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Online degree programs: Perceptions and realities

Have you ever considered going back to college in order to obtain a degree, but were not sure it would fit it into your schedule? Have you wondered whether an online program might be right for you? Even if the thought has never crossed your mind, it is likely you have seen some sort of advertising

for online degree programs. With the Internet revolution, the growth in demand for online education has even the most storied academic institutions considering how to incorporate distance learning into their curricula.

There was a time, not too long ago, when online degrees had a negative reputation. Most companies questioned the validity of the degree or the rigor associated with the program. Traditional institutions of higher learning wanted no part of the online education business because many believed a quality edu-

cation could only be delivered in a face-to-face format.

Well, times have changed. Driven by technological advances and the increased demand for more flexible and convenient delivery models, the availability and quality of online degree programs has grown tremendously. As a result, those looking to further their education have more options than ever before.

Scores of major universities, including Georgia Southern, have entered the online degree program market with impressive results. That being said, not all online degree programs are created equally.

The marketplace for online degrees is crowded. From traditional universities to for-profit educational institutions, the choices are plentiful. Even former General Electric CEO Jack Welch has gotten into the business of online degree programs.

Because there are so many options, several factors should be considered when investigating something as important as the next step in your academic career.

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In person or online?

First, you must decide whether you can be successful in an online learning environment. Not everyone is cut out for an online degree program.

Typically, online programs are delivered in an asynchronous format, meaning there are no specified class meetings. Content is generally delivered in various ways, including pre-recorded lectures, readings, projects and discussion board postings.

The instructor provides students with a framework and a calendar to follow, and it is the student's responsibility to keep up with the pace. This requires a certain level of self-motivation, which is not driven by the typical desire to be prepared for a classroom discussion.

While the online program faculty typically take extraordinary steps to make themselves available, many students may find the lack of regular face-to-face interaction can lead to procrastination. On the other hand, this type of degree program is especially appealing for those who travel on a regular basis, have variable work schedules or want to seek a degree from an institution outside the local area.

Accreditation: What is it and why is it important?

In general, accreditation, which is similar to board certification for doctors, is a process by which academic institutions are evaluated and certified based on established

standards and policies outlined by an independent body.

These independent bodies, such as the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools or the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business review various aspects of the institutions' operations to ensure they are upholding standards set forth by the accrediting agency. When seeking out online degree programs, selecting an institution that is accredited is a way to ensure the education provided is high quality and will be respected by employers. For example, AACSB accreditation is the gold-standard for business schools — only 30 percent of business schools in the United States have earned this distinction.

Online education has come a long way. With the proper mindset and a little research, an online program might just be a good fit for you.

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Melissa Holland



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