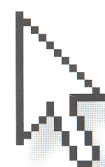




BY LISA VASQUEZ

# Online educ@tion



Ashley Taylor's employer dangled a promotion in front of her. The catch: she had to move out of state. Ashley was working full-time while going to college, just one year short of her bachelor's degree, she was at a crossroads.

Much to her relief, the University of North Texas had a program that allowed her to do most of the coursework online and keep that promise to her parents of finishing her degree. Ashley moved, finished on time and proudly added the title of UNT alumna to her resume along

with her promotion. Now back in Texas, this banker and marketing professional is a great example of how flexibility in higher education improves graduation rates.

There was a time when earning a degree or continuing education unit online was novel and curious. Few could argue

with the convenience, but was it too good to be true?

Today online education is thriving, and the number of colleges offering degrees entirely online has nearly doubled in the last 10 years.

According to the Babson Survey Research Group and the College Board, more than 6.7 million students took at least one college course online during Fall 2011. That's roughly 32 percent of all enrollment at American colleges and universities.

"We have seen tremendous growth in



online courses in the last few years because they offer flexibility in time and place for those who need it," said Dr. Jennifer Summerville, who is the Associate Dean of eLearning at Collin College. "It is ideal for students who want to speed up the process, re-enter the job market or begin a new career."

The hot trend is online graduate school, and some of the most prestigious universities are battling in cyberspace for online graduate students, particularly in areas like Collin County with a high concentration of bachelor's degrees.

## How to Choose

So where do you start? According to Summerville, students should start by choosing a major or field of study. Next, carefully research the quality of institutions that offer that major. Find out which best prepares graduates to work in the field, which is the best value for the money and which is most respected by both employers and grads.

Last year, U.S. News and World Report began ranking online bachelor's degree programs based on three criteria — faculty credentials, student services/technology and student engagement. For graduate programs, U.S. News also considers how selective the institution is with admissions.

"Be sure to choose a college accredited by a regional accrediting agency or at least an agency recognized by the Department of Education," Dr. Summerville said. "A student who needs a credential or license to work will need a college with full accreditation."

Students should pay extra attention to the price tag and financial aid promises. USA Today reported on a federal "crackdown on for-profit colleges to ensure students of these career programs are able to find jobs and manage their debt after graduation."

## How to Ace Online Classes

One myth is that online courses are easier than in-person. That's fiction if you select a quality program. Most require even more personal organization and motivation.

Start by knowing your learning style and making a schedule. If the course is self-paced, schedule time on your calendar for class, just like you would if the class was on-campus. Read the syllabus at the begin-

ning and set aside days, times and a place to tackle all the reading and homework assignments. Keep up or keep ahead, because it is easy to get behind when you are at home rather than face-to-face with a professor.

Also, ask if the program has an online orientation or what is available through the online student support center. Is there tutoring online? What library resources are online? How will you be tested?

Be sure to connect with the professor and engage in virtual dialog with classmates. Don't be silent! Some online students are more willing to share their true thoughts online than they would be to speak up in person. Whether it is a message board post, email exchange or social media dialog, discuss the subject matter with others to help apply the lessons.

## The Future

In a time when you can video chat around the world from your phone, some wonder if the day will come when you can watch your way to a college degree on YouTube mobile. Others are asking if graduate school will one day be exclusively online. In the meantime, countless students can lounge at home in bunny slippers and pajamas rather than fighting traffic, fighting for a parking space or fighting to stay awake after a full day at work. Online education has come of age, but the real power is removing the obstacles to your dreams.

**Visit [McKinneyOnline.com](http://McKinneyOnline.com) to link to these resources:** 

Collin College

Texas A&M University-Commerce

Texas Woman's University

University of Texas at Dallas

University of North Texas