

The Web: Become a Harvard man -- online

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You may not be able to relocate to Cambridge, Mass., but these days you can still earn a diploma from Harvard University's extension school -- thanks to distance learning on the Internet. Harvard, one of the nation's premier universities, and other elite educational institutions, like Stanford University and Seton Hall University, are offering courses of study leading to degrees and diplomas online, embracing the once-controversial mode of Internet learning, experts tell United Press International's The Web.

These are not the diploma mills of the early days of the Internet - slapdash sites where individuals desperate for status and career credibility could obtain "law degrees" online, in a few months, take the bar examination and then "practice law." Rather, these are high-quality, nationally accredited programs whose graduates are often coveted by employers.

"We hear consistently from prospective employers that their primary concern is where the student received the degree, not the mode of delivery," said Philip DiSalvio, director of Seton Hall University's online campus, called SetonWorldWide.

According to the American Society for Training & Development, nearly 29 percent of all courses that adult students take are reimbursed by employers -- and most of those study options contain an online element.

Many universities are embracing online technology as part of the core mission, and that is changing the very nature of higher education, experts

said.

"Online learning is bigger -- and more revolutionary -- than anticipated," said James Myers, director of the Center for Multidisciplinary Studies at the Rochester Institute of Technology, located in western New York state. "E-learning has expanded educational access to people constrained by time or geography and changed the way educators think about teaching and learning. The online movement helped reinvigorate the discussion around quality teaching and learning."

Many of the universities offer what they call "blended" course offerings -- diplomas and degrees that require a mixture of online courses and in-person classes for completion. "Students attend lectures, and the online element allows them to work on team projects, ask questions of the faculty and conduct other classroom activities, in a non-traditional way, using the Web," said Myers.

Others offer straight online options. "The beauty of online learning is that it serves the needs of a wide variety of students," said Myers. "For the adult learner with a full-time job, it allows access to a classroom when they are on the road, or after they have put the kids to bed."

Students interested in pursuing a degree online need to determine if the degree is accredited before enrolling. Many more people are exploring online degrees than was the case just a decade ago. "Online degrees are very common today," said Pat Wyman, an instructor of two courses at California State University, East Bay and author of the book, "Learning vs. Testing: Strategies that Bridge the Gap."

Wyman said there are "six basic questions" that one should ask of an online educational institution, including the following:

-- Is the university accredited by a nationally recognized authority?

- Do the classes for a particular degree clearly apply to the degree -- i.e., science courses for a bachelor of science degree?
- Is the course grading stringent or lax?
- Does the university produce official transcripts that employers can inspect?
- Does the university have relationships with employers and the community?
- Does the university have a job placement office that actually helps students land jobs?

Wyman said that, as an instructor, she believes it is perfectly fine to teach material online. But she prefers to grade students based on answers in an old-fashioned "fill-in" examination blue book. "Receipt of the assignments in the mail will answer questions that any employer may have," said Wyman.

Many people who have earned online degrees have prestigious jobs. According to Susan Grossman of the University of Oklahoma's College of Continuing Education, a senior vice president at the Detroit Tigers baseball team last December earned a master's degree in liberal studies from the university online, and another student who earned a master's online is now a college-level instructor of English.

The external program at the prestigious University of London every year graduates new lawyers who are eligible to take the bar examination in the United States. Harvard is offering a diploma in environmental studies and management online, as well as an array of computer-sciences classes. The University of Notre Dame offers non-credit, online courses for continuing education for Catholic deacons and priests.

Online learning is not restricted to college these days -- an online high school, govhs.org, the so-called Virtual High School, is considered something of a pioneer in distance education.

But some traditionalist schools like the University of Chicago do not offer any credit courses online. That's probably because the majority of online institutions are what used to be labeled "trade schools." Trade schools are decidedly non-prestigious in the eyes of some.

"Accredited, for-profit institutions -- we call them career colleges -- have played an important role in growing the online distance education market," said a spokesman for the Career College Association, an industry group, based in Washington, D.C. "In 2005, our sector alone enrolled nearly 450,000 online distance education students."

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