

DEVELOPMENT

Distance Degrees

Update your skills without setting foot in a classroom (maybe).

By Vicky Phillips

You completed your college degree when overhead projectors were high tech. Now your boss wants you to motivate virtual teams, and your daughter needs help with her science homework—building a multimedia dissection lab on her PDA.

Are your skills a little antiquated? Now might be a good time to crack open the books. No, on second thought,

forget the books; they're old school. You need something quicker and more interactive. How about a master's degree in e-learning or a certificate in using virtual reality for training, both available online?

Distance learning degree and certificate programs, once hawked on the back of penny matchbooks, are now offered by more than 400 institutions, ranging

from Ivy League schools (Columbia University) to cyber-universities (University of Phoenix) that have tailored their curriculums to working adults.

Smarter by degrees?

If you already have a master's or doctoral degree in HR, training, or an associated field, ask yourself whether you really need another master's degree. An accredited online master's degree will take, on average, three years to complete and cost more than US\$20,000.

If your goal is to quickly acquire a new skill set or enhance your employability in a new specialty such as online learning facilitation, consider a specialized certificate. Online certificate programs consisting of two to five courses can be completed in under a year and cost as little as \$1000.

If you don't already have a master's degree or the one you have isn't sufficient for your career aspirations, consider programs that allow you to earn a certificate then apply your certificate credits toward a master's. That strategy will enable you to change your skill set quickly, and you'll lose no time in achieving your long-term goal of an advanced degree.

The University of Maryland, Pennsylvania State University, and Jones International University are examples of regionally accredited institutions that offer two-phased certificate to master's programs completely campus-free.

Specialized versus generic

Work has grown increasingly specialized, and the training profession is no exception. But many academic degree programs remain generalized and offer more theory than practice. A one-size-fits-all curriculum of about a dozen courses (for example, master's in instructional technology or master's in educational technology) is offered by no fewer than 20 distance university programs.

If you've been in the training field

Hot Career Specialties

- George Mason University
Certificate in migrating traditional training to online delivery reskills old-school instructors to teach online

➤ http://ocpe.gmu.edu/certificate_programs/migrating.html

- Jones International University
Certificates and master's degrees in e-learning research and assessment, corporate training and knowledge management, facilitating online learning, and managing the e-learning environment

➤ www.jonesinternational.edu/ourPrograms/program.php?prg=2

- Portland State University
Certificate in distributed learning systems that covers instructional design and management and ends with a hands-on course in which you apply what you've learned to develop a course prototype

➤ www.ceed.pdx.edu/distributed_lmng

- University of Maryland University College
Certificates and master's degrees in corporate training at a distance, teaching at a distance, and distance education in developing countries

➤ <http://www.umuc.edu/grad/mde>

- University of Washington Extension
Certificate in distance learning design and development

➤ <http://www.extension.washington.edu/dl>

for a while, a generic educational technology degree that's heavy on theory and light on modern-day relevancy may not be your most marketable investment. Newer degree programs created online in the past decade may better fit your needs.

Jones International University was founded online in 1993. As a result, its curriculum was born on the Web and shaped in response to modern day market demands. If you want to study e-learning return-on-investment and online student retention, Jones is the only regionally accredited virtual university that offers a master's degree in education with a major in e-learning research and assessment. The program covers retention, motivation, and other related topics. You can

earn a certificate in five courses or a complete degree after 12 courses.

If you've been a stand-up trainer and now want to develop blended learning that mixes online and face-to-face delivery, look into the certificate in migrating traditional training to online delivery that's offered through George Mason University in Virginia.

Admission requirements

Professional schools typically require a bachelor's degree from a regionally accredited college with a 2.5 to 3.0 GPA. The most common admission exams are the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) and the Miller Analogies Test (MAT). These exams test very different abilities: The GRE

DEVELOPMENT

examines verbal and quantitative skills; the MAT looks at your ability to think comparatively. It's possible to gain a high score on the MAT and an average score on the GRE, and vice versa. If you're given a choice between the GRE and MAT, take both and submit your best score.

