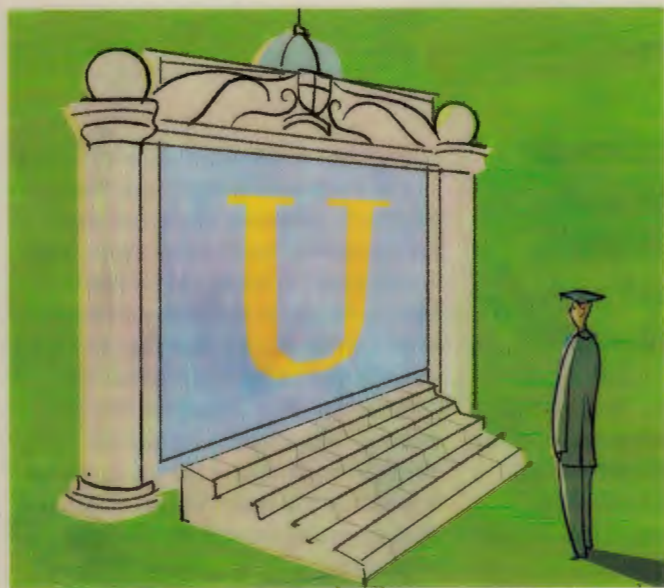


Grad Degrees From a Distance

Online master's programs are getting more students—and more respect. **BY LAURA COHN**



ONLINE GRADUATE-DEGREE programs are designed for mid-career workers who have full-time jobs and families. Their flexible schedules make them an attractive alternative to traditional classroom programs and, as recession-scarred workers strive to bolster their credentials, online programs have seen their enrollments jump. Diplomas don't specify whether a credential is earned online, so hiring managers may not know—or ask. In any case, earning an online degree from a respected university that a potential boss has heard of should eliminate any stigma.

Plus, a recent survey by

the Society for Human Resource Management, a trade association, shows that online degrees are viewed “more favorably” now than they were five years ago. John Challenger, chief executive of outplacement firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas, agrees. “We did once have a clear line between online and brick-and-mortar degrees, but that’s changing,” he says. “Hiring managers are catching up.”

Online programs generally require as much class time (of the online variety) and studying as traditional programs, although it may take longer to get your degree if you take a lighter load

while you're working. In lieu of textbooks, programs tend to use support materials, such as scholarly articles and case studies, which instructors post online.

Once you enroll, you have to post feedback via the Internet and participate on a regular basis. Some students have found online education to be more interactive than the traditional face-to-face experience. Anna Andriasova, a professor in the online MBA program at the University of Maryland University College, says she's been surprised at how well she gets to know her students. “Online students get in touch with faculty way more than students in a face-to-face classroom,” she says.

What it costs. You'll pay anywhere from \$300 to \$700 a credit. While some schools charge roughly the same for an online degree as for a traditional degree, others tack on “distance learning” and “technology” fees, which can amount to more than \$1,000 a year. Also, some schools require a brief campus residency at the start of the program and perhaps at the beginning of each semester. For-profit schools, such as the heavily marketed University of Phoenix, tend to charge more than others.

In general, you need 30 to 45 credits to complete a program, so the difference in price can add up. Employers often provide tuition assistance. Or, if the school qualifies, you could get a government loan (for more information, see www.finaid.org). ■

✦ KipTip

TOP ONLINE DEGREE PROGRAMS

These are the top-rated online master's degree programs in their fields, according to GetEducated.com. The site bases its picks on accreditation, national reputation, strength of online degree offerings and use of educational technology. The cost includes tuition as well as distance-learning and technology fees. For more top degrees, as well as details on requirements to complete them, see kiplinger.com/links/onlinedegrees.

BUSINESS. Duke University Fuqua School of Business. MBA-Global Executive (\$119,300).

COMPUTER SCIENCE. Stanford University Center for Professional Development. Master of Science, Computer Science (\$58,950).

EDUCATION. Columbia University Teacher's College. Master of Arts, Computing & Education/Teaching & Learning with Technology (\$34,785).

ENGINEERING. Stanford University Center for Professional Development. Master of Science, Engineering (\$58,950).

HEALTH. Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health. Master's in Public Health (\$69,460).