

## "Who Would Hire an Online Grad?"

*By: Jennifer Mulrean*

We know. You're naturally curious, committed to lifelong learning, and generally ambitious. Those are great reasons to pursue an education. But with the high price of college, it's safe to bet that you're also hoping that degree will pay off in more practical terms--with a first job, a promotion, or a job change, perhaps.

The good news is, it probably will. In simple terms of dollars and cents, a college degree can be worth millions in income over the course of your life. According to a July 2002 United States Census Bureau survey, people holding bachelor's degrees are expected to earn \$2.1 million over the course of their working lifetime--almost \$1 million more than the \$1.2 million in lifetime earnings for people who hold high school diplomas only.

But before you pile up those riches, you first have to get through the door of the human resources department. As a current or prospective online student, it's important to consider how an online degree will measure up against those earned at traditional brick-and-mortar programs.

### **Attitudes in flux:**

When asked directly, well-known Fortune 500 companies such as Intel and Wal-Mart said they'd accept online degrees, provided they come from regionally accredited programs.

The last time the question seems to have been put to human resources departments on a broad scale, however, was in late 2000, when Vault, a job-search service and publisher, surveyed almost 300 hiring managers. At the time, 77 percent of respondents said online degrees earned from well-known schools--the Stanford Universities of the world--were more valuable than those from online-only institutions.

A lot has changed since then, including the number of people enrolled in online courses. According to a recent Sloan Consortium report, more than 1.6 million people logged on to at least one online class in the fall of 2002. That number is expected to increase by almost 20 percent in the next year alone.

### **Support from employers:**

If you're attending a school that offers both campus-based and online courses, chances are your diploma won't distinguish whether you logged on or sat in a traditional classroom to earn it. At Columbia University, for example, online students can earn various graduate engineering degrees through Columbia Video Network (CVN). There's no need to distinguish the degrees as having been earned online because they're identical to the courses delivered at the physical campus.

"The degree (CVN students) earn is identical to what the offline students are getting," says Evan Jacobs, marketing manager for CVN. "The modality is secondary; the content is what's important and it's exactly the same."

Many of the CVN students are adults with full-time jobs, and as such, Jacobs estimates that 80 to 90 percent have their tuition reimbursed by their employer. The University of Phoenix estimates that a similar percentage of its own student body also has their tuition reimbursed by their employer.

"They have the full support of their companies," Jacobs says. "The fact that the employers are reimbursing them for their tuition is really a validation of our program and of distance learning."

"We've heard from a lot of students that they didn't feel they'd have been able to get that promotion or that next job without the skills and knowledge we provide," he says. And as the number of online students' increases, attitudes toward online degrees should continue to open up even further.

**The bottom line:**

**Randy Miller, CEO and founder of Ready Minds, which offers distance career counseling to everyone from students in college to adult learners, says that just in the last two years, human resources departments have become more comfortable with online degrees.**

**"They're realizing a lot of quality applicants are going the nontraditional route--if you can still call it that--and they don't want to miss out on this quality applicant pool," he says.**

Indeed, a July 2001 survey by the Distance Education and Training Council (DETC) found that almost 70 percent of corporate supervisors rated the value of a distance degree as "just as valuable" or "more valuable" than resident-school degrees in the same field. The survey pool, however, was comprised of managers with at least one employee who had earned a degree through a DETC-accredited distance program, suggesting that familiarity breeds acceptance for quality programs.

**In the end, Miller says, job seekers of all types have many of the same challenges. "It really comes down to the individual--they still have to distinguish themselves," he says.**

*About the Author:*

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