demanding responsibilities at home—flexible learning provides a tremendous opportunity."

Oravec's opinions are informed by her role as faculty for the university's online MBA program launched last fall as a virtual version of its long-standing, on-campus MBA. Donald Zahn, associate dean of the College of Business and Economics at the Whitewater campus, sees the online option, which requires no campus visits, as a way to reach a burgeoning audience of business people who are eager to have quality educational opportunities conveniently delivered to their desktops.

"Their time is especially precious," says Zahn. "Distance learning gives them the convenience to take courses on their own schedules from a hotel room, from wherever they

may be." Executives now telecommute to the Whitewater MBA program from as far away as Thailand.

NEW KNOWLEDGE-DELIVERY SYSTEMS

Laurie Hutton-Corr, director of strategic executive development for AT&T, had flexibility in mind when she registered for the online master's program in organizational design and effectiveness at the Fielding Institute of Santa Barbara, Calif. "With my schedule, it was not realistic for me to go to a day or evening class on a regular basis," she
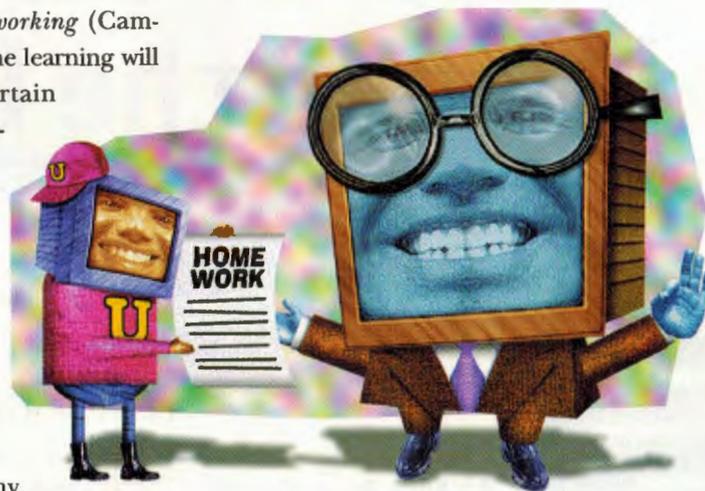
says. Although flexibility initially led Hutton-Corr to explore an online option, she now believes that she underestimated the kind of education that Fielding's virtual university was purposely designed to deliver.

"I was never that excited about learning in a classroom," she says. "It always seemed too one-way. At Fielding, you learn constantly from everyone in the group."

In the university, the professor's role has historically been that of an expert who lectures or "professes." Online learning is less likely to use top-down knowledge delivery methods, such as lecturing, and more likely to rely on peer-to-peer learning in the form of collaborative discussions and team projects. Hutton-Corr, like many adult learners, enjoys this new way of learning. ⇨

In collaborative education, also known as horizontal learning, students are expected to learn as much or more from one another as they do from their professors. And many argue that this peer-to-peer knowledge sharing is what the Internet is all about. "In online learning," explains Fielding's codirector, Judith Stevens-Long, "you get to hear voices that you wouldn't normally hear speak in a classroom. There is a valuable enhancement of quiet voices in an online (written) learning environment."

Online learning typically operates with groups of students communicating weekly in written form via message boards or text-based conferencing systems. It is both a highly personal and intensely writing-driven process of instruction. "We maintain a student to faculty ratio of one to six," says Stevens-Long. "That sort of individualized contact and small class size is rarely found in on-campus degree programs." Individualized instruction and feedback are hallmarks of many, though not all, virtual university programs. Thomas Edison State College, for example, does not use "professors" in its instructional process. Instead of a professor, students are assigned to work one-on-one with faculty "mentors."

NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND LEARNING PLATFORMS

Various platforms are being harnessed for online instruction. Fielding uses AltaVista's *Forum*, a platform that offers both real-time (live) Internet chats and asynchronous message board discussions. Fielding's program does not use live chats, which would require the students' presence online at set times. Instead, the program relies on asynchronous communication for convenience. That allows students to post their comments online and read the comments of their classmates according to their own schedules. Students still "attend" the virtual class each week, but the exact time is left up to each student. A student might participate in a team project at midnight, after the children are asleep, or during a lunch break. At Thomas Edison

State College, the instructional platform includes weekly mentoring via e-mail, phone conferences among learning groups and three brief, face-to-face campus residencies.

