



Have you considered the many advantages of distance learning?

Most Christian universities have opportunities for distance learning. Distance learning is gaining prominence among students eager to upgrade themselves for better career prospects. According to the U.S. Department of Education's National Forum on Education Statistics, virtual education is now part of the planning agenda of most organizations concerned with education and training.

The quality of distance learning has greatly improved in the past few years, as both students and educators have become more comfortable with the technology and as stories of best practices have been shared and duplicated.

While quality has increased substantially (and while many inferior programs have failed), it is still prudent to verify that the distance learning organization is fully accredited by the appropriate agencies. One valuable resource is AccreditedOnlineColleges.org. The goal of accreditation is to ensure that education provided by institutions of higher education meets acceptable levels of quality.

Accreditation in the United States involves non-governmental entities as well as governmental agencies.

Distance learning features a number of advantages. Perhaps the most relevant benefit involves the flexibility of when and where you participate. Other advantages include:

- ▶ Accessibility for those living away from the training center
- ▶ No waste of time or other resources in transport, commuting to a central location for each class
- ▶ Flexibility to study in any convenient location with an Internet connection
- ▶ Self-paced learning:
 - Quickly browse materials you have already mastered, and concentrate time and effort in areas containing new information and / or skills
 - Study materials at a personal



speed and intensity, without having to wait for slower pace of the average classroom

- Flexibility to join conversations in the bulletin board areas at any hour, and to review your classmates' comments since the previous visit
- ▶ Just-in-time learning; more opportunities to study the most current material available
- ▶ Flexibility for those with irregular work schedules
- ▶ Accessibility for those with restricted mobility (e.g., handicapped, injured, elderly)
- ▶ Accessibility for those with family responsibilities (e.g., parents with young children at home)

Recent research has shown that the most significant factor helping students to succeed – or not – in Web-based classes has been their ability to manage time.

The more successful students reported spending 2 to 3 hours regularly each week for each hour of credit for a class. For example, a 4-hour credit class required a minimum of at least 8 to 12 hours of work each week of the semester to complete all requirements.

Without class lectures to spur a quick burst of activity to complete a project, for example, some students procrastinated through weeks of the semester, only to find themselves so far behind that they could never recover. Experts strongly recommend that you devise a typical weekly schedule so that you will have a general guide for allocating appropriate time to study.

Students share their experiences

Getting started and pursuing a college education can seem like a daunting task, particularly if your job, location, time, and home responsibilities make attending a classroom challenging. However, when you take a step beyond the traditional classroom environment and consider distance education, the possibilities expand dramatically.

When several students who chose the online path to professional development shared their insights and experiences, they dispelled a few myths about distance learning. As you read their views, your ideas about trying distance learning may change, too.

We asked Gwen Ridley Robertson, a family child care provider, why she chose online [education] and her answer was simple, "I'm in my home all day and work from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. and online is so convenient. If I tried to get to class, by the time I drove and found a place to park, I would always be late."

Other students had different reasons for choosing distance learning. As a military spouse, Donna Britt travels with her husband and was not able to complete a degree at any one location. Jean Wright and Kathy Rogers both work fulltime and have families, one with high school age children and one with small children. Jean also lives in a rural location.

The Student Experience

These four people pursued degrees and expectations about what the courses would be like varied.

Gwen, who received her A.A., is now starting a B.A. degree. She did not expect the level of involvement she found. "I expected only e-mail communication, but the teachers helped me network beyond my own course with others and instructors were available to talk by phone."

Donna Britt, who received her Ed.D in Management of Programs in Child and Youth Services said what she discovered exceeded her expectations. "I realized that I can develop strong relationships with my fellow students without seeing them," she said. "Online courses opened up a whole new world of learning."

Jean Wright expected to be self-directed and to stay on schedule. She was pleasantly surprised that her



expectations were easy to meet. Kathy Rogers, who also is earning her degree in Early Childhood Education, said the video lectures that were part of her class enhanced the readings. "While watching the videos, I felt like I was a live participant in the class," she said, "because the readings and assignments fit together perfectly on the video."

Each student learned new computer skills including new software, like spreadsheets and how to download and upload assignments to the Web site. "I learned to adapt to the way each professor distributed materials and returned papers just like a student in a face-to-face class does," she said. In addition to learning new computer skills, Donna also became a more focused writer. "I had to be precise when I wrote, she said "because there are no visual clues or opportunities to clarify ideas through speech."

Time management became a family activity in Gwen's house. "Sometimes I did my homework with my children after supper," she said. This practice validated what she told them about their need to develop good study habits. "I have to study and so do you is the message," she continued, "and my children saw the pay-off when I received my degree."



Challenges Faced By Students

There were two primary challenges faced by these students:

Time management—Kathy remarked, "It is important to stick to your plan and not good to fall

behind. The professors give you a realistic timeline and the class Web sites have all the assignments and discussion topics listed."

Participating in the student teaching process online differed from traditional classrooms—Jean said: "My mentor, who also worked in my agency, videotaped me in the classroom doing a specific activity. I sent the videotape to my professor who posted it on the Web site. Then I watched it with my mentor and professor and they offered feedback." Insights

Students reflected about their distance learning experience. They realized that they have learned that:

They have the ability to succeed in an online environment.

Some people are independent learners—"In a traditional classroom, I probably would have been quiet and participated less in the discussion. But online there is no pressure to be called on, or worry that you will not be heard. I can participate in a different way—there is no time limit and I have access to the discussion all the time." (Gwen)

Advice for Potential Students

All the students agreed that distance learning was an enriching experience. They recommended:

- Trying an online course to see if you like it. Take a moment and review the self-assessment for online learning. This is one tool to help you decide if you want to try a course or earn a degree online.
- Asking for help with technology. The staff at school and people in technical support will be available to offer help with the online system.
- Being disciplined and carrying out assignments.
- Budgeting your time and asking your family to respect your time.

There are an ever-growing number of students nationwide who are taking online courses and reporting that the experience has enabled them to learn and also taught them something even more valuable—a better understanding about their own ability to succeed in the changing educational arena of higher education.

—From "Student Views of Distance Learning."
HHS/ACF/OHS.

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