Students — Choose Your School Wisely

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For working professionals who want to continue their education an online degree may seem like a perfect fit. There are numerous schools to choose from, a flexible schedule and no need to uproot families or leave jobs.

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A series of recent articles in USA Today led me to research for-profit schools that provide online education and how their degrees are perceived by human resources professionals, traditional college institutions, and investors.

Resume perception

If additional education at a particular institution is looked upon favorably by your current employer, the perception of others may not be important to you. However, statistics show the typical employee will stay with an employer for an average of 3-5 years. That suggests you should always consider the impact of educational decisions on your resume and future employment. A survey conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management indicates that HR professionals are split 50/50 on the value of an online degree relative to a traditional degree.

When the position sought is at the executive level, support of the online degree drops to 15 percent. It is important to verify that the degree program you are pursuing is recognized by your employer, or future employer, and valuable for promotion purposes. While this seems an obvious planning step, it is one that is overlooked and the result can be years of course work and debt with little benefit.

Traditional institution perception

Many students use an online degree program to take care of general studies courses and plan to transfer those courses to a traditional institution for completion of their degree. This plan may fail because institutions may not recognize course work from organizations without accreditation or with accreditation perceived as less credible.

Investor perception

Growth in the for-profit education sector in the last decade has been tremendous. Enrollment is up 300 percent. There are hundreds of for-profit institutions with approximately two million students enrolled. Investor perception could provide some insight to perceived profitability and growth. As an example, Strayer University was trading below $30 in 2000. By 2010 its stock price was approaching $250.

Conclusion

My goal here is not to globally discount for-profit institutions. Students must consider a myriad of issues when selecting an educational institution to further their career aspirations.

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