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Tapping Into E-Learning

After years of getting a bad rap, online education is paying off for nontraditional students.

By Verna Gates and Karyn Zweifel

Timothy Stallman is making himself recession-proof. Retired from the Marines in 1997 as a budget officer, he began taking online classes from Saint Leo University in Florida four years after the telecommunications company he worked for went bankrupt.

"In the newspapers, there are always openings for people with accounting backgrounds," says Stallman. "I want to make myself more competitive. I have a master's degree, and Saint Leo let me transfer those credits ... and apply them toward a bachelor's degree in accounting. I have two more classes I'm finished."

Saint Leo University is an accredited private institution that is one of the largest providers of online education for active and retired U.S. military personnel. Job security or advancement is a primary motivation for the majority of its students.

In good standing

What is now called "distance learning" hasn't always enjoyed a sterling reputation. In the past, correspondence courses and diploma mills cheapened the value of degrees acquired in alternative settings. But today it's a different story. Providers of online education are working hard to eliminate negative stereotypes.

Online education, just one part of distance learning, or "e-learning," is big business. The InterData Corporation, which gathers information about technology and the Internet, estimates that spending on online education will exceed \$23 billion by 2004.

At the Distance Learning Center for the Georgia Institute of Technology, associate director George G. explains there are no distinctions between online and traditional students. "The entry requirements and graduation requirements are identical," he says. "Your degree says 'Georgia Tech,' not 'distance learning.' We don't even offer classes online unless they're being taught on campus at the same time."

Hossein Arsham, a professor at the University of Baltimore and consultant and frequent contributor to online education journals, says he believes the "myths will gradually disappear as e-learning produces more qualified graduates." He adds that online graduates may be valued even more highly in the future because "they are self-motivated [and -disciplined]. ..." Every reputable provider of accredited degrees demands the same amount of coursework and perhaps even more participation than is expected at a traditional university.

"Nowhere on my transcripts will it say 'online,'" explains Marc DeBearn, a Saint Leo student who currently is serving as a sergeant first class in the Army and is based at Fort Campbell, Ky. "I didn't ask the question right off the bat." Due to his busy lifestyle, he needed the flexibility of an online class that was available nonstop [around] the world, so traditional classes wouldn't work. Online education is good for people away from home. I might spend 30 days out in the field, but I still have the freedom of opportunity," DeBearn adds.

Going to class

Online courses usually have some standard components. Lectures might be available as streaming audio or video, as videotapes or CDs mailed to your house, or as text available on a course's Web site. Reading assignments also are common. Participation in an online discussion usually is required.

post comments or responses to a given topic at the class bulletin board, and the instructor grades efforts. A final element is assignments and tests, usually e-mailed to the instructor but occasionally to a zip disk or other portable medium and mailed in.

"It's challenging," says Stallman. "It's a lot closer to the classroom environment than you might expect that there's a better student-teacher ratio than in regular classes," he continues. "It's not like there are a couple hundred students in an auditorium."

All students are required to participate in discussions, and experienced online instructors will keep the discussion from being dominated by a select group, so everyone has a chance to express opinions. It may be easier, too, for shy people to contribute comments and ideas when they are behind a keyboard at home, instead of face-to-face with an audience.

Arsham contends that "a successful online discussion has the same synergistic effect as a good class discussion, in which students build on one another's perspectives to gain a deeper understanding of the materials." It gives students an additional benefit, because the virtual discussions are through postings to an online bulletin board. "Online learning teaches you how to think before writing," says Stallman. "It demands discipline of both instructor and student."

Assignments vary according to the material covered in the class and the individual professor's preferences. Exams may be taken at home, or the course provider may require that students travel to another location and take tests under the supervision of a proctor, who will certify that they work on time and without any outside assistance.

Choosing an online educator

While the delivery of a course may vary from program to program, the signs of a good provider are consistent. "Go through universities that already have a good reputation," says Steve McCarty, president of the World Association for Online Education, an international professional organization for online educators. "Their online programs also are accredited, and they want to maintain their reputation for quality. Just beware of self-proclaimed online education programs that demand little more than your money. The names of so-called diploma mills often are deliberately similar to those of famous universities."

And don't expect an online education to cost less than a traditional degree. "I was surprised to find that costs are comparable," Stallman admits. Most online classes taken for credit toward a degree cost about the same rate as a traditional college. Wright notes that the Continuing Education Center at Georgia Tech is completely self-supporting, so the center has to charge comparable fees.

Arsham also encourages prospective students to assess the type of support services offered. "A person who is available for phone calls is essential, he says. "A current study shows that e-mail takes three times longer to get the same message across compared to speaking [directly]. Therefore, having a person whom students can talk to during office hours is proven to ... be very effective in learning."

Wright agrees. "An online student can't walk across campus and go to the library, the bookstore, or the professor's office. There has to be a way to make this happen. We're their feet, eyes, and ears on campus, and we do a good job at it."

Learning for life

Although many working people take classes online to improve their chances in the job market, many people can find their computer to be a source of entertainment and personal enrichment. Parr is the director of the online program at the Learning Tree University in Chatsworth, Calif., which has been offering courses for 28 years but has been online only since 2000.

"We offer 102 classes in a wide range of topics," DeLotell says. "For retirees, one of the advantages of online learning is the ability to learn and meet new people without leaving home. In a traditional classroom, you meet people from the same geographic area. But online, you'll meet people from California, Georgia, Australia."

Although Learning Tree classes do not offer credit toward a degree, they do issue continuing education credits and are accredited by the American Council for Continuing Education and Training. Ar

learning is good exercise to keep mental skills sharp, DeLotell continues. "When you spend time to learn, it stimulates your brain to become more efficient and more effective," she says.

Online classes might be short and free: how to make the best paper airplane, for example. Or take a little longer and cost a little more. The Seattle Teachers College has noncredit courses don't get all that art stuff!" for a \$100 fee.

MindEdge, a service that brokers online classes for a number of different universities, schools and institutions, has 509 offerings under the heading of "Arts & Crafts," 211 under "Home & Garden" and 211 under "Culinary Arts." Yahoo! also offers a service to help anyone locate an online class covering any topic.

"An increasing number of older students just want to keep active," says DeLotell. "They see their grandkids doing it, and they want to stay ahead of the 'grandma curve.' It also gives them exposure to the Web, sometimes for the first time. And once they've taken a course online, they'll get more comfortable with using their computer."

No matter why you choose to go online, there are some traits you need to have before you get started. "A person has to be a self-motivated learner," DeLotell says. "There's no hand-holding. It's your responsibility to move through that course. Because military people have already learned discipline, they would think that online education would suit them very well."

"I would recommend online education to anybody," says Stallman. "For people with prior military experience, it's really rewarding."