Colorado State launched one of the earliest virtual business schools in the United States. The program also uses one of the richest multimedia instructional delivery systems. Unlike many Internet universities, in which learning occurs primarily via text-based threaded discussion, the Colorado program mails videotapes of weekly campus lectures and classroom sessions to remote learners. Students view the videotapes weekly at their own convenience. Then they go online to discuss issues with their colleagues in live chat sessions using a conferencing system called embanet. Faculty maintain online advising hours and are also accessible by phone to answer questions students may have after viewing the weekly videotapes or while working on their homework.

Cotton, who attends Colorado State, likes the combination of online chat and videotape viewing. Being able to see instructors apply some of the procedures helps him to better understand complicated material, he says. The addition of videotape has been especially helpful in mastering complex quantitative procedures in finance and accounting. Jamie Switzer, director of distance education and media at CSU, also views certain business curricula, such as accounting and finance, as especially well suited to distance learning, because "drill-and-kill" methods can be used to help students master complex skill sets through visual repetition.

At CSU, students are steeped in how to learn and communicate across modern media. According to Switzer, students learn how to use "many kinds of (communication) media—the tools of tomorrow for the corporate world." CSU is working with desktop videoconferencing in addition to text-based Internet conferencing and videotape.

The University of Wisconsin MBA program operates via still another technological platform, LearningSpace, an integrated *Lotus Notes* educational system. It allows students and faculty to post and read assignments and class dis-

cussions online. The LearningSpace virtual campus is accessible to any student who can access the Internet using a Pentium computer with any industry-standard Web browser.

OPTIONAL FACE-TO-FACE MEETINGS

A growing number of online graduate schools do not require students to meet any type of physical residency requirement. Colorado State's College of Business, which has been offering its MBA in virtual form for several years, has never required face-to-face meetings. Switzer sees face-to-face residencies as optional elements. "Residencies allow students to get to know faculty and their classmates, to create a cohort," he says. "While this is nice, people can get to know each other online just as well." Research in the field supports Switzer's rationale. Unless there is some special educational reason to require face-to-face components, the learning process generally is not hindered by a completely virtual approach.

Other business programs, often those that focus heavily on the process of human management—such as leadership and organizational design programs—tend to include two or three weekend residencies where learning groups meet in person to establish psychological connections.

Albert, a student in Thomas Edison's virtual management program, views the three short residencies required for her degree as "vital." The Edison management degree program has a special emphasis in leadership. Albert met her mentors and classmates at a required three-day orientation. For her, the face-to-face residency "really personalized an otherwise fairly impersonal process." Her residency included an orientation to the learning technologies and team-building exercises that helped her feel more connected to the learning process in a collaborative way. "I attended a traditional four-year college," says Albert, who earned her undergraduate degree from Wheaton College. "When I went there, you had to dress for dinner; so for me to move into this (virtual learning) has been a quantum leap." ⇨

ONLINE GRAD SCHOOLS

No-Residency or Low-Residency Desktop University Programs

The following information is reprinted with permission from *Best Distance Learning Graduate Schools: Earning Your Degree Without Leaving Home* (Princeton Review/Random House, 1998), by Vicky Phillips and Cindy Yager.

Baker College Online
Business Administration/Human Resources
  Management
E-Mail: gradschl@baker.edu
(800) 469-4062

Bellevue University
Master's in Leadership
E-Mail: ssampson@scholars.bellevue.edu
(800) 756-7920, Ext. 3702

Colorado State University
Master's in Business Administration
E-Mail: bizdist@lamar.colostate.edu
(800) 491-4622

Fielding Institute
Master of Arts in Organizational
  Design and Effectiveness
E-Mail: admissions@fielding.edu
(800) 340-1099

George Washington University
Doctor of Education in Executive Leadership
E-Mail: seewhy@gwis2.circ.gwu.edu
(202) 994-1607; (800) 4GW-SEHD

