

## **Distance Learning is Hot!! Hot!!! Hot!!!**

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My colleague, Erin, and I packed them in at a recent Educational Planning Workshop at one of the high-tech firms in Silicon Valley. It was standing room only since the room was small and no one anticipated the large turnout. These employees were really ready to learn about educational options for degree planning. Many were new engineers and software developers, but there were long-time employees, also, knowing they needed new skills to move up or into new areas.

Erin and I talked about local colleges and universities and mentioned several Distance Learning programs for classes, certificates and degrees (both undergraduate and graduate). We were both surprised when we got asked the question: "What do employers think of these Distance Learning program?"

When the top colleges in the country are offering Distance Learning degrees and Distance Learning programs are the largest growing area of education today, we thought the answer was obvious, but perhaps not. So here are some pointers about Distance Learning programs.

- 1) The top schools in the country are offering distance learning programs--Stanford, UCLA, UC Berkeley, Colorado State University, New Jersey Institute of Technology, Columbia University, etc.
- 2) These are not the old "correspondence" courses, but the technology now allows schools to add video, audio, internet, computer conferencing. Distance Learning is a big business with both the private colleges and public universities, so counselors, professors, and advisors are trained to meet the needs of the Distance Learning student.
- 3) Most managers and most companies respect the Distance Learning degree and consider it to be equal to the degree on campus. Of course, there are always the "ole foggies" who didn't earn their degree "that way", and might not approve, but these are the same managers who did not like part-time programs or accelerated degrees. In the Bay Area and Sacramento area, with 60 hour work-weeks, hour commutes and family commitments, Distance Learning is looked on as an asset. Always check with your manager and Human Resources group in your company first before applying.
- 4) Distance Learning programs have the same requirements as the on-campus programs. You still have homework, tests, papers, projects, etc. Discussions might be held via computer conferencing, and tests can be proctored by the Human Resource Department at work or at a local library or school testing office. Sometimes costs are more expensive than on-campus, so make sure you ask. Renting videotapes and mailings might add to the cost.

But Beware!!! Not all Distance Learning programs are created equal. What should you look out for when considering a Distance Learning program?

1) Accreditation is the first consideration. Make sure that the school is Regionally Accredited. Regional accreditation is the minimum standard for most companies' tuition reimbursement and you may not be able to transfer your classes to another school if the school is not Regionally accredited.

I recently cut out all the advertisements from an airline magazine that promoted Distance Learning programs for both Bachelors and Masters degrees. In this particular magazine, there were 12 ads for schools. Not one of them was Regionally Accredited. So don't fall for the slick ad, the low cost or the acceleration of the degree. You won't have a "real degree" (according to most recruiters and staffing personnel at companies) and you won't be reimbursed by your company.

Regional Accreditation: Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC); Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS); North Central Association of Schools and Colleges (NCA); The Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges (NASC); Middle State Association of Colleges and Schools (MSA) and New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC).

2) Learn about Customer Service as a consumer of education. Ask the college representative how you order books, pay fees, register, get help for problems, talk with class members, rent videotapes, etc. See if you get quick response to your questions, or if you have to call the school several times before you even begin the degree. I've had clients who really wanted to go to school by Distance Learning, but got too frustrated trying to get help or even a return phone call from some of these colleges.

3) Be aware of your own Learning Style. Do you learn as well studying by yourself? Do you enjoy the discussions in class and can't imagine school without those discussions? Are you disciplined to study on your own? The new Distance Learning types of programs overcome some of the usual objections to not going to campus with computer conferencing, e-mail to professors, video imaging, satellite and microwave "live" classes with one-way video and two-way audio, but not all programs offer all these "goodies".