



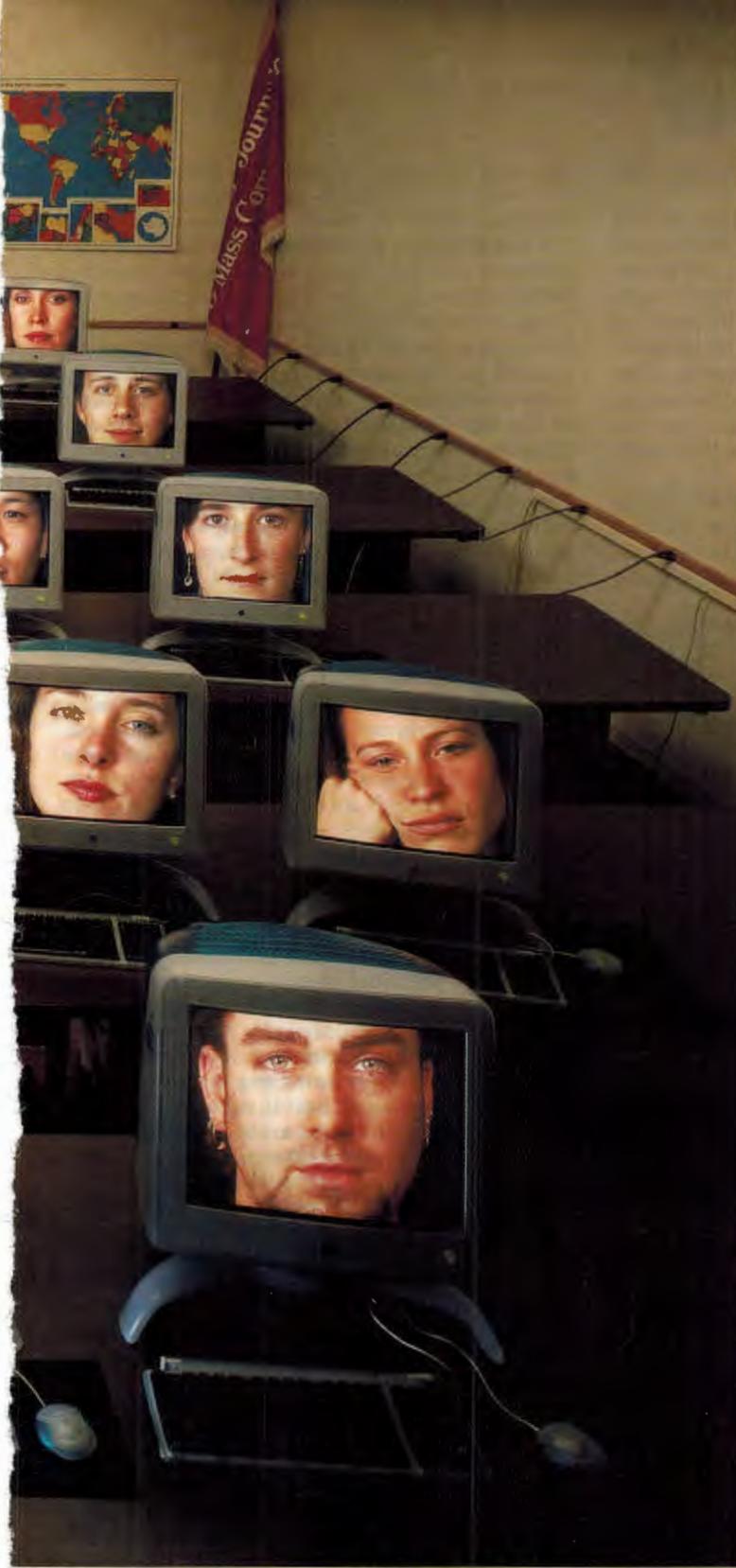
*More students are getting
their master's or Ph.D.
without stepping onto a
university campus*

BY CAROLYN KLEINER

A rollicking children's tune blares as students enter LIS 406—a graduate-level library science course at the University of Illinois-Urbana-Champaign. People chat animatedly among themselves until the professor arrives and starts reading aloud from *Mike's House*, a picture book about a young boy's trek to the public library. Some students listen and watch intently; others continue whispering back and forth about the story or the weather. Afterward, the class splits into discussion groups to talk about helping young children learn to read. All in all, LIS 406 is a typical course—except for one fact: The classroom is a virtual one, with students logging in from bedrooms and offices all over the globe.