Purdue University Krannert Graduate School
Executive Master's in Management
E-Mail: rapisarm@mgmt.purdue.edu
(765) 494-7700

Rochester Institute of Technology
Master of Science in Career and Human
  Resource Development
E-Mail: opes@rit.edu
(716) 475-2229

Thomas Edison State College
Master of Science in Management/
  Leadership Emphasis
E-Mail: info@tesc.edu
(609) 292-5143

University of Maryland
Master of General Administration/
  Human Resources
E-Mail: gradinfo@nova.umuc.edu
(301) 985-7200

University of Wisconsin Whitewater
Master's in Business Administration
E-Mail: zahnd@uwwvax.uww.edu
(414) 472-1945

VIRTUAL LEARNING—REAL LIFE BENEFITS

"Learning this way has helped to make computers and the online world very real to me," Albert explains. "Now my computer is not just a bundle of software; it is a lifeline to my classmates and their knowledge and experiences. My kids, the younger generation, see the online world as real because they have always learned this way ... virtual learning has made it very real for me, too."

Like most distance learners, Albert is pleased with the quality of instruction of the virtual university as well as the unexpected rewards, such as lessons in corporate virtual communication skills. Albert has used Thomas Edison's virtual delivery system to enhance her skills in writing and giving feedback in written form. "I speak better than I write," explains Albert. "Learning this way has helped me learn how to get ideas from my mind to my fingertips in a clearer way."

At Fielding, the process of how people learn online is considered such a vital part of the curriculum that students can opt to earn a special guided-practice certificate in the development, management and facilitation of electronic learning environments at the end of the degree process. In a world where many are confident that knowledge will increasingly be disseminated via virtual networks, Fielding's codirector, Stevens-Long, offers advice to training and HR executives interested in earning advanced degrees: "Online skills are really critical ... if you are considering an education, I really think it *ought* to have an online component."

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT ON THE NET

Attending a virtual university has given some managers a hands-on way of learning how to establish a new generation of online learning centers for their own corporations.

Hutton-Corr of AT&T, a student of organizational design and effectiveness with Fielding, sees the Internet as a natural place to develop and orchestrate knowledge communities or corporate-sponsored web forums, which allow employees from different geographic divisions or different departments to gather informally and learn from one another. "A knowledge community is a form of online learning," she explains, "It is not a degree program, but it does answer the question of how people can conveniently come together to learn."

Hutton-Corr also believes corporations need to develop online learning and training programs. "We have to move in that direction," she says. "There is a lot of material that lends itself to online learning ... it's simply more flexible and less expensive."

Hutton-Corr's next course in the Fielding degree program is knowledge management, in which she hopes to learn more effective ways to identify and use the corporation's knowledge resources through virtual platforms. "We teach one person something; then we have to answer the question of how we can teach 50 others the same thing. We need to get more efficient in dealing with these issues. Web resource centers can help us do that." ▮
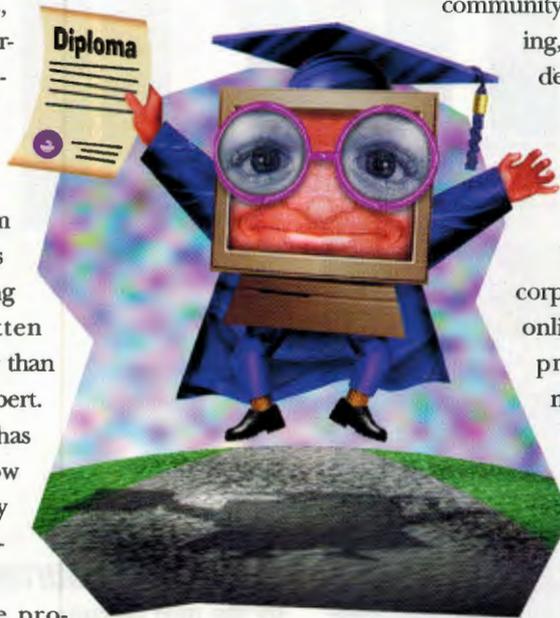
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