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Are Online Degrees Real?

by Jennifer Mulrean

Every day, students around the world are booting up, logging on, and signing in to their virtual classrooms.



According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, there were an estimated 2.9 million students enrolled in U.S. college-level, credit-granting distance education classes during the 2000-2001 school year. And a full 90 percent of the schools with distance-education offerings primarily delivered them through the Internet.

It's easy to see why. Online learning removes geographic limitations, as well as scheduling conflicts such as family or work commitments, that can make attending a brick-and-mortar school difficult or downright impossible. But for many prospective students, questions still linger: How does it work? Will I be lonely? Do I have to be a computer geek? And the biggest doozie of them all: Are online degrees *real*?

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Avoiding degrees-r-us

The short answer, of course, is yes. There are plenty of legitimate online programs that offer everything from undergraduate degrees in engineering to MBAs and Ph.Ds. But the perception of legitimacy is challenged by a number of things, not the least of which are spam offers for fake university degrees. These are from so-called

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"diploma mills," which churn out as many degrees as they have paying customers--not students. (For more tips on how to spot diploma mills, [click here](#).) Among the other challenges: the relative newness of the medium and a lack of knowledge about what online learning really entails.

"One thing we had to overcome was that in the minds of a lot of people, it was kind of equivalent to correspondence courses that put content on the Web, but students were pretty much doing it alone," says Brian Mueller, CEO of University of Phoenix Online. The perception, he says, "was that it was a lonely, isolated, content-driven experience."

To combat this, the University of Phoenix and other accredited online schools have modeled their online programs to have small, instructor-led groups with participation requirements and a great deal of interaction between students, and between students and teachers. At University of Phoenix Online, participation in class discussions is required five out of seven days.

"We provide a great deal of interaction with other students, a great deal of access to faculty, and a great deal of access to resources, such as our online library," Mueller says. "Any resistance that's still out there is dissipated when those three aspects are delivered."

And it seems to work: According to Mueller, about 86,000 students are currently enrolled in the University of Phoenix's online program. What's more, employers pay at least part of the tuition for some 50 to 60 percent of those students.

How to vet online programs

But just like offline schools, not all online programs are created equal. Nor are they all as well-known as the University of Phoenix, which launched its online program way back in 1989. To make sure you're not wasting time, money, and brainpower on a poor-quality or useless degree, you need to do due diligence before you enroll.

Probably the most important thing to look for is accreditation. Besides simply checking that a school is accredited, you also need to verify that the accrediting agency is recognized by either the [U.S. Department of Education](#) or the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), which maintains an [easily searchable database](#) of institutions accredited by recognized accrediting organizations.

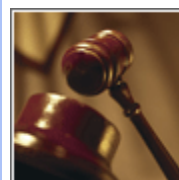
"The key issue here is that it isn't the delivery system that determines if a program is any good," says Alan

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Contreras of Oregon's Office of Degree Authorization. He should know. The ODA is in charge of investigating the use of bogus degrees in Oregon.

"Oregon is one of four or five states that has a law that says if you have a degree from an unaccredited institution, it is a crime to use that degree as a credential," says Contreras. While many people know to look for accreditation, Contreras says they don't often check on whether the accreditation itself is legitimate and federally

recognized. "You'll see accreditation from the 'Worldwide Association of Great Schools,'" he says. "People don't check beyond that and that's where they get into trouble."

Once you've determined the accreditation, spend some time comparing schools and evaluating their reputations. Call graduate schools and prospective employers to see if they're familiar with the program, and if so, what they think of it. A lack of familiarity with a program doesn't mean it won't be accepted, but they may want to contact the school for more information. You can also post messages in online newsgroups to see if anyone has taken classes in the program.

How to spot a diploma mill

Contreras, of Oregon's Office of Degree Authorization, provided the following tips for spotting and avoiding diploma mills:

1. Avoid schools without federally recognized accreditation.
2. Avoid schools that don't require any coursework in exchange for a degree.
3. Look for the school's contact information. It should include a phone number and a physical address where they can be contacted. Also, try reaching the school at the posted

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- RN to B.S. in Nursing
- B.S. in Information Technology



Kaplan University

- A.S.I.S. in Teacher's Aide
- M.A. in Teaching & Learning
- B.S. in Criminal Justice



American InterContinental University

- Master's in Education
- Master of Business Administration
- B.B.A. in Project Management



Capella University

- Ph. D. in Psychology
- M.S. in Ed/K-12 Studies in Education
- M.S. in Information Technology

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phone number and address. Can you reach a real person who can answer your questions?

The Better Business Bureau further recommends avoiding schools where you pay on a per-degree basis or you can negotiate your grade point average, and being wary of schools with names that sound similar to legitimate, well-known institutions. Also, you can check the ODA site for a [list of schools from which degrees are essentially invalid in Oregon](#). It's a mix of degree mills and schools that are "hard to classify." The list is by no means complete, but is a good place to get started.

About the Author

Jennifer Mulrean is a writer on MSN Money. She has written articles for the *Seattle Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *In Style* magazine. She lives in Seattle.



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