True, the majority of graduate students still favor bricks-and-mortar institutions and all that typically comes with them, from ivy-covered buildings and seemingly endless rows of library books to chance encounters with peers and professors between classes. Yet a steadily rising number of people are pursuing advanced degrees without stepping onto a university campus. According to the most recent report by the National Center for Education Statistics, about 1 in 10 of the 2.1 million individuals taking graduate-level courses in 1997-98 was enrolled in distance education classes. In the past year, remote enrollment has more than tripled, to 4,441, at the University of Maryland University College, one of the most established distance-ed providers. As interest grows, more and more schools are investing in remote learning, from big publics like Pennsylvania State and elite universities like Stanford to for-profit institutions like the University of Phoenix.

Anytime, anyplace. Distance education started with correspondence courses in the late 19th century and continued to grow through the development of radio, cable television, and videotape technologies, all of which have been harnessed to connect teachers and learners. But the past decade has seen a huge upsurge of interest in remote learning on the part of students and universities alike. Why? The Internet revolution, for one thing. The Web now provides a formerly missing ingredient in distance ed—quick and easy communication between students and instructors, and among classmates. In addition, thanks to the evolution of the information-based economy, many workers must keep updating their skills. "To stay employable, you need to keep on learning," says Kay Kohl, executive director of the University Continuing Education Association, an organization of more than 400 schools. This trend has given rise to a markedly older pool of graduate students: Today, more than half are over age 30, and nearly one quarter are over 40. Distance education often is a great fit for these working adults, many of whom have families and find it difficult to skip a child's ballet les-



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son or fight rush-hour traffic to get to a university campus for class.

"I had always wanted a master's degree, but it's hard to suspend a career and a family for it, especially when the closest school of public health is four hours away," says Jerry Parks, 45, assistant health director for Albemarle Regional Health Services in eastern North Carolina. As it turns out, he didn't have to move or commute to get his degree: After three years of coursework via teleconferencing and the Internet, Parks is finishing up a master's from the School of Public Health at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.

As more and more people turn to distance education, a debate has flared over whether it can be a good substitute for face-to-face instruction. Thomas Russell, author of a 1999 report titled *The No Significant*

ship between people because it's a process of identity formation, validation, encouragement, emulation, and inspiration. This only happens face to face."

Even advocates acknowledge that distance education isn't for everyone—that it takes independence, self-discipline, and a lot of motivation to succeed. Further, the quality of distance-degree programs is uneven at present. "A majority of universities have entered the distance-learning market rapidly and are not well prepared," says Vicky Phillips, coauthor of *The Best Distance Learning Graduate Schools* (Princeton Review Publishing, 1999, \$20). "Students run the risk of being guinea pigs." As she points out, program retention rates, which usually correspond with student satisfaction, range anywhere from 20 percent to the 97 percent that Urbana-Champaign's Library Education Experimental Program has achieved. Thus, it's important to consider an array of factors before choosing a school:

Accreditation. Along with reputable universities, scores of diploma mills have entered the distance-ed business. The first line of defense against these scams, which take students' money but provide no education in return, is to make sure a school has been approved by one of the six regional boards that accredit universities. This stamp of approval is often a good indicator of program quality. Individual programs can also be certified in their fields by professional groups such as the American Psychological Association and the National League for Nursing.

Program history. Ask distance-ed providers how many students they've graduated. Bear in mind that most online programs are so young that they have yet to grant any degrees. This number should skyrocket in the next few years; in the meantime, prospective students can ask new virtual providers a

number of revealing questions: For example, how many graduate students are currently enrolled? Who's teaching remote courses, and what kind of training and experience do they have? Also, confirm that a school truly offers the full range of courses you'll need to complete your degree at a distance. "Some institutions grossly exaggerate their online presence," warns Robert Tucker, president of InterEd, a Phoenix-based educational research firm.

Cost. Check the total price of a distance-education program, including extras, such as required trips to campus. If it seems too good to be true, it probably is: The cost of a reputable distance degree is generally comparable to—or a bit more expensive than—its on-campus counterpart. For instance, the master of science in library and information studies at Florida State University costs \$6,132 for in-state students, \$21,283 for out-of-state students; the distance versions cost \$8,400 and \$23,550, respectively.

Academic field. Some subjects clearly do not lend themselves to distance education. You'd be hard



VIRTUAL STUDENT. Norah Campbell spends weekends studying at the entirely online Concord University of Law.

