



Getting an advanced degree with classes over the Internet can help some balance work, school, and family. For others it is just a better fit.

Stephen Balzac got his undergraduate degree the old-fashioned way at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, but when his career focus shifted from software engineering to management and, eventually to psychology, he joined the tens of thousands of people who are earning advanced degrees online.

“Personally, I hate sitting in lectures, so I really liked the opportunity to arrange my time as I saw fit,” said Balzac, who earned a master’s degree in organizational psychology from Capella University and now serves as president of 7 Steps Ahead LLC, a consulting company in Stow.

The National Center for Education Statistics expects the number of students enrolled in distance learning courses to reach 18.2 million by 2013, up from 3.1 million in the 2000-01 academic year. About two-thirds of all post-secondary schools now offer courses online, and many offer undergraduate and graduate degree programs that can be completed without ever setting foot on campus.

Some schools only offer online degrees, while traditional brick-and-mortar institutions are looking for ways to allow students to complete all or a portion of their degree online.

“There are three dimensions to consider: You are buying learning, you are buying a degree, and you are buying a network. With respect to buying learning, I have yet to read any study that shows the superiority of classroom education over distance learning,” said Laurence J. Stybel, the executive in residence in the Department of Management and Entrepreneurship at the Sawyer Business School at Suffolk University, which offers online degrees.

Stybel did, however, say distance learning isn't for everyone, and potential students need to take into an account what they hope to get from an advanced degree.

“With respect to buying a degree, there are some professions where simply having the certificate is enough. For example in teaching, an MA is an MA and it gets you salary increases. It doesn't matter if the degree is from a top school or a no-name grad school, as long as it is accredited . . . in some disciplines, the institution granting the degree is critical.”

Here are some other schools locally where students can get an online degree:

The University of Massachusetts at Lowell has been offering online learning programs since 1995. The school had more than 14,000 students enrolled in online courses last year, up 17 percent from 2008. UMass Lowell offers both undergraduate and graduate degree programs to distance learners, primarily through its continuing education programs.

Some students will complete their entire degree online, said Jacqueline Moloney, UMass Lowell executive vice chancellor, while other students use some online classes to make managing a degree, work, and family easier.

At **Northeastern University**, Mike Zack, executive faculty director of online graduate programs, said the school has 900 students enrolled in its master's programs, including its MBA program and master's degree in finance program. Later this year Northeastern will begin offering an online master's degree program in accounting and taxation. “Our general approach has been to look at online as just another delivery method,” he said, while noting the course content, time commitment, and costs are the same whether a student earns the degree through the online program or by attending classes on campus.

The University of Phoenix has 200 campuses worldwide, including two in Massachusetts. Despite the many locations, a majority of students choose to complete some or all of their degree work online. The school offers associate's, bachelor's, and master's degrees and typically targets older, working students who find online classes make it easier to juggle family and job obligations.

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