Because distance learning programs target older learners (the average age is 36 to 44), more than half waive traditional admission exams. And some programs that require the GRE or MAT may be willing to waive the exams if you already hold a graduate degree.

Residency requirements

Don't assume that a distance degree can be completed entirely in your pajamas. Of the more than 300 accredited graduate programs profiled in GetEducated.com's *Best Distance Learning Graduate Schools* guidebook series, only two-thirds are completely campus-free.

Some programs offer all of their courses online but require weekend orientations on campus at the beginning of each semester. Students may also be required to come to campus to defend a thesis or master's project.

Make sure you understand residency requirements before beginning your degree. Airfare and lodging for a single weekend residency can tack as much as a thousand dollars onto your education bill.

If you're using corporate tuition assistance, seek written approval in advance if you hope to use corporate funds to pay for travel and lodging during academic residencies. While many tuition assistance programs cover tuition, few cover residency expenses.

Delivery methods

Check course delivery methods carefully before committing to a program. *Distance degree* is not synonymous with *online degree*. A distance degree can be delivered via the Internet, but it can also be delivered via CD-ROMs or postal mail (lonely

ways to learn), videotape, satellite TV (restricted delivery areas), and even by radio or audiocassette (popular with European and Asian universities).

Many large public university systems deliver distance degrees through satellite teleconferencing. These systems require students to attend weekly lectures that are commonly available only at specially equipped reception sites within the state.

A few distance degree programs are available only to employees of selected corporations. Ask your HR office about degree programs your company may sponsor at corporate sites or learning labs.

Money matters

Distance graduate schools don't provide much scholarship money, but most offer student loans and interest rates are low. Universities may offer different types of loans, so compare your options. A student loan from a private lender that's not government-subsidized typically carries a high interest rate and loan origination fees.

More good news: With distance learning you're not restricted to one or two schools you can commute to. You can literally shop around, comparing sticker prices U.S.-wide. A distance master's in educational technology from a regionally accredited online program can cost as much as \$26,000 or as little as \$5000.

The number 1 factor that influences graduate school costs isn't the quality of the program; it's whether the institution is a private university or a state school. Private universities depend on tuition; state schools are subsidized by tax dollars.

Online degree scams


The Internet has given rise to a new type of graduate school: the diploma mill. It's fairly easy to create a fake university that looks Ivy League by spending a little money on Web graphics and a lot of money on search engine optimization.

GetEducated.com has identified more than 20 fake Internet universities that

award graduate degrees. These diploma mills specialize in cranking out diplomas without offering instruction. The only admission requirement is a valid credit card.

How about a degree from an online university that's accredited by the American Council on Educational Quality (ACEQ)? It sounds impressive until you realize that the ACEQ is a bogus accrediting agency. Most fake distance universities advertise, legally, that they're 100 percent accredited. The problem is that they're accredited by bogus agencies, often ones that they've created.

Diploma mills have stepped up marketing on the Internet because search engines, the most commonly used method for locating information online, never screen for accreditation. Popular educational meta-sites such as Yahoo Education list any institution that can afford to pay.

To protect yourself, make sure you understand what accreditation is, as well as the value of different types of accreditation. Degrees earned from regionally accredited universities receive the widest acceptance. For a crash course on accreditation, including how to spot and avoid a diploma mill, visit GetEducated.com's online FAQ on distance learning and college accreditation or  **"Top Ten Signs That an Internet University Is a Degree Mill" Intelligence, June 2002 T+D.**

GetEducated.com also offers comprehensive guidebooks to accredited online degrees for free online.

 www.geteducated.com/articles/dlfaw.htm

 www.geteducated.com

Vicky Phillips, CEO of GetEducated.com, is the lead author of *Best Distance Learning Graduate Schools* and *Best Distance Learning Undergraduate Schools*. She has been researching and consulting on e-learning since 1989; vicky@geteducated.com.

Send submissions to **Development**, T+D, 1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313-2043; development@astd.org.