Difference Phenomenon, which reviews more than 350 studies of distance-learning programs, argues that the two modes of instruction are equivalent as far as student learning is concerned. Rebecca Behrend, for one, believes that distance ed is the superior choice. Behrend, 45, obtained a doctorate degree in clinical psychology last spring from Walden University, a well-respected virtual institution. She says the discussions between student and professor—and among peers—were more rigorous than those she experienced in the two on-campus master's programs she previously attended. "We needed to back up and cite references for everything we said [in E-mail postings]," explains Behrend. "It wasn't like the usual chatting in the classroom."

But critics say that many of the studies cited in Russell's book are poorly designed, and they vehemently disagree with his point of view. "I don't think you can get *any* education over the Internet," says David Noble, a historian of technology at York University in Toronto. "Education requires a relation-

pressed to find a remote graduate program in any of the laboratory sciences, for instance. But programs abound in fields that translate well, including business, education, engineering, and some of the health professions. The number of distance M.B.A. programs has jumped to over 150 in the past five years, says John Bear, coauthor of the upcoming *Bears' Guide to Earning MBAs by Distance Learning* (Ten Speed Press, April 2000, \$17.95). Olivier Vavasour, an Italian businessman who recently completed the Global Executive M.B.A. program at Duke's Fuqua School of Business, says the mostly virtual program made sense from a professional standpoint. Increasingly, business is going to take place online, he says, "and the only way to really put yourself in a situation where you understand it is to study online."

Distance ed has proved to be highly controversial in the field of law. In fact, none of the nation's top schools currently offer degrees at a distance. "So much of legal education—and legal practice—is a shared enterprise, a genuinely interactive endeavor," argued Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg in a speech last year. "The process inevitably loses something vital when students learn in isolation."

This widely held concern didn't stop Norah Campbell, 24, from enrolling at the unaccredited, online Concord University School of Law, which was launched by test-prep company Kaplan Educational Centers in 1998. The aspiring entertainment lawyer now spends her days working in the copyright department of EMI Music Publishing in New York City and her nights and weekends online, watching video lectures on torts and contracts. She contends she's better off than at a traditional institution. "When you're working full time, you come in and you're tired, and it's easy to miss things," she says. "With Concord, you can rewind the lectures." Still, she will be limited by her distance degree: California is the only state that allows Concord students to take the bar exam upon graduation.

Residency. A number of master's programs and nearly every virtual Ph.D. program have mandatory on-campus stays during which students may meet with peers and professors or participate in labs. Some schools make these trips easier on students than others. At Walden University, for example, residency requirements for Ph.D. programs are offered at different times of the year and in several cities. This flexibility allowed Rebecca Behrend to plan on-campus stays around her children's school calendar and her husband's work schedule.

Technology. Many students enroll in an online program not knowing the first thing about modems, message boards, or E-mail attachments. If you're a newbie, choose a program that eases the transition to the virtual classroom with on-campus or online computer-orientation classes. Also, investigate

the kind of technical assistance the school provides students on a day-to-day basis. A few of the top distance-ed providers, including University of Maryland University College, provide help via E-mail and a toll-free hotline, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Course delivery. Not every school connects teachers and learners in the same way, and it's important to identify the approach that works best for you. Michael Perez started his master's degree in mechanical and industrial engineering at the Georgia Institute of Technology with video-based instruction: On-campus classes are taped; copies are sent to distance students via UPS. Then last year, he took one of the school's first virtual courses and was quickly converted to online instruction. "In the past I would have to carry around videotapes all over the place, and if I was gone weeks at a time, I would get be-



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hind," explains Perez, who travels at least once a week as a manufacturing engineer at General Motors in Warren, Mich. "On the Net, I can access my class from my hotel room or the airport."

Student services. Inquire about the types of services provided to distance students. Can you get academic and career mentoring? Assistance filling out complex financial aid forms? Will you have ready access to a library? At the New Jersey Institute of Technology, for instance, remote learners can log into an online collection of 8,000 full-text digital journals. Students can also use E-mail or a hotline to request on-campus books and articles.

Reputable schools don't cut corners on any of these issues, from accreditation to student services. "Even though [distance learners] are full-fledged graduate students, they're also consumers," explains Gale Tenen Spak, NJIT's associate vice president for continuing and distance education, who employs four "customer-service representatives" in her office. "If we don't deliver, they'll walk." ●

EASY ACCESS.

While attending a conference for his job, Jerry Parks went online to catch up on missed coursework.