

2007 Best Schools

HispanicBusiness[®]

ELECTRONICALLY REPRINTED FROM SEPTEMBER 2007

'Netting Degrees

More Professionals Continuing Their Education Online

// by HILDY MEDINA

A BATTLE WITH CANCER AND A DIVORCE FORCED RAMONA ARMIJO, A SINGLE MOTHER OF THREE, TO PUT HER DREAM OF getting a Ph.D. on hold.

"I thought maybe it wasn't meant to be," says Ms. Armijo, a part-time health teacher at California's Oxnard College and owner of a marketing consulting firm. "I started to get discouraged."

A self-described "traditionalist" when it comes to education – she received a master's degree in public health from California State University Northridge – Ms. Armijo began exploring online schools and came across Walden University, a for-profit institution in Minneapolis that operates without a physical campus. She was hooked.

"As a single mom and as a working woman, it has allowed me the flexibility to not have to drive somewhere," Ms. Armijo says. "The virtual classroom really works for me." Ms. Armijo, 41, hopes to graduate in December with a doctorate in education.

She is one of an estimated 3 million people who will be taking an online college courses this fall. She is also among many people with families and busy professional lives who are turning to the Web for advanced courses or graduate programs, including MBAs and law degrees, because of online's convenience and relative inexpensiveness.

"There is a need for an accessible education," says Vicky

Phillips, chief education analyst at GetEducated.com, a consumer-oriented Web site that has been tracking and conducting independent research into the distance learning industry since 1989. "It's convenient, it gives people a lot more choices, and they don't have to be somewhere at a set time. These people are not going to quit their jobs, leave their kids, and then move into a dorm. Online education works for them."

That need for an accessible education has helped drive the growth of Internet-based education. In 1989, there were fewer than 50 accredited distance degrees. Today, that number has grown to more than 750. Since 2000, enrollment has been growing an average of 35 percent annually, with women making up more than 60 percent of enrollment.

"Because women are responsible for child care, if they're working and have three kids, when are they going to go to school?" Ms. Phillips asks. "If they can go to school online, that eliminates the commute time and the time they need to be in class; it gives working women a whole lot of freedom."

Many traditional universities and private, for-profit institutions now offer online courses, including many from top universities, such as Stanford, Duke, and the University of Maryland. Today, nearly half of all colleges and universities in the United States offer some type of online education. »

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— Ramona Armijo, who is earning a doctorate online from Walden University

“All sorts of colleges and universities are offering increasing number of online courses,” says Javier Miyares, vice-president of institutional planning, research, and accountability at the University of Maryland University College. UMUC is the second-largest university in Maryland and is one of the largest public providers of online higher education in the country.

In 2006, UMUC, which first began offering classes on the Web in 1994, had 155,000 students enrolled online. To recruit people for its online courses, the university offers prospective students a free weeklong online tour to see how Web-based classes work and the chance to talk to faculty members and alumni.

Among the most popular degrees offered online are a master’s in business administration and education.

Alberto Vargas Jr., who received an MBA from Walden University in June, said he was motivated to go back to school because he wanted to remain competitive in the marketplace. The convenience of an online education gave him the opportunity to do that.

“The ease of the online environment allowed me to continue working full time,” he says.

Walden University, which offers master’s and doctoral degrees in education management, health, and psychology, as well as bachelor’s completion programs in business, was founded in 1970 by two New York teachers who saw a need for distance learning. By 1995, all students were online.

“The majority of our students are people actively involved in their careers and making contributions to their professions,” says Denise DeZolt, Walden University provost. “Our program really gives working professionals the opportunity to go for a higher degree.”

Earning a degree from an online school isn’t automatically cheaper than attending classes on campus. Students can pay anywhere from \$600 to \$120,000. The average cost is about \$10,000 to \$25,000, with public schools being the least expensive option.

One positive trend is recent legislation that makes it possible for distance learning programs to offer financial aid.

The online education field also has its dark side. The industry’s popularity has fueled what experts call “degree mills” – unaccredited online schools that offer very little in terms of a quality education. Experts caution prospective students to do their homework before enrolling in a distance degree program.

“The worst thing a student can do is trust any online directory or any search engine to give them information on [online schools],” Ms. Phillips says. “They know exactly what to say and how to say it, and unless you really know about accreditation,



Online student Ramona Armijo, left, with her family.

you can be easily taken in.”

People interested in online courses can refer to Peterson’s Guide To Distance Learning, which screens for accreditation or go to the GetEducated.com site, which features a free service, “The Diploma Mill Police.”

Online education is not for everyone. It requires a lot of self-motivation and solid organization skills.

“Many students who enter an [online] program quickly realize that they have to be good about communicating with their professors,” Ms. Armijo says. “They just can’t sit around and wait for their professor to contact them by e-mail and follow-up. You have to be proactive if you really want to be successful, but then that’s the same for a traditional university.” □